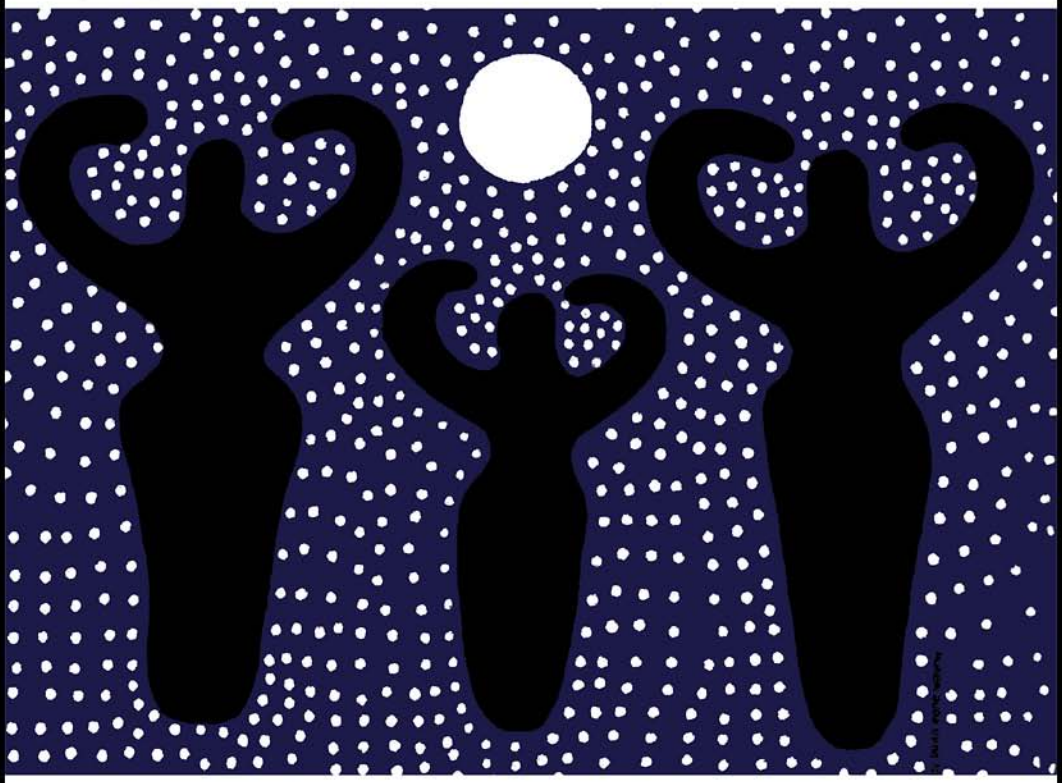
Trances, Dances, and Vociferations

Agency and Resistance in Africana Women's Narratives



Nada Elia

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Nada Elia

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This book is for my son Iyad who, at age five, corrected me, explaining:
"Without stories from your mind makes your brain rot, not [from] books."
For you, Iyad, I'll keep on interrupting my writing.

Contents

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I wish the list of "Thank Yous" were longer. The writing of this book has otherwise been a solitary endeavor; I have not read sections of it at any conference or received any critical reviewers' comments on the manuscript as a whole, and must alone assume responsibility for its faults, and hopefully its merits.

Abbreviations

A	Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (New York: Plume, 1984)
BL	Angela Y.Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon, 1998)
CI	Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1980)
D	Paule Marshall, *Daughters* (New York: Atheneum, 1991)
F	Assia Djebar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade,* Trans. Dorothy S. Blair (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993)
FE	Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise* (New York: Penguin, 1993)
HYS	Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* Trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York and Evanston: Harper, 1970)
KR	bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Holt, 1995)
LLB	Michelle Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1985)
NTH	Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Plume/Penguin, 1987)
P	Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Knopf, 1998)
PW	Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Plume, 1983)
SS	Assia Djebar, *A Sister to Scheherazade,* Trans. Dorothy S.Blair (London and New York: Quartet, 1987)
Song	Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1977)
TB	bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989)

Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.

—South African Freedom Charter

If bone structure is passed on, why not memory?

—Michelle Cliff

CHAPTER 1

Pre-Text

In the Beginning All Was Sound

in the beginning all was sound,
then words drew lines between day and night,
black and white,
male and female,
and echoes kept crossing the lines…

When Algerian novelist Assia Djebar set out to write her autobiography, she was confronted with the realization that she could do it only in French, the language of her former oppressor. "Autobiography practised in the enemy's language has the texture of fiction," she writes (*F* 216). "The language of the Others, in which I was enveloped from childhood…has adhered to me ever since like the tunic of Nessus" (217) she observes elsewhere, with a reference to the mythical half-human, half-horse monster with poisoned blood. To overcome this predicament, Djebar has recourse to a means of expression available exclusively to women: "The fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body: the body which…in trances, dances or vociferations, in fits of hope or despair, rebels, and unable to read or write, seeks some unknown shore as destination for its message of love" (180). Her writing, like that of many feminists, is a validation of sensual and intuitive knowledge, of a history passed down orally and through the body, for it is not to be found in textbooks. Visiting the site where her ancestors were killed ("fumigated") during the French conquest of Algeria, she experiences their agony gutturally:

> *I must lean over backwards, plunge my face into the shadows, closely examine the vaulted roof of rock or chalk, lend an ear to the whispers that rise up from time out of mind, study this geology stained red with blood. What magma of sounds lies rotting here? What stench of putrefaction*

> *seeps out? I grope about, my sense of smell aroused, my ears alert.... And my body reverberates with sounds from the endless landslide of generations of my lineage.* (F 46)

Djebar currently resides in the United States, after having divided her time for decades between Algeria and France. As she expresses her staunch feminist and Arab nationalist pride in French, she also exemplifies the condition of a woman who establishes her circumstances as both here and there, East and West.

An ocean away from Algeria and France, Michelle Cliff's disdain for the privileged position she can legally claim is yet another challenge to the arbitrary divisions ruling Jamaica. Culturally located in the middle (as a light-skinned Caribbean Creole), and identifying herself in various liminal roles (as a triracial lesbian), Cliff is acutely conscious of the necessity of bridging seemingly disparate elements to achieve cohesion and avoid disempowering alienation. In her fiction, Cliff rejects the whiteness her father claims for himself, which he seeks to bestow on her, to side with her darker (and estranged) mother. The protagonist she describes as *No Telephone to Heaven's* "most whole and sane character" (Raiskin 191), Harry/Harriet, is biracial and queer, ever passing through the various Jamaican social strata in order to best help the island's underdog.

In her nonfiction, Cliff also comments on the disruptive effects of Symbolic divisions that rule people's lives, even as they fail to adequately describe them.[1] "We were not responsible for these divisions but we lived them through," she writes in *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise,* as she struggles to define her own experience and finds herself stumbling across social, cultural, and linguistic roadblocks (24). Even the geography of her homeland is "obsolete," she observes, retaining as it does traces of the collapsed boundaries between black and white, mistress and servant.

Cliff's difficulty in articulating, even accepting, herself is representative of numerous people today, the living products of breaches in the Symbolic divisions that can no longer "contain" (constrain, inhibit) their members, despite persisting reluctance on the part of the dominant discourse to acknowledge that boundaries have always been permeable, that genuine creativity has always consisted of testing, stretching, and even exploding the barriers. Subversion from within? Yes, but always corrupt, adulterated by the outside element that infiltrated the fort while the sentinel dozed off, unduly confident, or during a change of guard.

A major aspect of this book, which is woven into the textual analysis of the novels at hand, is an examination of the dynamics of counterdiscourse as expressed by Africana feminists brought into the fold/fort, who have nevertheless retained their otherness, and now challenge the dominant discourse that pressures them to choose between "authenticity" (native

otherness) and cultural annihilation (the ever-elusive full assimilation). Thus Cliff, commenting on the fact that she could "pass" for white, writes: "Under British rule…we could have ourselves declared legally white. The rationale was that it made us better servants" (*CI* 6). But, more painfully: "Passing demands you keep that knowledge to yourself (*CI* 6).

People who shatter the binary, refusing to be defined as either/or, have always existed. In previous centuries, they have been delegated the role of monstrosities, abject aberrations, freaks, and "side shows." Once a year, by appointment to His Majesty the Phallus, they have been tolerated in carnivalesque reversals of the established order. In *The Dialogic Imagination,* Mikhail Bakhtin analyzes how carnival provides for a mocking of authority and an inversion of the power structure, exposing aspects of reality otherwise suppressed during the rest of the year. During carnival, Bakhtin explains, there emerges "a new mode of interrelationships between individuals, counterpoised to the all powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life." (123) Today, while still feared by conservatives and other purists, these carnivalesque creatures have claimed their rightful place in the realm of the quotidian. Cliff, again:

> We are not exotic—or aromatic—or poignant.
> We are not aberrations. We are ordinary.
> All this has happened before. (*CI* 7)

And, a few pages later:

> This kind of splitting breeds insanity. (11)

My project also presents a feminist analysis of counterdiscourse and the politics of gender in Africana women writers' responses to Euro-phallogocentric discourse.[2] It assumes and constitutes a reconfiguration of current academic, social, and even geographic divisions, for only by disrespecting such divisions can one adequately explore the multilayered realities of the lived experience of members of social groups that inhabit the nodes formed by the intersections of race, class, gender, sex and sexual orientation, and political convictions. Rather than focus on the "imagined communities" (in Benedict Anderson's sense of the nation-state) that many feminists of color do not always relate to, I look at connections between women in various parts of the world who struggle with aspects of racism, sexism, and classism, among other exploitative divisive systems. Such an exploration is necessarily interdisciplinary. My work is primarily a textual analysis of how these writers translate themselves and their alternative experiences into language.

An intrinsic theoretical underpinning of my investigation is the contemporary French feminist attempt to connect the exploration of women's

unconscious and their language(s) with the specificities of the female body, even as it rejects all essentialization. Most analyses of the physical nature of feminist writing have so far dealt with francophone texts, yet there is no reason not to explore this connection in writing in any language, especially when the author is alienated from the Symbolic discourse she was brought up to speak, and prefers to express herself in a semiotic manner, bringing about what Julia Kristeva has called a "revolution in poetic language" (Kristeva, 1984).

"They can speak the King's English good as me and you but the minute they set foot on the wharf for the excursion is only Patois you hearing," comments a taxi driver to Avey Johnson as she prepares to join the out-islanders for the annual celebration of their African origins, in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (187). In *Daughters,* the second novel by Marshall that I examine, Ursa transgresses, literally, the "Law of the Father," Jacques Lacan's term for Symbolic discourse, as she betrays her own father, a corrupt politician, on the eve of elections, causing him to lose his seat. Her act is only possible because her mother has also broken her vow of silence about the politician/father/husband's scheming.

Unlike the female characters in many feminist novels, most of whom start out voiceless and only gradually reach individual expression, Paule Marshall's women characters are highly voluble initially; they become accomplices in their own silencing as they seek to access the dominant discourse, and eventually recover their voices upon experiencing an epiphany that crystallizes to them the magnitude of their loss, hitherto disguised as "upward mobility." Because of their initial advantage, the recovery of their voices not only allows these women to regain their self-esteem and remedy their temporary alienation, it also enables them to facilitate community and cultural independence, a major achievement in postcolonial and immigrant diasporas. In my chapter on Marshall, I explore the devastating effects of complicity in one's silencing, as well as the genuine emancipation that accompanies the reentry into speech.

I do not seek to conflate the postcolonial and the African American experiences, for the postcolonial were temporarily dispossessed, while the African Americans became possessions. Furthmore, despite claims to the contrary, their experiences with their oppressors' languages are not identical: the majority of natives retained their language as the privileged few became bilingual, while enslaved Africans lost their native languages, as well as any knowledge of their ancestry. Nevertheless, there are grounds today for comparing and contrasting how African-American and postcolonial feminists counter the dominant discourse. Hence another part of my project is a look at African American feminists' denunciation of White English as oppressive. "Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white school teacher," avers Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* when she locates the origin of her

determination to escape slavery as the moment she overhears "schoolteacher" require his pupils to "put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193). This mistrust of "white schooling" is shared, if to a lesser degree, by many colonial students who, as they learned about the prowess of their conquerors, were also made to feel inferior, and to ignore their own accomplishments. As such, they were rendered incapable of writing and celebrating the phenomenal histories of Algeria's heroic *porteuses de feu,* the Caribbean's legendary rebels Nanny and Congo Jane, and West Africa's Ibos, whose supernatural powers allowed them to fly away, or walk on water, all the way to Africa, upon arrival in the countries where they would have been enslaved.

As Sojourner Truth's question "And ain't I a woman?" remains pertinent almost 150 years after she is said to have asked it,[3] poet/activist June Jordan today teaches her students to rid themselves of the King's English. "We will not help ourselves into extinction by deluding our Black selves into the belief that we should/can become white, that we can/should sound white, think white because then we will be like the powerful and therefore we will be powerful: that is just a terrible, sad joke; you cannot obliterate yourself and do anything else" (33).

Alongside the semiotic turbulences, my analysis of Africana feminist writing also explores the agency at play in "conjuring," as we see it in Morrison's work. While I make passing reference to many illustrations of the conjure woman in African American literature, I look specifically at Toni Morrison's Pilate, in *Song of Solomon,* and Connie and the Convent women in *Paradise.* Collapsing boundaries between mother and daughter, life and death, sex, gender, and sexuality, Pilate and Connie are moonshiners who sing as they brew potent mixes, some aphrodisiac and others abortive, and whose physical and spiritual eccentricities mesmerize men and jealously protect women and female space. Pilate's teachings and example bring the alienated Milkman back to his spiritual roots. The song Milkman offers Pilate as she is dying after finally burying her father's bones, is a song Pilate had sung herself. As Milkman's singing denies the finality of death, it also teaches him what it means to be able to fly, freeing him from the burden of an oppressive past. The Convent women, on the other hand, living in an ever-evolving, all-female community, present such a threat to the rigid structure of the town of Ruby that they have to be eliminated. Yet *Paradise* opens and ends with doubt about the success of the ambush meant to kill the Convent women. If they were indeed witches, as the Ruby men believed them to be, they would have escaped with their lives.

All four writers I study emphasize their alienation from the dominant discourse they were trained to speak, their choice of an alternative mode of expression, and their conscious articulation, in a feminine tongue, of the experiences of other women and men who have in the past been silenced for

lack of a space where their utterances could resonate. For if it is impossible to completely erase the effects of the dominant discourse, it is equally impossible to ignore the primal, communal, semiotic subtext.[4] All four novelists have been the subject of numerous essays, anthologies, and analyses. In exploring their work again, I highlight a number of elements they have in common. Foremost among these is a rewriting of history that illustrates their intuitive perception of the dynamics of feminine language and discursive resistance to an oppressive racist hegemonic system. Such rewriting produces a wholeness that fills the fault lines arbitrarily drawn by that discourse, whether consciously, in an attempt to divide in order to better rule, or unconsciously, because of an inability to transcend a binary view of the world. Thus Djebar analyzes her position as an Arab writing in French, the "oppressor tongue," about her country's resistance to colonialism. Cliff explodes the color lines that stratify her native Jamaica, while also exploring sexual duality, ambiguity, and passing. And in *Free Enterprise,* she irrevocably alters our perspective on U.S. history as she records women's resistance and their contributions to key historical moments. In *Praisesong for the Widow,* Marshall questions why one is supposed to believe that Jesus, but not the Ibos, could walk on water, while in *Daughters,* Ursa is outraged that her proposed thesis topic on the legendary rebels Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe is deemed unacceptable. As for Morrison, her work hinges upon an understanding of the inherent twoness of hyphenated African-Americans, diasporans in the epistemological sense of two-seeded, even as it warns against the dangers of separatism, whatever its motivations.

The hybridity that our writers promote is not a recent phenomenon, although it is only now drawing our full attention. As David Theo Goldberg pointed out at a 1998 conference, heterogeneity has characterized various nation-states for centuries, although it has been actively silenced in the political effort to racialize and sexualize the "Other."[5] Indeed, the effects of such silencing are obvious in the continuing presentation of such fundamentally multicultural customs as the drinking of tea, a quintessentially British institution, or the consumption of Belgian or Swiss chocolate as a fine European confection, when clearly both are transcontinental commodities, unavailable without trade with the East (for tea leaves), Africa (for cocoa beans), and the West (for sugar).

I had already made my selection of authors and works for *Trances, Dances, and Vociferations,* when I realized that they had one additional common factor which I had not intentionally sought, but which crystallizes these works as post-contact in both form and content: their literary genre is European in origin. Yet that genre, the novel, is heteroglossic and has transcended racial and class origins to become a vehicle of expression for various social, economic, and ethnic groups, including some opposed to the European bourgeoisie where it originated. As Ngugi points out in *Decolonising the Mind,* "The social and even national basis of the origins of an important

discovery or any invention is not necessarily a determinant of the use to which it can be put by its inheritors" (68). Ngugi goes on to explain that gunpowder was invented in China and put to use by colonial Europe in its expansionist project, that mathematical science was invented by the Arabs and has been appropriated by all nations today, and that African arts—music, dance, sculpture—have been appropriated by the United States and Europe in the twentieth century. He concludes his list of examples with the rhetorical question: "Why should not the African peasantry and working class appropriate the novel?" (68). Similarly, Mary Layoun, in *Travels of a Genre: The Modern Novel and Ideology,* demonstrates that, despite its origins in a literate European bourgeoisie with particular social values and expectations, the novel is now firmly established as a literary practice that can express the individual subjectivities and national aspirations of members of such disparate cultures as the Greek (Alexandros Papadiamandis and Dimitris Hatzis), Japanese (Natsume Soseki and Oe Kenzaburo), Egyptian (Yahya Haqqi) and Palestinian (Ghassan Kanafani).

While I necessarily make numerous references to the many works of Djebar, Cliff, Marshall, and Morrison, I have focused my analysis on two novels by each, choosing those that best crystallize the two elements I mentioned previously, the rewriting of history and the substitution of complex wholeness for divisiveness. Not surprisingly, these novels—Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (*L'Amour, la fantasia,* 1985) and *A Sister to Scheherazade* (*Ombre sultane,* 1987), Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and *Free Enterprise* (1993), Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and *Daughters* (1991), and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Paradise* (1998)—have numerous other elements in common: each portrays one or more powerful women living on the margins of society, exercising great power, thriving in their alterity, and working as matrices for a repressed culture whose unacknowledged achievements they consciously seek to preserve.

Tonality, whether in the form of song or an alternative poetics, presents one of the additional elements that link the authors I have studied. While most feminist scholarship realizes the importance of finding one's voice, little has been written about the musicality of that voice. Yet I am convinced that music is truly an empowering, liberating medium for women, as it was for all enslaved Blacks in the New World; for music is not, cannot be, subject to the laws of Symbolic discourse that regulate our speech. My title comes from a passage in Djebar's *Fantasia,* but I toyed with "A Need for Song" from Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven,* or even "The Screams of Hurt Women" from Morrison's *Paradise.*

Cliff writes of a sense of harmony that cannot be transplanted. In *Abeng,* the prequel to *No Telephone to Heaven,* she writes of a harpsichord that had been shipped from England to Jamaica and that could never be made to sound right on the island:

> The instrument had never adjusted to the climate. The schoolteacher explained to the congregation that a harpsichord had to be tuned every time it was played; even so, tuning upon tuning never made the instrument sound quite right…. Although they were not able to say so, most of the congregation felt that the harpsichord had been a mistake—not meant even in the most perfect of climatic conditions to accompany a hundred voices. It seemed the English people must sing softer—or not at all…The schoolteacher advised the congregation to tone down their singing, to consider the nuances of harmony and quiet—but this didn't work. (*A* 6)

The untameable voices of the Jamaican congregation, like the ululations of Algerian women witnessing the French attacks, the rhythmic ring shout in *Praisesong for the Widow,* the children's refrain in *Song of Solomon* and the "loud dreaming" that ultimately brings together the community of women at "the Convent" in *Paradise,* all function to record and transmit semiotic collective memories, merging the singer with her larger community, allowing her a privileged entry way into the unwritten but sung history of her ancestors. This singing is unmistakably African in origin, combining the function of the griot with the style of communal production intrinsically linked to a social function, the responsibility to hand down history. While Morrison, Marshall, Cliff, and Djebar claim different nationalities, they have in common their African heritage and a conscious embrace of their Blackness, despite the dispersal brought about by slavery and colonialism.

Angela Davis explains the function of music as resistance in the African diaspora:

> Of all the art forms associated with Afro-American culture, music has played the greatest catalytic role in awakening social consciousness in the community. During the era of slavery, Black people were victims of a conscious strategy of cultural genocide, which proscribed the practice of virtually all African customs with the exception of music. (*BL* 200–201)

Music then became a polysemic vehicle, expressing at once the "awakening social consciousness" of the African American community, as well as the persistence of the African collective memory. The early "sorrow songs" and work songs illustrate this duality or "Signifyin(g)," as they express the slave's desire to get the work done and her or his hatred of that very work in the field, the Big House, or the white child's nursery. "Signifyin(g)," which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5, "Under the Weight of Memory and Music," is an Africana form of verbal play that allows for the articulation of anger and aggression in harmless, socially acceptable forms. Singing serves yet another function as the only means of expressing, even to oneself, conditions and situations too sorrowful for words. Years after having been shackled by the iron bit that stifled his tongue, Paul D. in *Beloved* still cannot

speak of that offense: "I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul…. I just ain't sure I can say it" (71). Implicit or explicit in all these songs is the yearning for freedom, with the added irony that, for the enslaved, such freedom could at times only come with death.

The blues are the direct descendants of the slave songs, and they too are grounded in Signifyin(g). Angela Davis again explains:

> Blues make abundant use of humor, satire, and irony, revealing their historic roots in slave music, wherein indirect methods of expression were the only means by which the opposition of slavery could be denounced. In this sense, the blues genre is a direct descendant of work songs, which often relied on indirection and irony to highlight the inhumanity of slave owners so that their targets were sure to misunderstand the intended meaning. (*BL* 26)

Finally, I argue that Africana feminists today continue to engage in polysemic melodic discourses not because they are the only discourses allowed—patriarchy would love to have all women speak its phallogocentric discourse—but because such polysemic melodic discourse remains the only appropriate vehicle for feminist insurgency, while retaining the African process of "nommo," which exorcises as it names.

> In the Dogon, Yoruba, and other West African cultural traditions, the process of nommo—naming things, forces, and modes—is a means of establishing magical…control over the object of the naming process. (*BL* 33)

Rooted in the Africana cultural heritage that neither colonialism nor slavery successfully eradicated, such a process—a combination of conjuring, song, and double entendre, of trances, dances, and vociferations—provides for empowerment, liberation, and self-determination.

NOTES

1. The Symbolic order, according to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is in the realm of distinctions and differences between subject and object, self and other. The infant's entry into the Symbolic order, occasioned primarily by access to language, results in alienation, first experienced as the separation of infant from mother, and the splitting of the subject, who then occupies different "subject-positions" (I, you).

2. Throughout my work, I distinguish between the terms "Africana," which refers collectively to Africans and people of African descent in the Diaspora, and "African Americans," referring specifically to Africana people in the United States, the overwhelming majority of whom are the descendants of slaves.

3. See Nell Irvin Painter's *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol,* (164–178) where she demonstrates that Truth never did make the speech so widely attributed to her.

4. In *La Revolution du langage poétique* (1974), Kristeva associates the semiotic with the mother's body, yet stipulates that the anarchic impulses of the semiotic can transpire in the writings of both female and male authors who transgress patriarchal logic and rationality.

5. "The Racial State" Symposium, Brown University, October 23, 1998. Goldberg's comments are forthcoming in a book with the same title.

CHAPTER 2

"The Fourth Language"

Subaltern Expression in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and *A Sister to Scheherazade*

For isn't it odd that the only language I have to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?

—JAMAICA KINGAID, *A Small Place*

The women's shrill ululation improvises for the fighting men a threnody of war in some alien idiom: our chroniclers are haunted by the distant sound of half-human cries, cacophony of keening, ear-splitting hieroglyphs of a wild, collective voice.

—ASSIA DJEBAR, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*

As soon as the body sings, memory that had been hibernating for many long years revives.

—ASSIA DJEBAR, *A Sister to Scheherazade*

Assia Djebar's reputation as a feminist postcolonial novelist and film director is firmly established by now.[1] Numerous articles have examined the rich aspects of her oeuvre, and *World Literature Today* devoted its Autumn 1996 issue to her when she was awarded that year's Neustadt International Prize in Literature, an honor second only to the Nobel Prize: in the last twenty-five years, eighteen of the Neustadt laureates, candidates, and jury members have gone on to receive the Nobel Prize. As I write this, Djebar's accomplishments have also earned her the 1997 African Literature Association's Fonlon-Nichols prize, as well as the recognition of international organizations in Austria,

Germany, Italy, and Belgium. This chapter does not seek to further explicate Djebar's texts, nor does it attempt a synopsis of what has already been written about her. Rather, it explores her treatment in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade,* of the body as a "wild collective voice," and a venue of expression and counterdiscourse among the subaltern: Algeria's women under French colonization. Ululating in pain and outrage at the oppression surrounding them, these sisters become conjure women whose "alien idiom" is incomprehensible to hegemonic discourse, even as their vociferations rupture that discourse, undermining it and transforming it from below, making it forever one among many stories and histories. The "collective voice" also operates against the very distinctions the French sought to impose in their attempt to divide and rule, for it expresses the outrage of all colonized women, regardless of the social and ethnic distinctions the occupier sought to manipulate.

Collective voices and the interaction of voice and body are at play again in the contemporary, postcolonial context of A *Sister to Scheherazade* (1987), the sequel to *Fantasia* in the tetralogy that also includes *Vaste est la prison* (1995) and *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1996). Featuring a multivocal narrative, which juxtaposes an emancipated woman's voice with that of her cloistered co-wife and the latter's mother, *A Sister to Scheherazade* calls for coalition building and a joint denunciation of women's oppression from the "internal colonizer," the Arab men whose power rests, in part, in the lack of solidarity and support among women.

DIVIDE AND RULE

France's policy of divide and rule, while no less pernicious than Britain's, remains insufficiently denounced. Yet, in keeping with colonialist racism, France, too, sought to create, aggravate, and manipulate divisions between the various native communities. In North Africa, as elsewhere in the Middle East, these divisions fell mostly along religious lines. In 1870, all Maghrebi Jews in French colonies were granted full French citizenship. This became a factor of periodic resentment by Muslims and Kabyles of the North African Jews, and was viewed with approval by the French authorities. We must never forget how racist the *pieds-noirs* (French in North Africa) were: the colonial novels they wrote up to the middle of the twentieth century bear eloquent witness to their bigotry, along with some of the songs they composed. Should anyone wish to forget the virulent anti-Semitism of Christian Europeans in the Arab world and blame Arabs for it—despite the fact that Arabs are themselves Semitic and have historically harbored different religions with no more internecine tension that any other mixed society—Alain Calmes' *Le Roman colonial en Algérie avant 1914* is a wonderful study of these hateful Christian European documents and is replete with eye-opening citations, such as the

anti-Semitic "Marseillaise," apparently quite popular in colonial North Africa. In this version of the French national anthem, "nous" stands for the Christian Europeans in Algeria, and the Jews (derogatorily referred to as "youdis") are equated with vermin:

Pendant que la vermine
Travaille pour rien
Chez nous la famine
Tue le citoyen
Y a trop longtemps qu'nous somm's dans la misère
Chassons l'Etranger
Ca f'ra travailler
Ce qu'il nous faut, c'est unpeuplus d'salaire
Chassons du pays
Tout' cett' sal' bande de youdis. (71)

While the vermin/work for nothing/here famine/is killing the citizen/ We've lived in misery too long/let's kick the foreigner out/that'll give us work/what we need is more pay/let's kick this whole dirty gang of Jews out of the country.

The dynamics of "othering" are especially interesting in this context, as the French see themselves as locals, speaking of Algeria as "chez nous," while they consider the Jews as foreigners when these belong in North Africa more than the European occupier. Another song is:

Dans la ville d'Alger
Il n'y a plus qu'un cri
Patrie, Fraternité
A has les youdis. (72)

The city of Algiers/cries out in unison/Nation, Brotherhood/Down with the Jews.

Both these songs, and there are numerous others, were sung by the Christian European community in the Maghbreb, not by the Muslim Arab, Berber, or Kabyle natives. Indeed, the French national anthem is itself extremely xenophobic, if not outright racist—is there a difference?—calling upon French citizens to rid the nation of "impure blood" by openly violent means.[2] The violence that pervades the "Marseillaise" is such that France today is divided among those who favor a change in the anthem's lyrics and the more conservative communities who, while acknowledging that it constitutes a call to violence against those deemed "other," will still preserve it as a historical document that led their country to democracy.

The privileging of one community over another also translated into the favoring of Berbers over Arab Muslims in Morocco and Algeria. The

Berbers are an ethnic complex leading mostly sedentary lives in Libya and the francophone Maghreb, who converted to Islam during the Arab conquest, yet retained their languages along with some traditional tribal laws antedating their Koranic religion. (By the first century A.H., all Berber tribes had converted to Islam, or a variation thereof. Within five centuries, all but the Mzabites had become orthodox Sunnis). The religious categories the French colonizers had resorted to in their attempt to divide were used by the oppressed as factors of solidarity and coalition-building. Alain Calmes, Fatima Mernissi, David C.Gordon, Charles-Robert Ageron, and Mahmoud Kaddache, among other scholars of French imperialism in Africa, agree that, rather than divide, the French policy united the two communities. To cite Kaddache: "En tablant sur le particularisme kabyle, en attaquant le ciment religieux et culturel, la politique coloniale a scéllé la cohesion arabo-berbère" (282). "By wagering on Kabyle syncretism, by attacking the religious and cultural links, colonial policy sealed the Arab-Berber cohesion"). Indeed, the Kabyles (North Africa's largest Berber tribe), favored over the Arabs, were given various incentives to migrate to France, yet they were the founders of the first Algerian nationalist organization, l'Etoile Nord-Africaine (founded in 1926 in Paris). L'Etoile Nord-Africaine was succeeded by the Parti du Peuple Algérien (PPA) in 1936, the Comité Révolutionnaire pour l'Unité et l'Action (CRUA) in 1953, and the Front de Liberation Nationale (formally known as FLN) in 1956. All of these movements, each created when its predecessor was suppressed, had a significant Berber membership, indicating the Kabyle identification with the land, the native soil, and the repository of culture and ancestry of Algeria not France. Moreover, the 1954 Revolution, which evolved into the War of Independence, exploded in the Aurès and Kabylia regions of the Berber heartland. The long-term French plan for the Kabyles, however, was fundamentally different: through their assimilation and integration into the culture of the metropolis, they were to become the neocolonial class, perpetuating the French presence in Algeria. Djebar herself is part Arab, part Kabyle. While she initially identified herself as Algerian during the Independence War, she has more recently sought to highlight both of her indigenous cultures, and her 1995 *Vaste est la prison* takes its title from a popular Berber song.

COMING OF AGE IN FRENCH ALGERIA

In this francophone context, the reference to the body as a medium of expression immediately brings to mind French feminism's *écriture feminine,* with its critique of hegemonic discourse, and Djebar herself refers to French variously as the enemy's language, the oppressor's language, and the stepmother tongue. She does so, however, because to her French is primarily

the language of the colonizer. In this she differs from other advocates of *écriture feminine,* for whom all dominant discourse, regardless of its ethnic or national origin, is oppressive because it is phallocentric.[3] This difference becomes greater when one realizes that Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig, the prime proponents of *écriture feminine,* all have some personal awareness of French as a foreign language, which they completely ignore in their writing. Kristeva is Bulgarian: her Slavic/South-east European native tongue and culture are structurally different from French; Irigaray is Belgian, from a bilingual country where culture and identity are intrinsically tied to language; Wittig, born a French citizen, is of German heritage—her first language was German, and she grew up in Alsace, a region that has historically been contested between Germany and France—and Cixous is a North African Jew, a member of the community despised by the *pieds-noirs* even though the colonial administration and the metropolitan center granted them special privileges.

Djebar's focus on Algeria's women reveals an additional dimension to *écriture feminine,* for not only have these women experienced French as an oppressor tongue, but their resources against that language and their means to counter or denounce it were necessarily different. For the women whose voices she examines, being illiterate, do not write.

In view of the French propaganda about its "mission civilisatrice" in North Africa, it must be emphasized that, although the language of education in schools, with the exception of the medersas, or Islamic schools, was French, various estimates place the illiteracy rate in countries of the Maghreb under French colonialism at 85 to 95 percent of the native populations. The persistent belief that North Africans, *en masse,* learned French is a continuation of the colonialist lie that France actually educated masses of North Africans. In reality, by 1880, fifty years after the conquest of Algeria, education standards had fallen well below precolonial times (Calmes 51). General de Gaulle was correct in pointing out that Algeria's independence signified the death of a French illusion, not of the reality, since the North African country had never become French. Moreover, the sexism of the European colonizers reinforced that of the native communities: when and where schooling was compulsory, it was so only for boys, with both the child and his father going to jail for three days and paying a heavy fine if the young one played truant. But nothing of the sort applied to girls (Amrouche 17). Girls became pawns in the tug-of-war over culture, for by denying them an education, the North Africans were holding on, as best they could, to their "independent" (pre-colonial) traditions and cultures.

The North Africans' reluctance to educate their children in French schools is understandable when one considers what the children were taught. Kabyle poet Fadhma Amrouche, born in 1882 or 1883 (her biographer's date differs from the one she gives in her own work) writes:

> I was top in French history, but I hated geography—I could never remember all the Departments and Districts, whereas I can still remember in detail all the kings of France, who married whom, who succeeded whom, and all about the French revolution and the Napoleonic era. (17)

Clearly, schooling in Africa centered upon the foreign occupier's central systems of governance, achievements (Napoleon was North Africa's conqueror), history, foregrounding a progression toward democracy which, in keeping with colonialist hypocrisy and double-standards, the French actively suppressed in their colonies. The few girls who were thus "educated" were actually twice alienated: first from their native culture and second from that of the colonizer, in what constitutes an African parallel to the alienation of black women from the American dominant discourse.

Amrouche explains that, when the French colonial administration closed the school she was going to, she found herself, at the age of fifteen, short-changed and ill-equipped for the life awaiting her in her native village:

> From that day I tried to rid myself of the veneer of civilisation that I had acquired and not even think about it. Since the Roumis had rejected us, I resolved to become a Kabyle again.
>
> I told my mother she must show me how to do all her work about the house, so that I could help her. (31)

Amrouche's alienation foreshadows the plight of educated Black women in the United States, as illustrated in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon,* where First Corinthian's degree from Bryn Mawr:

> had done what a four-year dose of liberal education was designed to do: unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world…. After graduation she returned to a work world in which colored girls, regardless of their backgrounds, were in demand for one and only one kind of work. (*Song* 189)

Half a century later, Djebar's schooling also alienated her initially from her compatriots, even as she felt politically hostile to French colonization. In 1956, in support of the Algerian student strike against continuing French occupation, she turned from her studies to fiction writing. Her first novel, *La soif* (1957) received raves by French reviewers, while earning her the disapproval of North African critics and readers, who felt it neglected the immediate reality and focused instead on such "untimely" issues as Arab women's sexuality and their awakening and revolt against traditional mores. Writing over twenty years later, in his study of the North African novel, Abdelkebir Khatibi provides an insightful reading of the book, as he notes:

"A-t-on vraiment compris que la découverte du corps pour le personnage de *La soif est* aussi une révolution importante?" (*Le roman maghrébin* 62. "Have we really understood that the discovery of her body for the central character in *The Mischief* is also an important revolution?" my translation). It is true that *La soif* is one of the earliest and still exceptional works to show Arab women controlling their bodies, deciding whether to bear children or not and using sex as a tool for potential liberation. In this novel, Nadia, the protagonist, agrees to flirt with Ali, her friend Jedla's husband, in order to give Jedla grounds for divorce on charges of infidelity. In the meantime, Jedla finds out she is pregnant, and rather than accept her female "condition," decides to have an abortion without consulting her husband. She dies as a result of the operation, in what may be Djebar's way of suggesting there are no easy solutions to women's problems.

Similarly, her next novels *Les impatients* (1958) and *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) were viewed by North Africans as insufficiently political, while they were hailed in France as great novels. In *Les impatients,* the central character, Dalila, is yearning for greater emancipation from her culture's mores:

> *Pour la première fois de ma vie, je dormais seule, ainsi, en pleine nature…. Que pouvait-il exister d'autre que moi, et le ciel, à cette heure? Pendant dixhuit ans, on m'avait empechee d'aimer le soleil rouge, le ciel plein et rond comme une coupe fraîche. J'étais enfin dans la lumière. Je m'endormis.* (16)

> For the first time in my life I slept alone, in nature. What else could there be but me and the sky, at this hour? For eighteen years, I had been forbidden from loving the red sun, the sky full and round like a fresh cup. I was in the light at last. I fell asleep.

To revolt against traditional societal constraints, Djebar indicates in this early work, is not necessarily to engage in anything evil, for all Dalila wants to do is dance and sleep in the sun, to enjoy her body, free from the *hijab,* yet safe from the desiring masculine gaze.

In *Les enfants du nouveau monde,* Djebar finally deals directly with the Algerian revolution. In this "new world," women are depicted as having a political consciousness of their own, at times greater than men's. Amna is one such example, whose husband is a traitor to the national cause, while she herself continues to serve the resistance, breaking free from matrimonial subservience before her country can break free from colonial subjugation.

La soif, Les impatients and *Les enfants du nouveau monde* all deal with feminine rebellion, and while they are best read as juvenilia, they nevertheless reveal Djebar's early concern with female sensuality and freedom of physical expression, with rebellion grounded in national and personal/ feminine history.

It is revealing of Djebar's own double-consciousness that, as she wrote novels deemed too Western-influenced by her compatriots, she was also working (between 1958–62) for the revolutionary newspaper *Al-Moujahid,* edited by Frantz Fanon.[4] Her fourth novel, *Les alouettes naïves,* was completed in 1962 but not published until 1967. By then, she was teaching Maghrebian history at the University of Algiers.

MIDDLE GROUND

In 1985, when Djebar set out to write her autobiography, she was confronted with the realization that she could do it only in French, the language of her former oppressor. A historian by training, Djebar, however, knew too well the atrocities the French committed against her people, atrocities which partly explain, though certainly they cannot justify, the dismal circumstances in contemporary postrevolutionary Algeria. "The language of the Others, in which I was enveloped from childhood, the gift my father lovingly bestowed on me, that language has adhered to me ever since like the tunic of Nessus," she confesses, with a reference to the mythical, half-human half-horse monster with poisoned blood (*F* 127). "Autobiography practised in the enemy's language has the texture of fiction," she continues (*F* 216). Yet she could not renounce French, which helped her escape her own country's stifling fundamentalism, a neotraditionalism that dictates that women should be domestic creatures, their very lives threatened by their refusal to wear the *hijab* as they step out into "male territory." Indeed, her writing in *Fantasia* is her way of denouncing her culture's sexism:

> To refuse to veil one's voice and to start "shouting," that was really indecent, real dissidence. For the silence of all others suddenly lost its charm and revealed itself for what it was: a prison without reprieve. (*F* 204)

Djebar's predicament is by no means unique. One of the many facets of the educated postcolonial's condition is a problematic relationship to bilingualism, a familiarity with the colonizer's language that at times exceeds that with one's native tongue. Many radical postcolonial thinkers have stopped writing in the language of their conquerors. Foremost amongst those is Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o who, in 1977, stopped using the English language as a vehicle for his plays, novels, and short stories but continued to use it for his explanatory prose. Four years later, with *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature,* Ngugi also said farewell to English "as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way" (xiv). In order to avoid the substantially smaller exposure that would inevitably have resulted from the fact that most of his readers do not speak these languages, Ngugi wrote in Gikuyu or Kiswahili, formulating his thoughts in an African mindset,

then proceeded to do his own translations into English. In *Decolonising the Mind,* Ngugi argues that the imposition of European languages over Majority World cultures amounts to their annihilation:

> But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. (3)

In the Maghreb, one thinks of Algeria's Rachid Boujedra who, shortly after winning the Prix Goncourt, the French world's most coveted and prestigious literary prize, stopped writing in French in order to revitalize Arabic literature. Other authors, such as Morocco's Tahar Ben Jalloun, take a different approach to the fact that they write, think, and otherwise express themselves in French.

> [W]e're trying to make the most of this situation, not to keep complaining about it, to keep making it into a big issue, and every time say "oh la la, we write in French because we've been colonized." It's true, but you have to go beyond that, try to be a little more calm about it, and say OK, we write in French because it happened that way but let's try to get the most out of it for everyone. (30)

Between these two poles is yet another approach to bilingualism, a conscious problematizing of the use of the former oppressor's language, a realization that greater familiarity with the dominant discourse always-already implies some degree of alienation from one's culture but not necessarily with an acceptance of the hegemonic discourse. Instead, the use of that language itself becomes a subversive practice, thereby decentering, deterritorializing, and stripping it of its exclusive membership rules.

Djebar locates herself in that middle ground, as she feels indebted to French for her own personal liberation, while remaining aware of that language's subjugation of the greater community she identifies with: Algeria, and more specifically, Algerian women. An insider without, she oscillates between quasi gratitude to French, which allowed her to escape the harem, and nostalgic attachment to conversational Arabic, which bonds her with the Algerian women she interviewed, whose oral histories she inscribes in *Fantasia.* In *A Sister to Scheherazade,* she writes: "I lived subsequently outside the harem: my widowed father sent me to boarding-school, but I felt myself permanently linked to these prisoners" (78). Indeed, Arabic remains the language she loves, and gradually comes to represent to her the language of love: "[T]he French language could offer me all its inexhaustible treasures, but not a single one of its terms of endearment would be destined for my use" (*F* 27). Whatever its intent and contents, French to her is a barrier to love, a world where emotions cannot resonate:

> Ever since I was a child the foreign language was a casement opening on the spectacle of the world and all its riches. In certain circumstances it became a dagger threatening me. Should a man venture to describe my eyes, my laughter or my hands, should I hear him speak of me in this way, I risked losing my composure; then I immediately felt I had to shut him off….
>
> The compliments—harmless or respectful—expressed in the foreign language, traversed a no-man's-land of silence…. How could I admit to the foreigner, who had sometimes become a friend or a relative, by marriage, that such loaded words defused themselves as soon as uttered, that by their very nature they lost their power to touch me, and that in this case it was nothing to do with either of us? The word had simply drowned before reaching its destination. (126)

Arabic, on the other hand, immediately conjures up intimacy and is intrinsically linked to physical expression. Thus while she explains that her brother was neither her friend not her ally when she needed him, she nevertheless observes that all distance between the two of them is bridged when they meet after many years' separation, when he uses one idiosyncratic word from their childhood, a diminutive "peculiar to the speech of our tribe—half-way between the Berber language of the highlands and the Arabic of the nearby city" (80). That word, *"hannouni"* brings up physical, erotic, and sensual feelings which Djebar cannot see translated into French:

> How can you translate this *hannouni* by a word like "tender-hearted" or *"tendrelou"*? Or by "my darling" or "my precious heart." Instead of saying "precious heart," we women prefer the expression "my little liver," or "the apple of my eye"…(80–81)

And, whereas no compliment in French could ever reach Djebar, the Arabic language has an aphrodisiac effect on her:

> This one word could have filled my nights when I was in love…This word …sometimes my lips form it silently, awakening it; sometimes it is exhumed by a caress along one of my limbs and the sculpted syllables rise to the surface, I am about to spell it out, just once, whisper it to be free of it, but I refrain. (81)[5]

Djebar's ambiguous feelings towards French constitute, in part, her way to resolve her failure to write in Arabic. In 1969, following the publication of a collection of verse, *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse*, as well as a play, *Rouge L'aube,* Djebar stopped writing to devote herself to learning Arabic, which she was determined to use for her future publications. Her attempt at erasing colonial education proved futile, however, as the hegemonic French discourse seemed to have permanently displaced Arabic, relegating it to the status of spoken, conversational language. In an age of print media, that status is

always-already endangered, threatened with extinction. Yet we will see, throughout this study, how it is revived through oraliterature, the inscription of native, oral speech patterns and tonalities into the written text, thus creating the duality that best articulates postcolonial and diasporan hybridity. Djebar achieves this through the inclusion, in her novels written in French, of oral histories and interviews conducted in Arabic, Cliff and Marshall by alternating between patois and "the King's English," and Morrison and Marshall by foregrounding the richness of Black speech in their writing. "I have to rewrite, discard, and remove the print-quality of the language to put back the oral quality, where intonation, volume and gesture are all there," Morrison explains, commenting on her technique (Tate 126). Again, the very titles of these authors' works are indicative of their predilections: a fantasia is a music piece, the abeng a musical instrument, and the praisesong, as well as the song (of Solomon), are tunes meant to be heard, not read.

While still unreconciled to writing in French, Djebar resorted to the visual arts, and in 1978 directed *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua,* which was awarded the Prix de la Critique Internationale at the 1979 Venice Film Festival. Mildred Mortimer correctly points out that:

> For Djebar the gaze is crucial because the prohibition against women seeing and being seen is at the heart of Maghrebian patriarchy, an ideological system in which the master's eye alone exists; women challenge the patriarchal system by appropriating the gaze for themselves. (859)

La nouba, which features some of the interviews and oral histories later recorded in *Fantasia* under the subheading "Voices," foregrounds women's roles in the oral transmission of Algerian history, and is an "investigation of… the world of space and time as perceived by women, the world of body and thought as experienced by Algerian women" (Bensmaïa 878). Djebar's reappropriation of the gaze is empowering not only in its challenge to Maghrebian patriarchy, as Mortimer states in her analysis, it is also a conscious reversal of the Orientalist gaze North African women were subjected to by French artists. In an interview, she explained that it was her experience with filming—with controlling the gaze—that allowed her to return to writing in French. Her second film, *La zerda et les chants de l'oubli*, is a documentary covering the period 1912–1942 in North Africa, from the perspectives of Maghrebians generally and women in particular. In 1980, her stories of two decades were collected and published in French, as *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement.*[6] The title of that work, as well as the cover illustration, are taken from the 1834 oil painting by Eugène Delacroix depicting three voluptuous women in an exotic setting, dressed in luxurious silks, and being waited on by a turbanned servant. These women's profession—providing men with sexual gratification—is affirmed by their sleepy looks, supine positions, bare faces, bare feet, and the door that stands suggestively

ajar in the background. Djebar felt it necessary to redress this image that is part of the permanent collection at the Musée du Louvre. In a moment which crystallizes her agency and her power of subversion from within, she writes to counter the visual impact of the Orientalist painter. More powerfully, she lends her own voice and power of inscription to her dead sisters, whose hands had been amputated by the conqueror. In the concluding pages of the novel, Djebar picks up the discarded hand of an Algerian woman, cut off to facilitate the theft of her jewelry by the French: "Later, I seize on this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory, and I attempt to bring it the *qalam* (pen)" (*F* 226).

ALTERED EGOS, ALTERNATIVE VOICES

As an individual artist, Djebar writes in French. But as a member of the community of North African women, she foregrounds other means of communication, the vocal and the physical:

> The fourth language [after French, Arabic, and Lybico-Berber], for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body: the body which…in trances, dances or vociferations, in fits of hope or despair, rebels, and unable to read or write, seeks some unknown shore as destination for its message of love. (*F* 180)

The venue left for these women is the preverbal—physical expression, movements, sounds, trances and dances—functioning outside the reach of any Symbolic discourse and which can thereby communicate the indicible. Just as an energetic body's movement will not be stilled by the *hijab,* Djebar's use of French to revive these "vociferations" disarms that language, reducing it to the role of medium rather than agent of oppression.

Uncritical speakers of the dominant discourse adhere to a rigid language that does not allow for great liberties in interpretation or great variations in meanings. They uphold and seek to impose on us the Law of the Father, which stipulates a one-on-one equivalence between a sign and its signified. The Law of the Father is Jacques Lacan's theory that language is the medium through which we enter society and are capable of functioning therein, and that language is represented and enforced by the authoritarian figure of the father in the family. Ironically, the entry into language always entails alienation, for the very "self " captured in a statement such as "I am" is already at a distance from the speaker of that statement, subjugated to language even as it is the subject of a statement. In contrast to the rigidity and orderliness of phallogocentric discourse, female expression is viewed as poetically fluid and replete with ambiguities and uncertainties.

French feminists, despite their internecine differences as well as the ethnocentrism I mentioned previously, have denounced Western discourse's

systematic repression of women's experience, as it placed (white, upper-class) man at its defining center. This claim to centrality is expressed in religion, philosophy, politics, the various sciences, and language—it is no surprise that Euroman's first impulse, indeed irresistible urge, upon recognizing a child as his own is his bestowing his name, the Name of the Father, upon that child. Children who bear their mother's names are stigmatized as outside the Law, literally "illegitimate."

Yet in a striking illustration of their own repression of alterity, French feminists have not mentioned colonialism in their discussion of Symbolic discourse as an agent of alienation for all non-Westerners. A prime example is Cixous, who grew up as a French girl in Algeria and discusses "blackness" and Africa strictly in symbolic terms, co-opting these to represent European women's experiences, and thus usurping the space that would rightly be occupied by women of color. Cixous's homogenizing is even more striking when one recalls that she comes from a community granted French citizenship on the basis of its Jewish heritage, valorized by metropolitan France as long as it was kept distant (in North Africa), at the same time that it was viciously smeared by anti-Semitic colonials. Surely this liminal experience should provide for an appreciation of nuances, of differences within difference. Yet in her highly influential, widely anthologized manifesto of *écriture féminine,* "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous views all women, including herself, as symbolically black:

> As soon as [women] begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous….
>
> We the precocious, we the repressed of culture,…we are black and we are beautiful. (247–248)

Implicated in a Symbolic discourse of colonialism that includes them because they are white, these French feminists fail to adequately address the flip side of Euro-phallogocentrism, its effacing of the non-Western experience, both male and female.

Similarly, Kristeva erases the reality of Algeria's oppression as she levels differences between foreignness within and foreigners *per se.* This is most obvious in her recent work, *Strangers to Ourselves,* although it constitutes a natural progression of her writings since her own exile as a welcome East European political and intellectual dissident in France. Thus, in her discussion of Albert Camus's stranger, Mersault, she writes:

> Mersault is just as, if not more, distant from his conationals as he is from the Arabs. At what does he shoot during the imporous hallucination that overcomes him? At shadows, whether French or Maghrebian, it matters little. (*Strangers* 26)

As Winifred Woodhull points out in *Transfigurations of the Maghreb,* her excellent study of the (ab)uses of feminine tropes in Maghrebian literatures:

> By virtue of focussing on foreignness within and systematically dissociating it from social inequalities, Kristeva ends by ignoring the foreigners whose foreignness, unlike her own, sparks hostility and violence in France. (92)

What strikes me as even more offensive is the fact that no one, in looking at Camus's so-called masterpiece, has actually pointed out that, during France's lengthy occupation of Algeria, not a single French person was ever tried for shooting an Arab.

Growing up Arab in occupied Algeria, Djebar could not ignore colonialism. It was her father, a school teacher, who introduced her to French, the "oppressor's language," but also, as she refers to it, the "father tongue." Djebar opens *Fantasia* with a warning, an awareness of the potential danger involved in the acquisition of French.

> A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father. A tall erect figure in a fez and a European suit, carrying a bag of school books. He is a teacher at the French primary school. A little Arab girl in a village in the Algerian Sahel….
>
> From the very first day that a little girl leaves her home to learn the ABC, the neighbours adopt that knowing look of those who in ten or fifteen years' time will be able to say "I told you so!" while commiserating with the foolhardy father, the irresponsible brother. (3)

For the colonized, French is invested with a mythical dimension: learning it seems tantamount to initiating a metamorphosis that does not provide for turning back. And clearly, the danger is gendered: the male relatives, the "foolhardy father" and "irresponsible brother," have allowed a woman to taste of that forbidden fruit, which they can apparently digest unharmed. French, the "father tongue," is masculine, and should remain the prerogative of men. The gendering of language becomes obvious again in *A Sister to Scheherazade,* where Isma's aunt is distressed at the thought of the young child being sent to a French school, asking tearfully "Is she a man boy?" and blaming "the law of the *Roumis*" (130).

While I fully share Woodhull's concern with the abuses of the feminine trope, we must keep in mind that colonial Algeria was "feminized," symbolized by the submissive veiled woman, not the proud bearded patriarch, even though both types existed. Colonialism is not only racist, it is phallic, a gendered discourse, bestowing traditional male attributes to the dominant partner, and feminine attributes to the subjected one. One need only think of expressions such as "the rape of Africa" or the "penetration"

into "virgin territory" to realize the extent of the sexual imagery in colonialist discourse. Functioning in this paradigm, it becomes difficult to achieve emancipation without accessing, in a way, the dominant prerogatives, bell hooks's argument against feminism's embrace of a victim identity is absolutely in order, for if feminism is the overcoming of victimhood, once that goal is achieved we no longer need the ideology. Djebar did not embrace a victim identity: *Fantasia* opens with Algerian women watching the French fleet approach the North African coastline which, as I mention previously, reverses the gaze as it depicts women on solid ground, on roof tops, within a concrete enclave, while the French men are exposed at sea, powerless to hide themselves from the inquisitive oversight. But Djebar also realizes the linguistic dynamics that, in a colonial context, made Arabic the language of the vanquished. Similarly, in *A Sister to Scheherazade,* where she caustically denounces the brutal shackling and stifling of women's freedom in contemporary Algeria—a reality she simply cannot ignore—she nevertheless shows these women-as rebels exercising agency by whatever means available to them, much as the enslaved Africans and their descendants in the West, through sly civility, preserved their self-respect and dignity, eventually gaining their freedom. In *Vaste est la prison,* Djebar denies Algeria's "femininity," but only because she associates femininity with nurturing, a quality present-day Algeria no longer possesses:

> *Au centre, que faire sinon être happée par le monstre Algérie—et ne l'appelez plus femme, peut-être goule, ou vorace centauresse surgie de quels abysses, non, même pas "femme sauvage". (345)*
>
> At the center, what can one do but be sucked into Algeria the monster—and do not call her woman anymore, maybe a goul, or a voracious she-centaur emerged from some unknown abyss, no, not even "wild woman."

In *Fantasia,* and to a lesser degree in *A Sister to Scheherazade,* we see that French does indeed open up unprecedented possibilities for women. In particular, it allowed for an evolution of the relationship between Djebar's parents, who almost became accomplices in love as Djebar's mother learned French.

> After she had been married for a few years, my mother gradually learnt a little French….
>
> I don't know exactly when my mother began to say "*My husband* has come, *my husband* has gone out…I'll ask *my husband,* etc."…Nevertheless, I can sense how much it cost her modesty to refer to my father in this way.
>
> It was as if a flood-gate had opened within her, perhaps in her relationship with her husband. Years later, during the summers we spent in her native town, when chatting in Arabic with her sisters or cousins,

> my mother would refer to him quite naturally by his name, even with a touch of superiority….
>
> Years went by. As my mother's ability to speak French improved, while I was still a child of no more than twelve, I came to realize an irrefutable fact: namely that, in the face of all these womenfolk, my parents formed a couple. (*F* 35–36)

Nevertheless, even as it brought the parents closer, French alienated Djebar's mother from "the womenfolk," with whom she could only chat in Arabic, and among whom her modesty always suffered. By accessing French, Djebar's mother had moved away from full membership in the community of non-Westernized women, and aligned herself, if only through her claim to be part of a romantic couple, with a speaker and teacher of that alien and alienating language and its culture. Her use of the expression "my husband" suggests an intimacy that is absent from common references among other Algerian women to their spouses, references such as the impersonal "him" or even "the enemy." Moreover, the implicit direct counterpart of "my husband," namely "my wife," identifies Djebar's mother in the position of individual partner, not merely one of the "womenfolk," a member of the harem with no particular claim to selfhood, or at best a favorite child's mother. While that woman is, understandably, only referred to in *Fantasia* as "my mother," she is also a loved, happy, satisfied wife.

> The postcard was, in fact, a most daring manifestation of affection. Her modesty suffered at that very moment that she spoke of it. Yet, it came second to her pride as a wife, which was secretly flattered. (38)

French, with its emancipatory associations, must have been equally alienating to the young Djebar: A 1939 photograph of her father's village school shows her as the only schoolgirl among forty-five schoolboys. How can Djebar record the thoughts of people whose looks she recalls but whose statements she only hypothesizes as future utterances? How then can she, writing in French, inscribe the experiences of the female neighbors who never stepped through her father's school gates? In *A Sister to Scheherazade,* discussed below, we see her *speaking for* the cloistered woman, instead of giving her a voice of her own. That problematic appropriation of a subaltern voice in order to articulate the subaltern's plight is somewhat remedied by the fact that the emancipated woman, who speaks for the cloistered one, eventually gives her the key to her prison/apartment, urging her to escape whenever she is ready, rather than taking it upon herself to open the locked door.

Her own artistic merit notwithstanding, the use of the "oppressor's tongue" for one's liberation, simultaneous with the denunciation of the oppressor, is not unique to Djebar—indeed, it is common among women of color in various parts of the world. Simply put: when one is subjected to a single oppression, the

linguistic, one can reject the oppressive language. But when one is affected by multiple oppressions, it may be extremely productive to use one master's tools to dismantle another master's house. While many examples come to mind, I will cite here only one additional Africana woman writer who has used a European language to denounce a non-European oppressive custom, namely the Ghanaian feminist Ama Ata Aidoo, who is also highly critical of colonialism and the cultural "bomb" it has brought to Africa. Aidoo comments on the potential emancipatory uses of the foreign language as she empowers Esi, in *Changes: A Love Story,* to ask for a divorce on the grounds of "marital rape," an expression that is nonexistent in any African language that she is aware of. Esi, a champion of African cultural independence, had felt temporarily trapped in a sexually abusive marriage, for she had earlier argued that "you cannot go around claiming that an idea was imported into a given culture unless you could also conclude that to the best of your knowledge, there is not, and never was any word or phrase in that society's indigenous language which describes that idea or item" (12). And, to the best of Esi's knowledge, there is no indigenous word for "marital rape" in Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, Wolof, Temne, Kikuyu, Kiswahili, Chi-Shona, Zulu, Xhosa, or any other African language.[7] But Esi, and Aidoo, both reconcile themselves to making use of the concept by locating Esi's discontent with her marriage not in a linguistic context, but a physical, visceral one instead. Esi is feeling angry, sore, and dirty:

> And here she was, not feeling academic or intellectual at all, but angry, and sore…And even after a good bath before and after, still dirty…Dirty!… Ah-h-h-h, the word was out. (12–13)

Esi's use of a Western concept, "marital rape," does not imply her allegiance to Western culture, nor does her espousing an African brand of feminism suggest this is the only school of feminism in Africa. In fact, Aidoo reminds her Western readers, in *Changes* and her other writings, of the varieties of African feminisms, often presenting an array of such beliefs in the same work (see Elia 1999). Similarly, the mere fact of Djebar's being female cannot alone qualify her for the role of spokesperson for "the Algerian womenfolk." We cannot forget that Djebar is an independent, emancipated, educated woman living in the West. We must avoid the trap of essentializing women as biologically determined, even as we assert that we express ourselves differently. I maintain that our alternative/alternate modes of expression are a result of our socially constructed roles that have historically relegated us to the margins of the social text, the official, hegemonic discourse. Yes, women can take liberties with language, and we have historically done so whenever we have sought to see ourselves represented in language. In various aspects of life, past and present, from the secular to the sacred, women have had to interpret, manipulate, and modify language and to transgress its rigidity in

order to secure for ourselves a forum for expression, for representation. A prohibition such as "Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Wife" is only supposedly universal in that it clearly addresses the heterosexual male. Gay men, heterosexual women, and lesbians must engage in simultaneous translation to make it apply to them. Women are also further distanced from the dominant discourse in this Mosaic command as they are presented as possession—the neighbor's wife, and not neighbors in their own right.

Women have resorted to interpretation whenever statements were made that supposedly applied to all. Indeed, if language is to make sense to us at all, there has got to be more in it than Lacan's "word-to-word connection." The hegemonic, dominant discourse keeps us limber and increases our flexibility through the intense linguistic maneuvers we undertake to make it relate to our experiences as women. It is all the more so when that dominant discourse is twice removed from us as foreign and colonizing.

Almost two decades before *Fantasia,* as she attempted to gain fluency in Arabic, Djebar had already confronted the traumatic realization that she had been schooled in the language of her alienation: "My oral tradition has gradually been overlaid, and is in danger of vanishing" (*F* 156). A generation earlier, her mother, too, had suffered communally as she gained individually from her knowledge of French. Upon receiving a letter from her schoolteacher husband, for example, she was at once flattered and embarrassed, the French written word leaving her at a loss for words in spoken Arabic:

> "He wrote his wife's name and the postman must have read it? Shame!…"
> 'He could at least have addressed the card to his son, for the principle of the thing, even if his son is only seven or eight!'
> My mother did not reply. She was probably pleased, flattered even, but she said nothing. Perhaps she was suddenly ill at ease, or blushing from embarrassment; yes, her husband had written to her, in person!….
> The murmured exchanges of these segregated women struck a faint chord with me, as a little girl with observing eyes. (37–38)

The experiences of Djebar and her mother, a full generation apart, are similar in that both women can no longer express themselves fully in Arabic, as a direct consequence of their schooling in French, a schooling moreover conducted by a man. Yet what is most significant is that Djebar can still relate to that moment of embarrassment that her mother must have felt, although the immediate circumstances themselves are different. The mother had received a postcard written by a man, probably mentioning what he had done while away from home or relating some superficial news about himself. The reception of such a postcard, naming her as the addressee—the dominant discourse inscribing her in its narrative—makes her so uncomfortable as to silence her socially, even as it pleases her personally. Djebar, on the other hand, is a woman seeking to record intimate feelings and experiences—an autobiography is essentially different from a

postcard. She is the sender, not the recipient. She is struggling to enter her experience in the dominant discourse, aware that the latter has erased rather than inscribed that experience. Yet she, too, like her mother, is frustrated by her familiarity with French. And it is this shared feeling of frustration that bridges the gap between her, her mother, and the broader community of women, whose unity was temporarily disrupted by the imposition of the foreign language. Thus Djebar's writing, like that of many feminists, is a validation of sensual and intuitive knowledge, of a history passed down orally and through the body, and not found in the textbooks she read in her father's French school. This oral history is transmitted in Arabic, the mother tongue which French did not erase and which acquires a physical, erotic nature "associatively linked to a curved and dancing female body which has escaped its confines" (Ghaussy 460).

In the above passage, Djebar recalls both the postcard and the segregated women's "murmured exchanges" surrounding it. Similarly, some of the material she collected for *La nouba* is included in Part Three of *Fantasia,* "Voices from the Past," in chapters again entitled "Voice." The resulting polyphony, while clearly not exhaustive, suggests the heterogeneity of the subaltern experiences, as it produces an echo effect with its myriad variations and its infinite repetitions. This heterogeneity can again be clarified with our discussion of the prohibition against coveting "the neighbor's wife," a prohibition that must be interpreted differently by the speakers of various nondominant groups who nevertheless have in common the process of simultaneous translation. The subversive power of these subaltern groups—unacknowledged, though no less momentous because it is not sensed by the speakers of the dominant discourse—lies in their rendering that discourse polysemic, or open to a number of interpretations. Whether viewed as semiotic turbulences, syntactical or grammatical errors, disruptions, or "Signifyin(g)," they irrevocably chip away at the supposed insularity of the dominant discourse, and only the most myopic reading can retain the illusion that language signifies no more than what speakers of the dominant discourse wish it to.

Fantasia's many "voices" recount the experiences of women as individual agents, as well as members of the subjugated community. Thus one "Voice" speaks up, only to fall silent again, when her older brother seeks to shelter her from the brutality of death:

> My elder brother Abdelkader came up behind me and suddenly said angrily to the others, "Why did you show her the body? Can't you see she's only a child?"
>
> "I saw him fall!' I said, turning round suddenly. 'Right in front of me!" And my voice gave way. (121)

Another "voice" gives the alarm as she hears French spoken, and is quickly surrounded by death:

> I could hear French spoken, not far away. I asked in surprise, "Who's speaking French?"
>
> The old woman said, "One of our men, probably!"
>
> "No," I replied. 'You know perfectly well we're forbidden to speak French now.'
>
> I turned around to look and spied French soldiers. I gave the alarm, shouting, "Soldiers! Soldiers!"
>
> I'd barely started running when the firing began. A child (some of the married women had children) had just got up and came tottering out first: a bullet hit him in the middle of the forehead and he fell down on the ground in front of me. (132)

In another episode, yet another "voice," having informed the freedom fighters about the impending arrival of French soldiers, must suffer for it:

> When I got back from meeting with the Brothers, I found out in the village that the French were going to make a raid into the mountains. I had passed on the information…. And that's how I found myself facing the French officer!…
>
> This time they questioned me with electricity until…until I thought I'd die. (160–161)

Indeed, the voices resonate in the mountains, in the caves, coming from everywhere, inundating *Fantasia.* The pain of the victims sounds a primal scream, a powerful shudder, repeated ad infinitum. In this respect, it becomes irrelevant that the woman who uttered it has fallen, for the echo-like structure magnifies the voice, multiplying its call. The "wild collective voice" is heard by everyone, including those in charge of silencing it. Eugène Fromentin, a chronicler of the conquest of North Africa, records that breach of silence:

> A heart-rending cry arose—I can still hear it as I write to you—then the air was rent with screams, then pandemonium broke loose. (F, epigraph xxii)

Djebar comments in *Fantasia* that none of the thirty-seven accounts of the 1830 siege of Algiers was written by a woman. The multitude of voices she cites in that novel certainly remedies that silence. As Dorothy Blair points out in the introduction to the English translation: "The hero of the Algerian resistance to the French conquest was the legendary Sultan Abd al-Qadir, but the episodes which stand out here are those featuring the sufferings of women" (F, Introduction, n. pag.).

Fantasia also functions as gazing back, opening with a scene of women looking out to the sea, watching the French armada approaching their shores. Here too, by foregrounding the women's physical presence in open space, she counters the masculinist blindness to women's presence at historical moments

and debunks the Orientalist myths that Arab women are always passive, always "absent."

> I can imagine Hussein's wife neglecting her dawn prayer to climb up too onto the terrace. How many other women, who normally only retreated to their terraces at the end of the day, must also have gathered there to catch a glimpse of the dazzling French fleet. (*F* 8)

The role reversal is further underscored by the protagonists' immediate surroundings: the women are on solid ground, atop erect, "man-made" buildings, while the men are at sea, in a naturally fluid setting.

Despite its focus on women's experiences, *Fantasia* is not all oral and feminine history. It features episodes drawn from obscure archives, letters by petty officers to their families in France, or the private journals of the early colonizers, all punctuated by Djebar's own voice in the autobiographical chapters, or that of the numerous women she interviewed, the *porteuses de feu,* women who took part in the War of Liberation. While some sections show women as agents, others depict them as victims of utterly barbaric conquests: many had their hands and feet cut off by the French for their jewelry, thousands died in the fumigation of rebel tribes in the caves in which they had taken refuge. Significantly, none of the passages depicting women as victims are narrated by these women themselves. Rather, it is the male French gaze that sees them as such, symbolically stripping them of the agency they enact in the episodes featuring their own "voices." Djebar, bilingual and bicultural, fuses past French reports with contemporary Arabic narratives. By doing so, she belies the assertion that official (male/victor) reports are definitive, while oral (female/vanquished) narratives constitute at best a distant memory, to be ultimately obliterated by the "self-evident truth" of history books. Moreover, Djebar's subversive use of written/printed French to record those oral narratives renders that very language "feminine"—equivocal, ambivalent, ever evading closure. (Ghaussy 458)

"Biffure," the last chapter in Part One, is a prime illustration of *écriture feminine,* an exposition of intuitive knowledge and feelings, emphasizing the physical, her own body—not official documents—as the agent of continuation, and expression of her kin. Djebar narrates her impressions upon entering the dark cave where a tribe had been obliterated. Visiting the site where her ancestors were "fumigated" during the French conquest of Algeria, she relives their agony:

> *To read this writing, I must lean over backwards, plunge my face into the shadows, examine the vaulted roof of rock or chalk, lend an ear to the whispers that rise from time out of mind, study this geology stained red with blood. What magma of sounds lies rotting here? What stench of putrefaction seeps out? I grope about, my sense of smell aroused, my*

> *ears alert, in this rising tide of ancient pain. Alone, stripped bare, unveiled, I face the images of darkness….*
>
> *And my body reverberates with sounds from the endless landslide of generations of my lineage.* (*F* 46)

The undermining of the dominant discourse, French, is rendered here through her reading of its reflection on the wall, "writ from right to left in the mirror of suffering":

> *The flickering flames of successive fires form letters of French words, curiously elongated or expanded, against cave walls, tattooing vanished faces with a lurid mottling…*
>
> *And for a fleeting moment I glimpse the mirror-image of the foreign inscription, reflected in Arabic letters, writ from right to left in the mirror of suffering.* (46)

The Arabic text which she senses in the dark tells a story different from the superscripted French text. It tells of a suffering that could not be articulated in French, nor even in Arabic, itself Symbolic, patriarchal as the culture it bespeaks, and which also seeks to relegate women to a position of passive recipient rather than active agent. With her body bent backwards, her bare face plunged in the shadows, Djebar interprets the dark signs of the suffering, leaning over the memory of the victims, groping about, her ears alert, her sense of smell aroused. Her own literacy is of no avail—it is impossible to read in pitch darkness. But all her other senses are receptive to the cave's myriad messages. Speaking in tongues, the conterdiscourse she channels is multiple, as was the oppression. It "reads" in Arabic rather than French, it produces a mirror-image, a negative/negating image, and it is transmitted through the body, the site of feminine alterity.

The next "episode" of *Fantasia,* Chapter I of Part II, is "official history," what Ranajit Guha, writing on "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency" in colonial India, has described as "primary discourse," explaining that "it is almost without exception official in character…. It was official also in so far as it was meant primarily for administrative use—for the information of government, for action on its part and for the determination of its policy" (7). Djebar, schooled in French and seeking to express the voices of the various participants in the Algerian revolution, includes the texts inscribed "from left to right," texts that the French officers wrote for their compatriots explaining military strategy and logistics. These official texts, however, will never again read with the same aura of authority and/or objectivity because of their juxtaposition to those that articulate and inscribe the screams of the victims. Citing the chroniclers is subversive in another way, for she reveals them to be affected by the sight of the massacred tribes, vulnerable to feelings of remorse, guilt, and outrage at their own barbarism, fostering ambiguous feelings about

the orders conveyed by the dominant discourse and undermining the very validity of that discourse and its claim to authority. Thus Pélissier, who was responsible for the fumigation of numerous tribes in the caves that Djebar visited, is shown as transformed by his contact with his own victims' corpses.

> "Smoke them out mercilessly, like foxes!" ordered Bugeaud, and Pélissier obeyed.
>
> That is what Bugeaud had written; Pélissier had obeyed, but when the scandal breaks in Paris, he does not divulge the order. He is a true officer; a model of esprit du corps, with a sense of duty; he respects the law of silence. (*F* 70)

"The law of silence" could not, however, forever obscure the sinister sights Pélissier witnessed. Once again, bodies, even in death, prove stronger than words; they defeat attempts at official reporting and are turned over to the person most worthy of narrating their suffering: not the French, male aggressor, but the Algerian female kin of the fumigated tribe.

> After Pélissier emerges from this promiscuous contact with the fumigated victims clad in their ashy rags, he makes his report which he intended to compose in official terms. But he is unable to do so; he has become for all time the sinister, the moving surveyor of these subterranean medinas, the quasi-fraternal embalmer of this tribe which would never bend the knee….
>
> Pélissier, speaking on behalf of this long drawn-out agony, on behalf of fifteen hundred corpses buried beneath El-Kantara, with their flocks unceasingly bleating at death, hands me his report and I accept this palimpsest on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors. (79)

The scandalous official written reports were censored in Paris, but the bodies' eloquence still recounts Algeria's subterranean/subaltern stories, long after literal death. The cave is at once communal tomb, interring the massacred tribe, and life-giving womb, (re)birthing Djebar into her native community.

Another chronicler of the French massacres, Bosquet is challenged by the sight of a woman's corpse:

> Bosquet muses over the youth killed defending his sister…he recalls the anonymous woman whose foot had been hacked off, "cut off for the sake of the khalkhal…" Suddenly as he inserts these words, they prevent the ink of the whole letter from drying: because of the obscenity of the torn flesh that he could not suppress in his description. (56)

Flesh prevents the ink from drying, from formulating the definitive report of the conquest. Flesh allows Djebar to experience her culture's pain as she assumes a cramped position inside the darkness of the womb-like cave. It also allows her to reverse the French script and frees her from the intellectual

shackles the French language would have imposed on her. The wild, collective voice rings on, for "Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanquished sisters (204)."

As we will see in the following chapters, this subversive writing, the inclusion of discordant elements within the dominant discourse, will take on a different manifestation as Africans becomes Afrodiasporan. Expressing at once resistance and persistence, such ambivalent discourse becomes "Signifying)", the semiotic veiled in/as the Symbolic. Merging into one, the two discourses—text and countertext, Symbolic and semiotic, black and white—form one impression which, like an optical illusion, allows for different and often contrasting interpretations, depending on the perspective of the viewer. In *Song of Solomon,* for example, the opening chapter introduces the action as taking place on "Mains Street and Not Doctor Street," and the reader can interpret that as an assertive exclusion of the second designation (this is not Doctor Street), or its inclusion (as well as Not Doctor Street). It is no coincidence that speakers of the dominant discourse will generally opt for the exclusionary designation or singular interpretation, while the subordinate reveal their multiplicity and polyglossia by engaging in simultaneous, or multiple interpretations.

THE STORYTELLER'S SISTER

If French liberated Assia and her mother in *Fantasia,* it nevertheless alienated them from their less fortunate sisters, with whom Assia soon realized she could only communicate in Arabic. The complex relations between language, freedom, self-expression, alienation, and liberation is examined again, from a different perspective, in *A Sister to Scheherazade,* where Isma, a physically and sexually liberated woman living in France, returns to Algeria and must speak (in Arabic) to Hajila, her cloistered co-wife, urging her to recover her freedom.

Loosely modeled upon the legendary Scheherazade and Dinarzade of *The Thousand and One Nights, A Sister to Scheherazade* reinscribes the message that women's solidarity can help them escape patriarchal oppression, whil their internecine rivalry aggravates it. Interestingly, Djebar's novel charts the crystallization of this awareness in Isma, the emancipated, speaking subject modeled on Scheherezade, the seductive storyteller, and not in Hajila, whose restricted space and silenced voice parallell those of Dinarzade, who kept watch nightly under Scheherazade and Sultan Shahrayar's bed. Hajila, although bought into an abusive marriage, is anything but submissive, just as Dinarzade, despite lying supine in the darkness, played a key role in the liberation of the sultanate's women. Shortly after her marriage, Hajila decides to start roaming the city streets whenever she can, soon discarding the *haik* she dons simply to walk past the concierge. The exercise of her rebellious

agency, however, stops short of giving her an individual voice; she is incapable of speech when people ask her questions:

> But when you throw off the woollen veil, when you roam around, your voice seems to have been left behind…In the surge of emotion when the stranger addressed you, you realize you have lost the power of speech. (*SS* 42)

She can, however, ask for directions home, i.e., to her husband's, to make sure she returns before he discovers she has gone out against his explicit proscription. The request for directions is a complex phenomenon, for while Hajila is returning home to an abusive husband, she is, at the same time, ensuring she arrives there in time to avoid additional punishment for having gone out.

Isma, unfettered by tradition, is extremely voluble, speaking not only for herself, but for Hajila as well: the chapters in *A Sister to Scheherazade* alternate between Isma, in the first person, and Hajila, addressed by Isma, in the second person. Isma is initially self-centered, and only gradually realizes that her unearned privileges can be oppressive of other women, unless put to work to further their freedom, not hers. Because patriarchal oppression functions by proxy through women, Isma is at first unconscious of her responsibility in Hajila's oppression. She gradually becomes aware of it as she watches Hajila's mother, Touma, participate in her daughter's imprisonment:

> Now, the mothers keep guard and have no need of the policeman's badge of office. The seraglio has been emptied, but its noxious emanations have invaded everything. Fear is transmitted from generation to generation.
>
> The matriarchs swaddle their little girls in their own insidious anguish, before they even reach puberty.
>
> Mother and daughter, O, harem restored! (*SS* 145)

Because she does not know her own mother, who died during labor, Isma is free from the "noxious" maternal influence: "I never knew my mother, so she could not pass on her fears to me!" (147). As she confronts Touma in the presence of the young Nazim, born to a third wife of the same husband, she understands the perpetuation of oppression:

> From earliest childhood males learn to detect the breach in our defences caused by indecision—the moment of weakness which, in a flash, sets women in wrangling confrontation with each other.
>
> What they see as children will serve to slake their appetites as adults. To widen eventually the gap between us…forcing us more and more to lose hope. (*SS* 146)

Isma had arranged Hajila's marriage by going to a local match-maker, who introduced her to Touma. Although she no longer lived with her husband,

Isma's primary objective at the time was to free herself from responsibilities, as indeed most first wives, though they may resent the intruder into their households, are nevertheless relieved by the reduced demands of their husband on them upon his second, third, or fourth marriage. One of the nameless women's voices explains: "Respite comes; the husband will take a co-wife; Oh, to feel free at last, to be really independent—a queen!" (128). Isma's first encounter with her co-wife, who is certainly not a rival in any sense of the word, occurs only months after the marriage she had arranged. She is moved to tears at the sight of the beaten, raped, pregnant Hajila, in whose victimization she has unknowingly, though actively, participated. Isma suggests they meet again at the *hammam,* where she gives her the key to the apartment, urging her to escape, "Get out for the sake of getting out!" (*SS* 153).

Once again, in *A Sister to Scheherezade,* Djebar elaborates on the divisive effect of the French language running parallel to patriarchy, which posits women as rivals where their solidarity would secure their emancipation. Here, too, French creates a special bond between men and women, but it is one that serves to alienate women from their sisters, disenabling feminine group resistance. Thus the young child, Meriem, born out of the love Isma once had for her husband, speaks only French, showing no interest in learning Arabic, which would link her to the cloistered women and is the only language her step-mother Hajila speaks. Even in the contemporary, postcolonial reality, where the direct oppressor is not a foreign occupier, French remains the dominant discourse, which underprivileged women have no access to. A second, unloved and unloving wife, Hajila listens to her husband's conversations with his daughter, understanding only a few scraps. The bond between the two French speakers is one she cannot join: "From the very first day, they have been shut off from [her] by this musical language, which they brought with them, at the same time as their luggage." (26)

We find out later that Meriem, born in France, is reluctant to learn Arabic because she fears a fate similar to Hajila's, holding on instead to what distinguishes her from Hajila's misery. However, Nazim is eager to learn Arabic although his mother is French. He is, after all, a boy who will grow into manhood, into privilege. Yet the evolution in Djebar's work is one from personal to collective emancipation as she repeatedly merges her voice with those of her sisters, "awakening" them. This self-sacrifice, the disintegration of individual identity into the broader collective of dominated people, first expressed itself in *Fantasia,* in which the "I" is gradually muffled, submerged by the voices it revives, privileging them as it loses its own privileges. In *A Sister to Scheherazade,* the first person narrator must step aside, vacating a space for those in the shadows, and allowing them to achieve freedom. However, it is problematic that just as the title suggests a space for the sister, it nevertheless continues her presentation as secondary—the French title,

Ombre Sultane, just as the English, *A Sister to Scheherazade* fails to name Dinarzade, while in the text, Hajila, the oppressed woman, never really speaks but is spoken for by Isma, the liberated co-wife. On the last page of A *Sister to Scheherazade,* the pronoun "we" finally appears, expressing community but also uncertainty and fear. "As soon as we women are freed from the past, where do we stand?…I fear lest we all find ourselves in chains again" (160).

REDRAWING THE BOUNDARIES, OVERCOMING DIVISIVE BINARIES

Racial categories are socio-political constructions that often have little, if anything, to do with genotypes. Historically, the tendency has been to view these categories as discrete entities rather than nodes on a rhizomatic continuum. Yet the adherents of this divisive theory immediately encounter insurmountable problems. White supremacists, for example, are anti-Semitic, yet the Semites, who originated on the eastern Mediterranean shores, are considered white. Do white supremacists believe in the superiority of the Aryan ethnicity? Indians are Aryan, but brown—the very word "Aryan" is Sanskrit, meaning "noble people." Or does religion define ethnicity? The Muslim, Christian and Jewish people of the Middle East are all Semitic, yet the dominant discourse, which has devised these designations, reduces that ethnicity to its smallest constituency, the Jews. Anti-Jewish comments are mostly denounced as anti-Semitic, but anti-Arab comments are never termed anti-Semitic, although they also target Semitic people for their differing cultural norms and/or religious beliefs. Critiques of Israel are also termed anti-Semitic, because Israel is the "Jewish state," even when the critique is pointedly and exclusively a political one. The Eurocentric discourse, fixed in a binary mode, can only comprehend the two major European religions, Christianity and its "other," Judaism, and consequently projects two corresponding ethnicities, Aryan and Semitic, to these religions. With colonialism, this Eurocentric discourse was transplanted into the Middle East, where "Semitic" continues to this day to refer strictly to Jewish people, in total disrespect for the region's non-Jews, whose very Semitic identity is thereby denied. For example, in his January 21, 1998, interview with the press in Washington D.C., then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself equated Palestinian resentment of the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank with anti-Semitism, as if Palestinian people resented the ethnicity of their oppressors, an ethnicity which is also their own, and would be happier with their dispossession and the denial of their human rights if they were victimized by some other ethnic group. The fact that no journalist questioned Netanyahu about his accusation is a sad indicator of the state of political savvy among American speakers of the dominant discourse, for his statement is seriously flawed. First, it denies the Semitism of Palestinians. But even if we

were to momentarily join in the quasi-universal ignorance about the ethnicity of Arabs, the argument is still wrong. By its logic, the various African wars of independence were not motivated by nationalism and a desire to break free from colonial exploitation, but by anti-Aryanism, and should be denounced for what Netanyahu knows them to be: virulent racist mass hysteria! It is deplorable that, as Netanyahu usurps the victim position 0while conversing in the dominant discourse to an audience of dominant discourse speakers, the subaltern get completely pushed off the text. The agrarian dispossession of the "other" Semites is paralleled by their discursive erasure, as evidenced in the infamous statement by an earlier Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, that Palestine is "a land with no people for a people with no land".[8] (I claim Netanyahu as a speaker of the dominant discourse on the grounds that he is a Euro-Jewish male in Israel. His reduction of the ethnic designation "Semitic" strictly to Jews, in other words his failure to comprehend or acknowledge the multiplicity within that designation, further qualifies him for this designation.) Such (false) positioning oneself as victim of a valorized binary negates one's power, even as one is exercising it, at the same time as it "disappears" other oppressed groups. It is parallel to the claim by Western, white feminists, that they are in the position of people of color, a claim which seriously jeopardizes the visibility of various people of color, not the least of whom are women. In *A Sister to Scheherazade,* Isma does not position herself as victim; she addresses the victim in the second person singular (you are, you do, you say) and remains conscious throughout of her privileged position.

A white woman victimized by patriarchy can still be an oppressor through white supremacy, which bestows countless privileges on her, and for any discourse to fully address the plight of various social groups, it must function in a nonbinary paradigm, rather than seek to find equivalences hinging on that polarized binary. The differences are too great between the circumstances of the various groups. I am in no way suggesting that the existence, in a culture, of multiple racial and ethnic categories would indicate that culture's freedom from prejudice, and would even claim otherwise. My point is to clarify the difference between a binary Eurocentric discourse and the nonbinary native discourse, as well as the consequences of the imposition of the Eurocentric upon the native discourse. In total disregard for a complex reality where border crossings have long been more frequent than insularity, Eurocentric discourse has defined Aryan and Semitic, Black and White, North and South, East and West.

If we opt for the geographic signifier over the religious and/or ethnic, which clearly presents unresolvable problems and paradoxes, why are Arabs not considered Asian or African, according to which continent they were born in? Today, there are twenty-two Arab countries, nine of which, including the most densely populated, are in Africa, yet Arabs are not considered African. (Egypt alone has a population of 50 million and Algeria close to 30 million, making

them much larger than their Asian counterparts, many of which are extremely small: Lebanon has a population of under four million, Kuwait under two million, and the seven states making up the United Arab Emirates, for example, number less than two million). In the Arab world, language becomes the primary signifier, erasing racial differences between the Aryan (in Syria) and the Negroid (in the Sudan). These differences are also erased, if for completely different reasons, in the United Kingdom, where the term *Black* includes Africans, Asians, Arabs, and Latino/as. Indeed, language appears to be one of the few acceptable forms of cultural crossing, as expressed by Djebar herself, who comments on her bilingualism as "this bastardy, the only cross-breeding that the ancestral beliefs do not condemn: that of language, not that of the blood" (*F* 142). Spanish, which bestows the designation "Hispanic" or "Latina/o" on members of various ethnic groups, is another such language. Yet this linguistic cross-breeding comes at a high price for the subordinate, as Ngugi makes clear in his denunciation of the "cultural bomb."

In "Toward a Critical Theory of Race," Lucius Outlaw argues that while the concept of race has been instrumental in organizing the social world, it has been an extremely protean one, varying according to the needs of particular systems.

> Even a cursory review of this history should do much to dislodge the concept from its place as provider of access to a self-evident, even ontologically *given* characteristic of humankind. For what comes out of such a review is the recognition that although "race" is continually with us as an organizing, explanatory concept, what the terms refers to—that is, the origin and basis of "racial" differences—has not remained constant. When this insight is added to the abundant knowledge that the deployment of "race" has virtually always been in service to political agendas, beyond more "disinterested" endeavors simply to "understand" the basis of perceptually obvious …differences among human groups, we will have firm grounds for a rethinking of "race." (Goldberg 1990, 61–62, author's emphasis)

I propose that Europeans seek to separate Arabs from the rest of Africa, imposing the North Africa/sub-Saharan (white/black) divide, because they cannot deny their links to the cultures across the Mediterranean, while eagerly wishing to keep their distances from Blacks.[9] There is little mention of the fact that Saint Augustine, for example, must have been Black, although it is acknowledged that he was born and resided most of his life in North Africa. His life spanned the years 353–430 A.D., in other words before the Arabization, and "whitening," of that part of the continent. As I argued elsewhere (Elia 1995), there is a long history of Europeans appropriating credit for non-European achievements. For example, German Johannes Gutenberg is credited for the invention of the printing press, which existed in China for centuries before he popularized it in Europe;

Vasco Da Gama was claimed to be the first man to circle the southern tip of Africa, as if the millions of Africans who navigated those shores for centuries before him were somehow paralyzed or otherwise overpowered every time they approached the Cape, never quite able to circle it.

African historians agree that the term "African," derived from Afri, Afriqui, or Afrigui, was originally the name of a Tunisian ethnic group and was later used to refer to various peoples from what now includes Morocco and Libya. Africans from various parts of the continent, including its northern third, feature a shared history of colonialism, sex, and other kinds of labor exploitation, racist discrimination, "cultural bombs," and postcolonial diasporas. The ethnic, racial, cultural, spiritual and/or religious differences between Kabyles and Zulus, for example, are no greater than those between the Portuguese and the Laplanders. Why then is there no questioning the "Europeanness" of Christopher Columbus and Vasco Da Gama, both from the Southern Iberian peninsula, as well as Alfred Nobel from Sweden? More pointedly, why should a philosopher like Ibn Rushd (better known in the West by his Latin name Averroes) be denied his African identity and deemed "white" because he was an Arab?

Kiswahili, the African lingua franca, is seventy percent Arabic. From the Western perspective, one could argue that Kiswahili is a colonial language, since Arabic spread through commercial expansion and the slave trade, both of which benefitted the Arabs. The argument collapses when one realizes those Arabs were also African—the binary is inclusive, not mutually exclusive. In fact, while no records were ever made of the religion of the enslaved Africans brought over to the Americas, it is now estimated that between ten and twenty percent were Muslim, having converted to Islam generations before the transatlantic slave trade pitted Arab against Dahomey, Fon, Mandingo, and other West Africans. Those Arabs were not the only Africans who captured and sold members of other tribes. They were the only ones singled out by European discourse. We recall that Ngugi, upon rejecting the "cultural bomb," decided to write in Gikuyu and Kiswahili. Kwanzaa, the Afrocentric AfricanAmerican celebration, uses Kiswahili. Leroi Jones renamed himself Amiri Baraka, a Kiswahili name, and when I asked him how he justified the adoption of the language of slave traders, told me those traders were African too.[10] I had questioned his prerogative to choose an African name for himself…

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* Patricia Hill Collins views the Afrocentric feminist epistemology as a point of contact between Afrocentric and feminist analyses of oppression.

> The search for the distinguishing features of an alternative epistemology used by African-American women reveals that values and ideas that Africanist scholars identify as being characteristically "Black" often bear

> remarkable resemblance to similar ideas claimed by feminist scholars as being characteristically "female." This similarity suggests that the material conditions can vary dramatically and yet generate some uniformity in the epistemologies of subordinate groups….
>
> Rather than emphasizing how a Black women's standpoint and its accompanying epistemology are different than those in Afrocentric and feminist analyses, I use Black women's experiences as a point of contact between the two. (206–207)

The above quote is revealing in that, by presenting the Afrocentric feminist position as a point of contact between feminist and Afrocentric analyses, it recognizes the feminist position as a white one. A discussion of the alienation of Black women from feminism, because it is such a "white" movement, is beyond the scope of my current project, and has been given due attention in various books. I merely wish to point out here that the French proponents of *écriture feminine* are equally guilty of this Eurocentrism, whereas Djebar's work bridges the feminist and the Afrocentric: it does indeed represent Africana feminist thought.

Upon receiving the Prix Fonlon, Djebar reiterated her connections with Africa, indicating once again that she does not abide by Europe's division of Africa between North and sub-Saharan, "Arab" and Negroid. I cite her at length, for the speech is not widely available, and it expresses Djebar's identification with African culture, her use of African ancestral rituals, and a spiritualism that allows her, as she converses with the dead, to function at once as griot and conjure woman:

> I was wondering to myself…what force there might exist that best could unite us and help us identify with each other, us, people who have come from the four corners of Africa. Could it be Death, a death that speaks to us, a hallucination that opens a dialogue and demands a response?
>
> If we could no longer avoid our dead, those too recently departed, those whose work remains unfinished and whose youth has been severed, at least let us gather around them, *but in an authentically African manner.* I have a model in mind to propose, what is called "le grand retournement" (the great turning over), according to the ancestral ritual of the Madagascar Merinas.
>
> Yes, I would certainly adopt this ritual; take out from their graves our absent ones, our bruised ones, our martyred ones; turn over their bones in public and in the open air, change their shrouds. And all through this, just like the ancient Merinas of yore, I would sing, I would sing to them in joyful tones. I would make of it a festival and a celebration…. In short, I would turn Death, she who has become inseparable from us, into a ceremonial of beauty, of inventive verb, of life. (*African Literature Association Bulletin* 21–22, Djebar's emphasis)

With her adoption of the "grand retournement," Djebar affirms her spiritual ties with Africa rather than her adoptive West or North, while arguing for a

revisiting of the ancestors and emphasizing again the cultural role of song and tonality—all of which, as we shall see later, are Afrocentric feminist values that both predate colonialism and the diaspora, and have survived these two traumas.

NOTES

1. In this chapter, I have used published translations from the original French whenever available and provided my own when needed.

2. The Marseillaise was first composed in April 1792, and titled "Chant de guerre pour l'armée du Rhin" (Rhin Army War Song). It was first introduced to Paris by federates from Marseille and adopted as the national anthem under the title "La Marseillaise" on July 15, 1795.

3. For an excellent synopsis of *écriture féminine,* see Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'écriture feminine.*"

4. Clarisse Zimra," Afterword," in Assia Djebar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,* 159–211, 190.

5. Cultural predilections are particularly evident in the choice of terms of endearment. In the United States, expressions such as "honey" or "sweetie" reveal the culture's preference for sweet flavors over sour or salty. The translator seeking to render such terms into French, for example, would have to find the cultural equivalent to honey, since the literal translation, "miel," simply wouldn't do. Arabic terms of endearment tend to be either abstract, "my love," "my life," "my spirit," "my soul," or anatomical, "my heart," "my eyes," and most suggest a very intimate connection between lover and beloved.

6. For a study of the depiction of North African women as exotic/erotic, see Malek Alloula, *The Political Harem.*

7. The concept of marital rape as an offense is itself relatively recent in Western culture too, as evidenced from the absence of an "indigenous word" for it in any European language—the expression is a combination of two pre-existing words that are also found in most other languages.

8. In "What's Not in a Name," Arab American author Marilynn Rashid writes: "I came to understand that when a nation-state seizes land, it confiscates identity. Just as the United States conquered, colonized so many words in 'America,' so Israel has annexed, appropriated the term *Semitic*" (201).

9. See Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization,* and Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality?.* One need not espouse the belief that all civilization came from sub-Saharan Africa to acknowledge that prehistoric Egypt was "Negroid," hence "African" even by the arbitrary divisions prevailing in the West today.

10. Conversation at Tufts University, February 1998.

CHAPTER 3

"The Memories of Old Women"

Alternative History in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise*

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

—MAYA ANGELOU, "Still I Rise"

She was thinking about the magic which had encircled their girlhood, which their stolid schoolmaster in the tiny country school had persisted in calling naive science, bunga nonsense. He had warned them against false knowledge. That which was held in the minds and memories of old women…. The women intimate with the heavens and the movement of the heavenly bodies.

—MICHELLE CLIFF, *No Telephone to Heaven*

Each one, pull one back into the sun.

—ALICE WALKER, "Each One, Pull One."

Like the young Djebar taken to French school by her school principal father, Michelle Cliff was induced into Jamaica's dominant discourse by her light-skinned father, the proud descendant of slave owners. Like Djebar, Cliff became aware at an early age of the precarious position she occupied, as she grew up wavering between the various components of her

heterogeneous background. In *No Telephone to Heaven,* the central character, Clare Savage, is closely modeled upon Cliff herself, and the fictional name emphasizes what was viewed as Cliff's distinguishing feature, her light skin. In her autobiographical *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise,* Cliff explains how she gradually embraced her African heritage, which her middle-class colonial Jamaican education had prompted her to deny.

In the first part of this chapter, I will analyze *No Telephone to Heaven,* with passing reference to its prequel, *Abeng,* with a focus on the tensions between dominant and subordinate discursivities. In the second part, I examine *Free Enterprise,* where Cliff revives and inscribes the unwritten history of Africana women in the United States. *No Telephone to Heaven* does not lend itself easily to a plot summary, yet I will attempt here to offer a brief synopsis of the main parts of the novel before analyzing the pivotal role of Harry/Harriet's queerness in bringing about physical and spiritual healing among various marginalized and oppressed social groups.[1]

Moving back and forth through Clare Savage's travels over three continents, *No Telephone to Heaven* shows us the light-skinned young Jamaican Creole immigrating to the United States with her family, and remaining there with her father after her parents' separation, and the return of her mother and younger sister to Jamaica. Clare then goes to England for her university education, visits Jamaica on her vacation, befriends Harry/Harriet, returns to Europe for a while, and eventually goes back to Jamaica, where she joins a guerrilla group fighting for the island's independence. The novel, which does not follow a chronological order, begins and opens with the guerrilla scene, taking place on a joint British-American movie stage set up in the Jamaican jungle, foregrounding camouflage, passing, performance, revolutionary ideals and, in the final scene, death. *No Telephone to Heaven* is a sequel to *Abeng,* which introduced the readers to Clare Savage at a younger age, concluding with the teenager's budding awareness of the dynamics of race and sexuality in her native Jamaica.

CROSSROADS CHARACTERS

In the two fictional novels, *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven,* Clare's father, Boy Savage, can and wants to pass for white, while her darker mother is deeply attached to her Ashanti and Arawak roots. Yet in a 1994 interview, Cliff explains that neither of her parents wanted to pass for white: "Even though both of them are very light-skinned and could pass easily, they were never comfortable with that kind of thing" (Adisa 274). It is therefore highly significant that, in her fiction, Cliff chose to make her father seek whiteness upon coming to the United States by identifying himself as unadulterated white without mentioning his slave ancestors, and marrying a white woman (after his first wife's death). Clare's

mother Kitty, on the other hand, was homesick for everything Jamaican. Towards the end of her stay in the United States, she called herself "Mrs. Black," simultaneously identifying with her African roots and rejecting Symbolic whiteness. As we saw in the previous chapter, such a gendered affiliation between the parents, the association of the paternal with whiteness—Djebar's father promoting a European language and European mores in his professional and domestic life—and the maternal with darkness—Djebar's mother remaining a bashful member of the North African women's community—is representative of the gendered division in Symbolic discourse where the masculine is the dominant, the feminine semiotic and suppressed. As race scholar Lewis R.Gordon succinctly put it in *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism,* and again in *Her Majesty's Other Children,* "in the U.S., the Phallus is white skin."[2] Gordon's comment applies equally to numerous countries in Africa, the Americas generally, and Europe—indeed wherever whites live with members of other races. In parts of Asia, the valorization of white skin takes on yet another manifestation, as lighter-skinned Indians or Arabs, for example, are considered more "attractive" than their dark-skinned kin.[3]

Cliff adds that her protagonist, Clare Savage, "not exactly an autobiographical character," is nevertheless similar to her in that both are "crossroads character[s]" ("Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character" 264–265). Clare's full name is representative of her duality, Cliff explains, for whereas her first name means light-skinned, her surname "is meant to evoke the wildness that has been bleached from her skin."

> She is a light-skinned female who has been removed from her homeland in a variety of ways and whose life is a movement back, ragged, interrupted, uncertain, to her homeland. She is fragmented, damaged, incomplete. The novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* describe her fragmentation as well as her movement toward homeland and wholeness. (265)

The name "Clare" carries another level of significance as it is the name of a college at Cambridge University, the matrix and dispenser of the British knowledge that the Savages claim as their cultural heritage, especially because one of their ancestors had studied there. As we shall see, in claiming her despised identity, Cliff does more than embrace her blackness, she embraces all of the components of her mixed racial, gender, class, and cultural subjectivities, thus transcending various divisive polarized binaries.

Clare's duality, or more correctly her multiplicity, is representative of numerous subordinate groups, continually negotiating the liminal spaces between the dominant discourse and their own positionalities. Most men of color in relatively privileged positions have written of the duality of their experiences, some with sorrow, others in postmodern jubilation. Thus W.E.B.Du Bois wrote with sadness of the "two-ness" of the African American:

"One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings," (*The Souls of Black Folk* 5) and eventually renounced (or attempted to renounce) that dual identity to become a citizen of Ghana, in Africa. More recently, in his preface to *Race Matters,* Cornel West recounts how he had a hard time getting a taxi to stop and give him a ride in New York city (xv). Race, or more correctly racism, is indeed the only obstacle hindering West, a widely-published Black professor at a prestigious university, as indeed racism alone, but not classism or sexism, had hindered Du Bois. While Du Bois and West lamented their circumstances, Abdelkebir Khatibi, program director of the College International de Philosophie in Paris, euphorically celebrated his bilingualism as a francophone Arab in the novel *Love in Two Languages:*

> *Bi-langue?* My luck, my own individual abyss and my lovely amnesiac energy. An energy I don't experience as a deficiency, curiously enough. Rather, it's my third ear…. Bilingual, I am henceforth free to be entirely so and on my own behalf. Freedom of a happiness which divides me in two, but in order to educate me in thoughts of nothingness. (5)

The majority of people of color, however, have more than race against them, and many less-privileged contemporaries of Du Bois, West, and Khatibi have explored the additional layers of experience and meaning resulting from the overlapping of their defining circumstances. Sojourner Truth's rhetorical question, "Ain't I a Woman?" is one of the earlier documents exploring the impact of race and gender on black women in the United States. In the 1960s, Frances Beale wrote of the "double jeopardy" of black women, as black and female, and in the 1980s, Deborah King further analyzed the cumulative effects on black women of the intersection of their various circumstances: race, economic status, poor education, reduced job opportunities ("Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness").

That class constitutes a significant factor in one's attitude towards bilingualism is clear in the works of Beur novelist Mehdi Charef who, in contrast to Khatibi, explodes against the pressures resulting from his having to deal with two linguistic systems. In his first novel, *Tea in the Harem,* the main character Majid, closely modeled on the author, feels helplessly trapped following an argument with his mother, a cleaning woman, who speaks only Arabic:

> Majid understands the occasional phrase here and there, and his reply is subdued, because whatever he says is bound to hurt her…. She leaves the room and Majid flops down on the bed, reflecting that for a long time he's been neither French nor Arab. He's the son of immigrants—caught between two cultures, two histories, two languages, and two colours of skin. (13)

Interestingly, all of the authors mentioned here, regardless of their differing personal circumstances, have tried to inscribe their multiplicity, literally, in their texts. Du Bois illustrates his duality with the bars from the sorrow songs that begin each chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk.* West's *Race Matters* readily lends itself to the two readings: matters of race, and race does make a difference. The jacket cover, inside frontispiece, and opening text page of Khatibi's *Love in Two Languages* display the title in Arabic calligraphy, as well as French or English. The original French title of Charef's novel, *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed,* is taken from a mistake by an Arab schoolchild in France who, when the teacher announced that the day's lesson was to be about "le théorème d'Archimède," thought they were going to discuss "le thé au harem d'archi Ahmed." The dedication of Charef's novel is "for my mother Mebarka, who can't read." Such foregrounding of one's complexity is also the case with our four main authors. Djebar tells us that "Fantasia" is both the Arabic "fantazziya," meaning ostentation, and a European musical piece. Cliff explains that "Abeng" is an African word for the conch shell used to call the slaves to the canefields and the instrument used by the maroon armies to pass messages to runaway slaves. Of her 1994 novel, *Free Enterprise,* she says: "the title has all these different meanings" (Hausmann Shea 33). Free enterprise refers to the slave trade, which "wasn't just about the transportation of people; no, shipping companies were involved, insurance companies, people who provided salted fish for the slaves. It was an interlocking industry" (33). But *Free Enterprise* is also about an entrepreneurial black woman, Mary Ellen Pleasant, who believed in free enterprise (i.e. capitalism), and in the enterprise of freedom: she financed the escape of slaves. Marshall's *Praise song* refers the reader to an African tradition, even though the novel's setting is American. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* refers simultaneously to a verse in the Bible, with its affirmation "I am black, but comely" (Song of Sol. 1:5), and to the oral history of the African American community as it is passed on in song across generations.

Growing up bilingual and a colonial subject, Djebar had been temporarily silenced by her awareness of the effects of a French education on her. Cliff expresses similar feelings in "Notes on Speechlessness," the first piece of writing she produced after the completion of her dissertation at the University of London on aspects of the Italian Renaissance. In "Notes on Speechlessness," Cliff identifies herself with Victor, the wild boy of Aveyron who, "after his rescue from the forest and wildness by a well-meaning doctor of Enlightenment Europe, became 'civilized,' but never came to speech" (*LLB* 11). Elsewhere, she elaborates: "I felt with Victor when I first read his story. My wildness had been tamed, that which I had been taught was my wildness, which embraced imagination, emotion, spontaneity, history, memory,

revolution, and flights of fancy" ("Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character" 263).

Cliff had first been silenced by intrusive authority. In an interview, she explains that, as a young child, she had kept a diary. One day, her parents broke into her room while she was at school and read it. That incident completely shut her off, and "the only thing I wrote after the diary was my dissertation" (Adisa 274). Yet in order to recover her voice and articulate her subjectivity, Cliff had to slide to the very opposite end of the written form she had been trained to master. Having completed a formal dissertation, she now began to write "illogically:"

> I could speak fluently, but I could not reveal. I immersed myself in the social circles and academies of [Italy], creating a place for myself there, and describing this ideal world in eloquent linear prose.
>
> When I began, finally…to approach myself as subject, my writing was jagged, nonlinear, almost shorthand…. I felt my thoughts, things I had held within for a lifetime, traversed so wide a terrain, had so many stops and starts, apparent nonsequiturs, that an essay—with its cold-blooded dependence on logical construction, which I had mastered practically against my will—could not work. (*LLB* 12)

Cliff freed herself from the stifling logic of academic discourse and, as she regained her voice, her speech, she was once again capable of articulating her whole identity, which had previously expressed itself only in fragmentary fashion—the dissertation and the "illogical" notes. Her process of internal healing recalls that of Djebar, who managed, after overcoming her own silence through movie-making, to record, in *Fantasia,* the oral histories of numerous Algerian women alongside the official reports of French colonizers.

In keeping with the author's own heterogeneity, the style of *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* also vacillates between dominant and suppressed, between the King's English, which Cliff learned at school and university in England, and Jamaican "english," with its different tonality, its refusal to sound as if slavery, the Diaspora, had not taken place.[4] In her preface to *The Land of Look Behind,* Cliff explains that Caribbean authors must of necessity be subversive in their writing, as they reclaim their full history:

> To write as a complete Caribbean woman, or a man for that matter, demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush…. It means finding the artforms of these of our ancestors and speaking in the *patois* forbidden us. (*LLB* 14)

We recall that Cliff had opened *Abeng* with the image of an imported harpsichord that needed daily tuning, yet always sounded "off." This assonance is representative of the different speech patterns between Europe

and the Caribbean, England and its colonies. Of *No Telephone to Heaven,* Cliff explains:

> I alternate the King's English with *patois,* not only to show the class background of characters, but to show how Jamaicans operate within a split consciousness. It would be as dishonest to write the novel completely in *patois* as to write entirely in the King's English. (*LLB* 14)

In *No Telephone to Heaven,* Clare's first awareness of the irreconcilable differences between her parents—differences that express themselves most clearly in their racial sympathies and identifications—occurs when she is fourteen, as Boy decides to leave Jamaica for New York City. Opting for the cheapest option, the Savages fly into Miami where they buy a car to drive North. The parents' initial responses to the United States are diametrically opposed: Kitty at once viscerally senses the signs of racial hatred and intolerance, while Boy is in denial both of the signs, which he relegates to the past, and of how they relate to him, silencing all references to his African blood:

> No Statue of Liberty for them—oh, no—their emblem of welcome, going almost unnoticed until Kitty commented on it, was a small sign obscured by the cracked and boarded-up glass of an abandoned NAACP office they passed on their way out of Miami. A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY, it said. "Hello, America," Kitty muttered to herself, after repeating the words on the sign to her family. (*NTH* 54)

An impressionable teenager infatuated with her father, the young Clare asks him, not her mother, what lynching is. She recalls the tension in the car, the colliding emotions, and her father's answer condoning rather than denouncing what may well be the most violent illustration of bigotry and racial hatred:

> "It is a form of punishment for wickedness," her father told her—tidy and just, Dickensian almost…. Mus' be one old sign, he said to himself. Don't America finish with that business long time now?
>
> Kitty sucked her teeth at his explanation but offered her daughter nothing more. (54)

Significantly, Boy's own suppressed thoughts, those articulating the fears of people of African descent, the part he denies, are thoughts expressed in "untidy," non-Dickensian English: "Don't America finish with that business" is not the King's English, and the stylistic breach between his proffered explanation, "lynching is punishment for wickedness," and his internal questioning, illustrates both his Creole (split) consciousness and his racial self-loathing. In keeping with the socialization of subordinate groups into simultaneous translation, his

unvoiced though deeply-felt fears express themselves in the speech of those who can only stand outside the gates of Clare College.

The differences between the parents increase gradually as they travel North, with the mother holding on to her Jamaican identity as the father upholds whiteness and the dominant discourse. The linguistic dynamics between the two parents throughout Kitty's stay in the United States are well worth examining, for Kitty is represented as the one who is muttering or silent, as Boy takes charge of speaking for his family in "proper English," seeking to establish a whiteness Kitty refuses to claim for herself.

Kitty had not spoken up, but merely muttered to herself "Hello America," and still not speaking, she successfully vocalizes her disapproval as she punctuates Boy's "tidy" explanation with her teeth-sucking. The Savages' first stop on the way to New York is in Georgia. The year is 1960, and the South still segregated. The very light-skinned Boy enters the motel while Kitty and the two daughters remain in the car. As he is checking in, he notices a pro-Klan sign on the wall next to the check-out times and the announcements of church services and local attractions.

> Boy questioned the innkeeper politely. "Are you a member of the Klan?"…
>
> When the man only stared at him, Boy went on.
>
> "I couldn't help noticing your sign…I understand it is an organization with deep historical roots."
>
> "That's right…Anyway, how'd you know about the Klan?"
>
> "Oh, we are quite civilized in Jamaica, you know." (*NTH* 58)

Clearly, when one equates lynching with "punishment for wickedness," the next logical step is to consider familiarity with the Klan civilized. By speaking as if the Klan were a benevolent association that would not harm him, Boy has absorbed, assimilated, and internalized the dominant discourse. And as he does so, the gap between him and Kitty widens.

Boy defines himself in colonialist terms as a "white Creole," connected to slave-owning Europe and viewing non-Europeans as "others."[5] He claims his English origins through his great-grandfather Judge Savage who, on the eve of emancipation in Jamaica in 1834, murdered the one hundred slaves he owned on his large plantation. Boy did not mention this massacre to Clare when he took her to visit Paradise Plantation, volunteering only "it did belong to us once" (*A* 24). The judge had justified his action on the basis that:

> These people were slaves and would not know how to behave in freedom. They would have been miserable. He was a justice who had been trained to assess the alternatives available to human beings, and their actions within the limits of these alternatives. These people were not equipped to cope with the responsibilities of freedom. These people were Africans. (*A* 39)

Judge Savage was married to an Englishwoman, who stayed in England while Savage forcibly lived with a half-African, half-Miskito Indian woman. Yet even as it acknowledges this relationship, the Savage family mythology has bleached the reluctant mistress, converting her to half-Miskito, half-Spaniard, thus avoiding the taint of the "tar-brush." Kitty Savage's family, on the other hand, while also mixed, makes no claim at hereditary whiteness. Members of her family have brown skin and wavy hair, and "No one suggested that they try to hide it—were they able to" (*A* 54). Moreover, Kitty's mother, Miss Mattie, to whose land the politicized Clare returns at the end of *No Telephone to Heaven,* is not impressed with her son-in-law, thus revealing a mental emancipation from the colonial color-value system. In *Abeng,* we find out that Boy and Kitty had "married against great opposition from Kitty's family" (*A* 45). Yet the dominant class system in Jamaica would certainly have made of the quasi-white Boy a very eligible choice. Kitty's family, the Freeman's, never warm up to Boy. In *No Telephone to Heaven,* Kitty recalls her mother's comment, whenever Kitty quarreled with Boy: "You lie wid dog, nuh mus' get up wid flea" (*NTH* 75).

Eventually, as Boy chooses persistently to pass for white, Kitty broaches the topic of divorce, speaking in the language of slaves, her language, and positioning Boy in the role of slave master. This is the role he had claimed for himself as he acknowledged only his European ancestors, priding himself on being Judge Savage's great-grandson:

> The memory [of his mixed ancestry] retreated as fast as it had come and Boy took the plunge, making himself at home in his new country. "I am a white man. My ancestors owned sugar plantations." There it was. Discreet but firm. (*NTH* 57)

Even as Kitty resents Boy's arrogance and embraces her own past of slavery with its customs and its idioms, she feels empowered, grounded, and capable of setting out on her own:

> "Busha, is maybe time we cut the cotta…what you think?" She broke the silence, addressing him as overseer, with reference to divorce among the slaves who had been among their ancestors. Slicing the device on which their burdens balanced…
>
> "Why you call me 'busha,' woman? I don't drive you. I don't push you against your will." Boy, frightened.
>
> She smiled at him. "You preffer 'slave'…'massa'? Is what your American friends call you?"
>
> Suddenly, she was in control. (82)

Kitty gains control as she breaks the silence of her own volition and on her own terms. Having refused to speak the oppressor's language, she had been temporarily speechless, reduced to gasps and teeth-sucking. Yet she

soon recovers her voice and speaks with the serenity of a woman comfortable with her identity, free from the Creole racial self-hatred of the Savages.

At that time, Kitty had been working in the packing room of a laundry, slipping pieces of advice, signed "Mrs. White," in the yet-unpacked parcels. The advice consisted of reminders to the customers that it was:

> a wife's duty to make her husband's shirts, their crispness and their stiffness, a matter of her primary concern. That it was part of her mission to assure "sanitary sheets to bless the slumber of your loved ones." That a woman might be held to account if her tablecloth showed tattletale gray. (73)

There was no Mrs. White as such—the pictures of a matronly European woman were printed by the nephew of the laundry proprietor, Mr. B.—yet Kitty had to fill them in and sign them to give the quaint advice an authentic touch. She was to lend her own signature to a dominant discourse of wifely duty and subservience that she was questioning in her own life. The morning after bringing up divorce to Boy, Kitty commits her ultimate act of agency in the United States, as she symbolically kills off "Mrs. White," precipitating the events that culminate in her separation from Boy and her return to her beloved Jamaica.

> It was time to end her nonsense once and for all. Once and for all. She took a stack of letterheads and colored in the pink face of Mrs. White. She drew a balloon next to each dark face. HELLO. MRS. WHITE IS DEAD. MY NAME IS MRS. BLACK. I KILLED HER.
>
> She felt free, released. She spent the afternoon tucking the sheets of paper into clean linen. Sending her furious Aunt Jemima into the world. (83)

When customers call to express their outrage and stop their business with Mr. B., Mr. B. immediately fires his two African American employees, as he cannot conceive that it was the mild-mannered, lighter-skinned Kitty who had scribbled the offensive messages. Overcome by the turn of events, her own emancipatory impulse that cost her darker colleagues their jobs, Kitty leaves Boy and Clare behind, taking only her younger (and darker) daughter Jenny to Jamaica.

> In my family I was called "fair"—a hard term. My sister was darker, younger. We were split: along lines of color and order of birth. (*CI* 11)

Upon her mother's departure, Clare stays with her father, and is in turn subjected to his urging that she pass for white. An adolescent struggling to adjust to a new life in a new country, without her mother, Clare is urged by

her father to deny her blackness: "Through all this—this new life—he counsels his daughter on invisibility and its secrets. Self-effacement. Blending in. The uses of camouflage" (*NTH* 100). But Cliff is also acutely aware that passing carries a heavy price. In *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise,* she had written: "Under British rule we could have declared ourselves legally white. The rationale was that it made us better servants." Yet she is quick to add: "Passing demands you keep that knowledge to yourself" (6). In *No Telephone to Heaven,* passing also entails a painful loss, and Clare's attachment to her mother grows stronger as she realizes that to be white is to deny Kitty's blood.

When Boy first tries to enroll his daughter in school and is asked to identify her race, he blunders:

> "White…of course."
> "Are you sure?"
> "Yes, quite sure." Clare felt her stomach twist. Boy barreled on…. "My family is one of the oldest families—"
> "And your wife's family, Mr. Savage?"
> "My wife and I are separated." Silly declaration…. Would Kitty's blood now be erased? (*NTH* 98–99)

With this threat of the denial of her mother's blood, Clare grows to identify more strongly with her blackness, with "the identity they taught her to despise." This serves simultaneously as an identification with the feminine and an irrevocable separation from her father's embrace of the dominant discourse.

Clare's yearning for her mother intensifies as the space she had previously occupied, that of the privileged light-skinned Jamaican, recedes, and she is pressured to choose. In Jamaica, where "unmixed" whites make up the smallest percentage of the total population (estimated at two percent), the existence of "in-betweens" is unchallenged, their visibility allowing for representation and stratification determined by numerous socioeconomic as well as racial criteria. Cliff explains:

> In Jamaica we are as common as ticks.
> We graft the Bombay onto the common mango. The Valencia onto the Seville. We mix tangerines and oranges. We create mules….
> We are not exotic—or aromatic—or poignant.
> We are not aberrations. We are ordinary. (*CI* 6–7)

Indeed, the recognition of Creole hybridity, albeit racist, has allowed for a very elaborate taxonomy. Cliff illustrates the cross-cultural mixing primarily in terms of healthy, nutritious fruits, with only one reference to animals, well-nigh inevitable considering the currency of the term.[6] Yet the terminology devised by the colonizers for such ethnic and racial border-crossing

extravaganza as prevails in the Caribbean reflects what is viewed as diseased (albino), animalistic (mule, wolves, coyotes…), or simply incomprehensible behavior ("I don't understand you" and "There you are" are some of the categories). Upon arriving in the United States, Boy recalls:

> A lesson from the third form on the history of Jamaica sprang to mind: mulatto, offspring of African and white; sambo, offspring of African and mulatto; quadroon, offspring of mulatto and white; mestee, offspring of quadroon and white; mestefina, offspring of mestee and white. These Aristotelian categories taught by a Jesuit determined they should know where they were—and fortunate at that. In the Spanish colonies there were 128 categories to be memorized. (*NTH* 56)

It is the memory of these categories, which deny him absolute whiteness, that Boy is eager to repress. In *Snow on the Canefields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity,* Judith Raiskin cites:

1. Spaniard+Indian woman=mestizo
2. Mestizo+Spanish woman=castizo
3. Castizo woman+Spaniard=Spaniard
4. Spanish woman+Negro=mulatto
5. Spaniard and mulatta=Moorish
6. Morisco woman+Spaniard=albino
7. Spaniard and albino woman=a "throwback"
8. Indian and "throwback woman"=wolf (lobo)
9. Wolf and Indian woman=zambayo

   …
13. Barcino and mulatta=coyote

    …
16. Coyote mestizo and mulatta="There you are"

    …
20. Calpamulato and cambujo woman="Suspended in the air" (tente en el aire)
21. Tente en el aire+mulatta="I don't understand you" (No te entiendo)
22. No te entiendo+Indian woman=a "throwback" (184–185)

Raiskin also points out that, whereas Native American blood can be "erased" after three generations, African blood proves an irrevocable stain. Thus the "bleaching" of Judge Savage's mistress is crucial as it turns her into a "castiza" who, when coupled with a European man, restores "whiteness" to the family. In the United States, however, the racial system is arbitrarily binary, refusing to accommodate Creole identities.[7] Here Clare must take sides, for as the school principal tells her not-quite-white-enough father, concluding the interview: "I do not want to be cruel, Mr. Savage, but we have no room for lies in our system. No place for in-betweens" (*NTH* 99). It is no coincidence that the Klan strongly condemns and opposes

mixed marriages, for they would lead to "in-between" offspring, challenging the binary system.[8]

On September 16, 1963, the fifteen-year old Clare Savage is designated by her teacher to read the newspaper in front of her classmates. The story is about the Sunday School bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four black girls, Carole, Cynthia, Addie Mae, and Denise, are killed. Deeply moved, Clare clips the photograph of one of the girls in her coffin and keeps it in her wallet. Forbidden an "in-between" place, she identifies with darkness. Two months later, when Boy comes across the photograph, he is furious: "Girl, do you want to labor forever as an outsider," he queries, distancing himself again from Africanness, as Judge Savage generations ago, had spoken of Africans as the ultimate Other. "You are too much like your mother for your own good," Boy continues, rasping at Clare (*NTH* 102).

UNDERWATER HISTORY

Clare's alienation illustrates two major aspects of the contemporary Africana experience: the Diaspora, and a colonial education that left her ignorant of her own people's history and achievements, resulting in her belief in her cultural inferiority. In *No Telephone To Heaven,* Clare's reflection on colonial education in Jamaica recalls Algeria's Fadhma Amrouche, briefly discussed in the previous chapter, who knew all about the colonizer's history, and little about her own:

> Poor teachers. Had they done wrong?
>
> Even after high school and college in America their lessons stuck in Clare's head. She could still conjure the monarchs in consecutive order, faces and names, consorts and regents, offspring and stillbirth, and some nights, when sleep was distant, she would pass them across her inner eye. Divorced, beheaded, died. Divorced, beheaded, survived. Gloriana. (*NTH* 109–110)

For the postcolonial subject, there is no inalienable right of return to precolonial "purity" or "authenticity." As Helen Tiffin argues, "Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity" ("Postcolonial Literature" 95). This hybrid culture results from the superimposition of the newly-acquired, formerly-forbidden knowledge over the colonial education, or the peeling off of layers of that education to reveal knowledge that has always existed, concealed underneath the colonial veneer. Patois, as Cliff argues, was once forbidden, but never forgotten (*LLB* 14). The process of recovery is never easy and the outcome totally unpredictable, ranging from disenabling bitterness to unbridled creativity. We have noted earlier how Djebar was silenced for over a decade

when she first realized she was more fluent in French than in Arabic. Cliff also felt "handicapped," as she explained in her "Notes on Speechlessness," when, having completed a formal dissertation, she realized she could "speak fluently," but "could not reveal" (*LLB* 12). Cliff's inability to reveal results from an education that strictly censored the components of her personality which were deemed illogical, irrational, and "unacademic."

Unable to forget colonial education, Clare Savage, Cliff's fictionalized self, must counter it with her own. Just as Djebar had done in *Fantasia,* Clare must resort to alternative records to recover her history. Clare rewrites her culture's history, having researched it through excavations and oral narratives, foregrounding the experiences of the natives and slaves. Where Djebar had to enter the caves that had engulfed her fumigated ancestors, Clare needs to excavate Arawak artifacts buried under colonial erections, thus unearthing her native American ancestry. In addition , she must bathe in the waters that swallowed the enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage, drowning those who were thrown or threw themselves overboard—Toni Morrison's "Sixty Million or More." (Where North African or Arawak history has been suppressed in its own locale, it is "subterranean," while it becomes underwater, "submarine," in the Afrodiaspora in recognition of the oceanic crossing.) The process of rediscovering history for Djebar and Clare also involves recording oral narratives, the stories told them by the older generations.

> What history do you bring to your students?
>
> The history of their…our homeland.
>
> How have you found this history?
>
> I have educated myself since my return. Spoken with the old people… leafed through the archives downtown…spent time at the university library …one thing leads to another. I have studied the conch knife excavated at the Arawak site in White Marl…the shards of hand-thrown pots…the petroglyphs hidden in the bush…listened to the stories about Nanny and taken them to heart. I have seen the flock of white birds fly out at sunset from Nanny town…duppies, the old people say….
>
> Ghosts, the spirits of the Maroons.
>
> What else…what other sources?
>
> Stories of Anansi…Oshun…Shàngó…I have walked the cane… poked through the ruins…rusted machines marked Glasgow…standing as they were left. I have swum underwater off the cays.
>
> History can be found underwater.
>
> Yes, some history is only underwater. (*NTH* 193)

Inscribing the horrors of the Middle Passage is another instance of the recovery of voice after an initial silence, the loss of expression resulting from the traumatic hurling into the oppressive dominant discourse. (Djebar and Cliff had not always been silent, but became so after their formal education).

It is highly significant that of the over six thousand Afrodiasporic slave narratives recorded up to the nineteenth century, only two discuss the Middle Passage at all, those of Olaudah Equiano and Martin Delaney.[9] The silence is unnatural. The latter half of the twentieth century, on the other hand, has produced a steady trickle of titles which either mention or are devoted to the Middle Passage. These include Robert Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" (1966), Amiri Baraka's play "Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant" (1967), Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), and Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* (1990). Alex Haley's epic *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), with a lengthy depiction of the nightmarish voyage, has sold over eight million copies, and is estimated to have been watched on television by over 130 million viewers in North America alone.

Along with discussions of the Middle Passage, references to underwater history are pervasive among contemporary Africana writers in the Caribbean and the United States. "There is a river of bones at the bottom of the Atlantic, stretching from West Africa to the Caribbean," Amiri Baraka reminded the audience during a special performance for Black History month at Northeastern University.[10] Baraka's claim echoes Derek Walcott's "Sea is History" and Edward Kamau Brathwaite's "The unity is sub-marine."[11] Still in the Caribbean context, we have Edouard Glissant's exploration, in *Poetics of Relation,* of the murderous Middle Passage:

> The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers*—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, those lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corrugated balls and chains. (6)

The importance of the Caribbean as repository of Afrodiasporic history is foregrounded again in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and *Daughters* (1991), the two novels by Paule Marshall discussed in the next chapter. In *Praisesong,* Avey Johnson, a culturally-alienated, wealthy, African American widow in North White Plains, New York, undergoes spiritual rebirth at a ritual gathering in the Caribbean island of Cariaccou. In *Daughters,* Ursa-Bea, born in Hartford, Connecticut, to an African American mother and a Caribbean father from the small island of Triunion, always feels an irresistible longing for "her" island. Ursa is raised in the United States, where she also goes to college and majors in history. When she proposes to write her senior thesis on Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, a rebel slave couple, her topic is turned down as unacceptable. Ursa is determined to write that history, however, and as a

mature returning adult student, seeks a second master's degree in order to write Congo Jane's history.

As submerged history is recovered, women's resistance is also brought to the surface. In *Abeng,* Cliff foregrounds Nanny, the Ashanti rebel leader:

> Nanny, who could catch a bullet between her buttocks and render the bullet harmless, was from the empire of the Ashanti, and carried the secrets of her magic into slavery. She prepared amulets and oaths for her armies. Her Nanny Town, hidden in the crevices of the Blue Mountains, was the headquarters of the Windward Maroons—who held out against the forces of the white men longer than any rebel troops. They waged war from 1655–1740. Nanny was the magician of this revolution—she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles.
>
> There is absolutely no doubt that she actually existed. And the ruins of her Nanny Town remain difficult to reach. (14)

Cliff continues her comments on the difficulty of documenting alternative history among the colonized: "But as you are no doubt well aware, there are no facts in Jamaica," she writes in *No Telephone to Heaven.* "Not one single fact. Nothing to join us to the real. Facts move around you. Magic moves around you. This we have been taught" (*NTH* 92). Then she remembers facts recorded in official textbooks about resisting women whose power is best expressed in Jamaican "english":

> Wait. I can call up one fact. "The adamantine refusal of the slave-women to reproduce"—a historian report that. What of Gamesome, Lusty Ann, Counsellor's Cuba, Strumpet called Skulker—not racehorses, mi dear, women: barren. Four furious cool-dark sistren. Is nuh fact dat? Fact, yes, but magic mek it so. (92–93)

Cliff picks up on the concept of "factual/dominant" versus "folk/subordinate" knowledge in her subsequent novel, *Free Enterprise,* as Mary Ellen Pleasant explains to a friend, urging her to take the name of "Annie Christmas":

> "A fine figure of a woman, as they say…. Six feet, eight inches tall, weighing two hundred pounds…. Occasionally she got all dressed up and put on her thirty-foot-long necklace, on which each bead signified eyes, noses, and ears she had gouged out or bitten off in fights…. Although she'd done considerable damage in her fights, she herself was intact. In fact,…"
>
> "Fact?"
>
> "Fact. As much as anything is fact." (*FE* 26)

Cliff, like Djebar, was trained as a historian, and claims she was always aware of biases in official records, which minimize resistance, if they mention it at all. Her own work counters that obliteration:

> I started out as an historian; I did my graduate work in history. I've always been struck by the misrepresentation of history and have tried to correct received versions of history, especially the history of resistance. (Adisa 280)

Cliff also acknowledges her significant debt to Morrison, saying she could not have written some of her work if Morrison had not written *Beloved*. "[Morrison's] imagining of that period, of slavery and its aftermath, opened up my imagination with regard to the rewriting of history, revising the history we've all been taught" (Adisa 280).

The dominant discourse's dismissal and denial of "facts," where alternative history is concerned, is manifest today in the designation "Fiction/ Women's Studies" for the writings of women of color such as Cliff, Morrison, and Djebar, who consciously and explicitly aim at reinscribing history. This perpetuation of silence disempowers. The designation "fiction" negates the very thorough and painstaking research these authors have conducted. As for "Women's Studies," it suggests that the knowledge gained from this research is aimed primarily at women, when it frequently deals with the histories of all members of a subordinate culture, Cliff writes: "It seems to me that if one does not know that one's people have resisted, then it makes resistance difficult" (Adisa 280). Such empowering knowledge, however, is still subject to erasure. The fact that Alex Haley's *Roots* qualifies (justly, I hasten to add) as autobiography, while Djebar's *Fantasia* does not, is indeed symptomatic of the gender politico-dynamics of literary discursivity. Exceptional men of color can claim agency, but women of color must remain posited as victims, the subaltern who will not be permitted to speak. Seizing the power of speech and writing becomes, then, the ultimate act of resistance, and Djebar's return to French, Kitty's filling in the bubbles with disruptive messages from Mrs. Black, and Clare's recovery of her idiosyncratic vocabulary despite the formal education, are all instances of such resistance.

Along similar lines, African American cultural critic bell hooks elaborates on her own repudiation of the victim identity, explaining that this rejection "emerged out of [her] awareness of the way in which thinking of oneself as a victim could be disempowering and disenabling" (*KR* 5). Stressing that her repudiation of a victim identity is not a denial of the fact that African Americans are indeed victimized, hooks argues:

> I lived in a world where women gained strength by sharing knowledge and resources, not by bonding on the basis of being victims. Despite the incredible pain of living in racial apartheid, southern black people did not speak of ourselves as victims even when we were downtrodden. We identified ourselves more by the experience of resistance and triumph than by the nature of our victimization. (*KR* 52)

A major objective of rewriting history is the foregrounding of resistance, for a knowledge of past power invigorates the downtrodden. In this light, it is easy to understand the desire of the dominant discourse to prevent greater awareness among the subordinate of these suppressed memories, whose seismic strength threatens to upturn the status quo. Alternative history foregrounds the accomplishments of women such as Congo Jane and Nanny and the thousands of Algerian women freedom fighters who are not mentioned in official textbooks. Just as importantly, alternative history foregrounds alternative sources of knowledge deemed too illogical to qualify as knowledge. Yet it is such organic knowledge that allowed Djebar to sense the agony of her ancestors as they were fumigated in their caves; and it is the same intuitive knowledge that allows for Clare's mother, Kitty, to sense her mother's death, miles apart. Kitty, who was introduced as more in touch than Boy with her non-European heritage, can interpret the howling of dogs and other such natural phenomena.

> "Lord have mercy, Miss Kitty; why de dogs dem mek such a racket?"
>
> "Me no say, Dorothy. I really don't know."…
>
> "Dem say dog only howl so when smaddy dead. Is one communication …it signify death. Wunna no recollect what dem tell we?"
>
> "Oh God," Kitty moaned into her mattress, *remembering this truth of their girlhood. So it was. So it is.* Raising her head, Kitty whispered to her maid, "Is what dem say, missis, is what dem say." (*NTH* 67, emphasis added)

Kitty's wisdom was derived from her mother, Miss Mattie, a woman "intent on symbol" (69). Miss Mattie "believed in planting when the zodiac was favorable" (69), and taught her children to fear Sasabonsam and respect the Merry Maids in the river, even as she pondered biblical verses for a week, for she was convinced that magic was in everything, including the Bible.

Ever cautious to champion difference, Cliff does not essentialize the feminine as she resurrects alternative knowledge. She describes it in ungendered terms, as "country vs. city." Thus Boy cannot understand Kitty and Dorothy because he is "citified" (68). On the other hand, Clare's friend Harry/Harriet, although physically male, can and does learn "the healing practices" from "women who knew the properties of roots and leaves and how to apply spells effectively" (171). At the end of *No Telephone to Heaven,* Harriet, still physically male, is a nurse/medicine/conjure woman.

QUEERNESS AS HEALING PRACTICE

Michelle Cliff describes Harry/Harriet as her lesbian model: "Harry/Harriet is the novel's lesbian in a sense: he's a man who wants to be a woman and he loves women" (Raiskin 191). But Harry/Harriet, a non-operative,

transgendered transvestite, is more than lesbian, s/he is ultimately queer, refusing to draw new lines, new boundaries, and create divisions and new definitions as s/he chooses her/his new identity.[12]

In *No Telephone to Heaven,* Harry/Harriet's complexity is represented physically, in her/his bisexuality and biraciality, and intellectually in her/his training, which combines Western and non-Western knowledge. But the most significant aspect of *No Telephone to Heaven* is that Harry/Harriet never undergoes a physical transformation, remaining dual in body, as is the fate of all Creoles, diasporans, and biracials for whom transformation is impossible. The only option available to hybrids is a reconciliation with the various elements that make up their identity, a spiritual healing that gels these elements into viable wholeness rather than fragmentation.

Queer theory, which seeks to transcend the hegemonic binarism of hetero- vs. homosexual, is the most appropriate tool for an appreciation of *No Telephone to Heaven,* as it allows for the ultimate move beyond divisive paradigms. While all genealogies of social phenomena are arbitrary and political, and while I would in no way suggest that queers did not exist before their linguistic referent, I nevertheless argue that queerness as a political and theoretical movement is a consequence of such recent movements as poststructuralism and postcolonialism, which first successfully challenged and critiqued, as they sought to overcome, oppressive binary polarities. Thus while queers will name but not define themselves, because no definition can encompass the multiplicity of queer experiences and practices, they nevertheless transcend "the hegemonic binarism of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality'" (Jagose 64). Moreover, the choice of naming oneself queer represents spiritual and mental emancipation from the dominant discourse which, as it posits binary difference, fails to accommodate multiplicity. Queer theory is one facet of the end of modernism and its metanarratives, and queerness a manifestation of the move beyond sexual binarisms into multisexualities. In her introduction to the revised edition of *Between Men,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick comments on the emergence, between the mid 1980s and the 1990s, of "a highly productive queer community whose explicit basis is the criss-crossing of the lines of identification and desire among genders, races, and sexual definitions" (x).

In an interview, Cliff explains that she wanted Harry/Harriet to "portray a character who would be the most despised character in Jamaica, and show how heroic he is…. I also wanted him to have endured what a woman in the culture endures, especially a woman like his mother, who has been a maid. When he talks about his rape and then his mother's rape…he is the most complete character in the book" ("Adisa" 276). Indeed, despite the potential to represent the most split consciousness, Harry/Harriet displays the greatest insight into the political hierarchies of the island and is the one character with the power of self-definition, of choice. Without a sex change operation, Harry/

Harriet decides to become a woman, assuming the gender role of nurturing nurse/rootworker generally associated with that sex: "The choice is mine, man, is made. Harriet live and Harry be no more" (*NTH* 168). As Harry gradually transforms him/herself into Harriet, s/he comes to represents the healthy coming together of diverse elements that would otherwise have led to fragmentation and paralysis. This is a truly subversive act, as it allows her/him to deconstruct dominant ideas of race, sex, and class without substituting new ones that would merely have the effect of creating additional divisive boundaries. In her insightful reading of *No Telephone to Heaven,* Raiskin correctly asserts that Cliff "sidesteps the danger of merely fine-tuning the system with additional 'identities.'…Cliff's is not so much an argument that seeks recognition for another racial or sexual category misrepresented by a dominant discourse; rather she allows her characters to reveal the fantasies of the dominant discourse itself, fantasies that locate subversion in biology rather than in culture" (191–192). Instead, Harry/Harriet intentionally and optimally functions in the liminal spaces, playing all the cards at hand. Ever aware of the potential of performance to channel her/his desires into untapped territories, even Harry/Harriet's passing is not an act of capitulation, but a strategic ruse that admits her/him into ever wider circles, allowing her/him to practice her/his healing sciences among ever greater numbers of people.

Cliff's own semi-fictionalized alter ego, Clare Savage, is set up as a foil to Harry/Harriet, as she presents the initial self-deprecation and personal loss involved in the endeavor to attempt purity by taking sides in discursive binarisms. Such partisanship is at play in conventional homosexual views which reinforce the dominant binarism of sexual orientation as determined by one's biology and that of one's partner, rather than an alternative approach at self-definition opposed to and independent of the dominant discourse's knowledge-power paradigm. The performance put on by queers, who play a role in society even as they negotiate their sexualities, places them in a highly subversive field, as they cannot be designated/represented by the dominant discourse as "the other of heterosexual." As Sedgwick points out:

> It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation." (*Epistemology of the Closet* 8)

As the novel unfolds, Harry/Harriet evolves from a youth who had somehow always accepted her/his strangeness into a caregiver and rootworker who daily

performs her difference and self-chosen multivalent identity, her queerness, as she tends to the various ills of her beloved community:

> [Harriet] had been studying the healing practices. At the university and with old women in the country, women who knew the properties of roots and leaves and how to apply spells effectively…. Had [her people] known about Harriet, they would have indulged in elaborate name-calling, possibly stoning, in the end harrying her to the harbor—perhaps.
>
> And still she was able to love them. How was that? (*NTH* 171)

Clare Savage, on the other hand, is depicted at first as still struggling with what she considers to be opposing aspects of her identity, a fragmented, rather than harmonious multiple personality. Her movement from fragmentation toward homeland and wholeness is facilitated through her friendship with Harry/Harriet, as well as the care Harry/Harriet gives Clare when the latter is hospitalized with a (highly symbolic, if painful) uterine infection that renders her sterile, and makes her question her "future as a woman" (*NTH* 170). This is the moment Harry/Harriet chooses to explain to Clare about her own circumstances:

> "Harriet, now, girlfriend…finally."
>
> "Then you have done it?"
>
> "No, man. Cyaan afford it. Maybe when de revolution come…but the choice is mine, man, is made. Harriet live and Harry be no more." (168)

Eventually, as Clare and Harriet grow closer, Clare also learns to embrace her own multiplicity and becomes an empowered, politically aware and active person, donating her grandmother's abandoned land to the revolution she joins:

> She is the woman who has reclaimed her grandmother's land. She is white. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveler. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Farmer. (91)

Performance, a practice ever present in queerness, characterizes Harry/Harriet from our very first encounter with her/him, and becomes critical for her survival towards the end. Our first encounter with Harry/Harriet already introduces her/him as a conscious performer, inviting people to her/his show. In this scene, s/he is a guest at a poolside party:

> Pedro had brought mescal with him and cheerfully offers it around. Then Harry/Harriet, boy-girl, Buster's brother-sister, half-brother-sister actually, who was always strange, since childhood, they say, but everyone tolerates him, as if measuring their normalness against his strangeness…. Harry/Harriet puts on a bikini—bra stretched across his hairy, delicately

> mounded chest, panties cradling his cock and balls—and starts to dance to "Hey Jude." People laugh but nobody takes Harry/Harriet to heart. "You won't laugh when I am appearing in London with the Royal Ballet and the Queen come fe see me." (21)

Towards the middle of the novel, s/he also puts on a conspicuous show, claiming to be the ultimate personage in a patriarchal society—a polygamous prince—while displaying a traditionally feminine disguise: bright lipstick and colorful (sparkly red, gold, and green) eyelids. The two friends are having a drink at a bar, frequented by tourists and set up to resemble a transatlantic ship, prompting Harry/Harriet's remark that "our homeland is turned to stage set too much" (*NTH* 121). But Harry/Harriet is no less stage-like her/himself:

> "For Clare's sake, Harry/Harriet wore a proper dinner jacket, but his face bespoke his usual brave, glamorous self…. Clare couldn't help but smile….
>
> "Harry, is what shade of lipstick that? I think it's a bit outré…even for you."
>
> "Look, darling, I felt especially colorful tonight. And given the fact that I draped myself in this drab garb, without so much as an earring to recommend me, for your sake, you might be more appreciative." (121–122)

Eventually, they are approached by a tourist, who had only seen Harry/Harriet's back:

> The man turned to face Harry/Harriet for the first time. Barely concealing his shock at the man/woman's painted face. Clare would have sworn Harry/Harriet twinkled his eyelids for the man…. "Yes?" Harry/Harriet met the intruder's eyes, demanding he continue…or leave….
>
> "I am Prince Badnigga, and this is my consort, Princess Cunnilinga…. I see you have noticed my eyelids…these are the colors of our national flag. At the first sign of manhood each young warrior in our country must do the same." (124–125)

It is significant that Cliff chooses this moment to bring about the Afrocentric idea of the "Black Macho," denounced as oppressive by various black gays, who view in it a continuation of the reductivist approach to African history. As black gay critic Marlon Riggs explains:

> Before the white man came, African men were strong, noble, protectors, providers, and warriors for their families and tribes. In pre-colonial Africa, men were truly men. And women—were women. Nobody was lesbian. Nobody was feminist. Nobody was gay…. But the embrace of the African warrior ideal—strong, protective, impassive, patriarchal—has cost us. It has set us down a perilous road of cultural and spiritual

> redemption, and distorted or altogether disappeared from historical record the multiplicity of identities around color, gender, sexuality, and class, which inform the African and African American experience. (*Black Macho Revisited* 474)

Couched in a context of performance—in a country "turned to stage," at a bar set up to look like a Spanish galleon, with Clare and Harry/Harriet "passing" for a foreign, patriarchal, heterosexual couple—this "scene" explodes the idea of the African warrior Harry/Harriet claims to be. Biracial, bisexual, a survivor of sexual abuse, s/he cannot be a model of purity, only self-empowerment. Yet we are also told the naive tourist will believe and revel in this "exotic encounter," appropriating it for his benefit as all colonizers benefitted from their contact with "the other."

> "God, Harry"—Clare dabbed at her eye corners—"what a poor t'ing… how could he believe that?"
>
> "Poor t'ing nothing…we have given him a story he will tell and tell and tell. The sort of t'ing they all want. Exotic. Af-ri-can. Hot nights and mystery. He will return to him lickle business or town or office or country club where everybody is exactly the same and tell them all. By the time he returns he may have kissed Princess Cunnilinga and advised Prince Badnigga in affairs of state…Jesus!…Why them cyaan jus' visit and lef' us be?" (*NTH* 126)

The third performance comes at the end of the novel. Harriet is a nurse, and again, we see her putting on a show, juggling performance, passing, agency and self-determination:

> One old woman, one who kenned Harriet's history, called her Mawu-Lisa, moon and sun, female-male deity of some of her ancestors.
>
> None of her people downtown let on if they knew a male organ swung gently under her bleached and starched skirt…. Had they suspected, what would they have been reduced to? For her people, but a very few, did not tolerate freaks gladly. (171)

While Cliff's concern in *No Telephone to Heaven* is with Jamaica, "freaks" are no better tolerated in the United States, where queers have also encountered significant resistance from the gay and lesbian communities. Indeed, queer theory, and the naming of oneself as "queer," comes as a response to the binarism implicit in homosexuality, which defines its sexual practices as nonheterosexual, while excluding other possibilities. The shift from "gay and lesbian" to "queer" is more than a semantic evolution and was meant to include bisexuals and transgenders, but the latter two continue to be excluded from discussions of nonmonosexual, nonheterosexual identities. Thus the transgender community, which includes, but is not restricted to, pre-, post-, and non-operative

transsexuals, drag queens, transvestites, and hermaphrodites, remains marginalized in lesbian and gay activism in the United States. Unfortunately, examples are numerous: the category "bisexual" was dropped from the Fifth Annual Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference at Rutgers University and was only included after intense lobbying in the title of the historic 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Rights and Liberation. Similarly, Joshua Gamson writes that "When the *San Francisco Bay Times* announced to the 'community' that the 1993 Freedom Day Parade would be called 'The Year of the Queer,' missives fired for weeks" (Seidman 395). The April 2000 March on Washington still featured transgendered speakers asking for greater tolerance within the gay and lesbian communities. Cliff is to be credited for creating a character such as Harry/Harriet in her fiction, yet I think it unfortunate that she implies Harry/Harriet would have had an easier life in the United States than in Jamaica. While one can understand the motivations of homosexuals to distinguish between themselves and bisexuals, who are suspected of having access to the privileges of heterosexuality, transgender subjectivities seem to present a greater theoretical challenge to gay and lesbian activism and politics. Yet surely, as we look at Harry/Harriet, we cannot conceive that s/he has it easier than a monosexual, homosexual person![13]

Along with these performances, we are reminded, also at three different moments in the novel, of "the uses of camouflage." In fact Cliff presents us with two different types of passing: the strategic ruse employed by Harry/Harriet, who stops performing once in a safe place with friends who know her/him, and the "permanent passing," which does not allow for a reprieve, for casting off the mask at the end of the performance. Permanent passing is illustrated in the novel by Clare's father, the light-skinned Boy Savage, who claims hereditary whiteness and denies the African blood in his genes, and can therefore never go back on his lie. Although it is Boy who advises his daughter on "the uses of camouflage," his actions represent an acquiescence to, and reinforcement of the dominant discourse of white supremacy, which would view him as inferior because of the "impurity" of his blood. Such passing, which necessitates making oneself invisible, is alienating and disempowering. On the other hand, Harry/Harriet's passing allows her/him to live her/his life in the most fulfilling and productive ways possible. It is guerrilla camouflage as seen in both the opening and concluding scenes of the novel, that erases the socially imposed differences of race, sex, and class in order to allow for revolutionary coalition-building:

> These people—men and women—were dressed in similar clothes, which became them as uniforms, signifying some agreement, some purpose—that they were in something together—in these clothes, at least, they seemed to blend together. This alikeness was something they needed, which could be important, even vital, to them—for the shades of their skin, places traveled to

> and from, events experienced, things understood, food taken into their bodies, acts of violence committed, books read, music heard, languages recognized, ones they loved, living family, varied widely, came between them. (*NTH* 4)

The camouflage comes with an ironic twist, as we find out that the uniforms were stolen from American tourists and worn by Jamaican guerrilla fighters opposed to American neocolonialism:

> The people on the truck wore khaki—and they wore discarded American army fatigues, stolen from white kids high on dope…sleepyhead, on the beach at Negril or Orange Bay….
>
> The camouflage jackets, names and all, added a further awareness, a touch of realism, cinematic verité, that anyone who eyed them would believe they were faced with *real* soldiers. True soldiers…this is how the camouflage made them feel. (7)

This strategic passing can fool onlookers who see real fatigues and camouflage jackets; but it does not affix an identity to the guerrillas who, with the exception of the always-already protean Harry/Harriet, rotate their jackets with the American soldiers' names still taped on the pockets:

> They wore the jackets in strict rotation, with only the medical officer, formerly a nurse at Kingston Hospital, owning one to herself. Her name was Harriet; in the jacket she became Thorpe. There were five other jackets—and they called each by the name on the pocket: Johnson, Washington, Skrobski, Diaz, Morrissey. (7)

Cliff's talent lies in the fact that she presents no easy solutions, no unrealistic successes. The novel's title indicates the eventual failure of the revolution—a band of guerrilla fighters cannot realistically end American neocolonialism. The final section of the novel, depicting the defeat of the revolution, is appropriately entitled "Film Noir" in a double entendre reference to the fact that the failed guerrilla attack is planned on the stage of a multinational film set, a joint U.S.-British venture.

Passing, even when it involves agency, is never free from the dominant discourse. The jackets are originally accessory to American aggression, and the Jamaicans who wore them die at the end. The "Badnigga/Cunnilinga" story enriches the traveller's repertoire of exotic tales even as it provides Clare and Harry/Harriet with their own comic relief. Harriet's passing does not eliminate the real danger of being "fucked to death," should the people find out about the organ between the legs of this loving, devoted caregiver.

> He is vastly outnumbered, will—unless they protect him, because he is one of them, though apart from them, reminding them of their wholeness—he will end up in some back-o-wall alley in Raetown, fucked to death. (*NTH* 21)

Yet Harry/Harriet's "passing," far from being a capitulation to the dominant discourse, is radically subversive. S/he is not the norm, but the extremely rare exception. As a nonoperative, transgendered, biologically male queer, her/his very life depends on camouflage and the silence of people in the know. Clearly, to Cliff, there are no easy solutions, no prescriptions for whether one should or should not pass; she presents both of her central characters having to deal with this issue, Clare refusing to pass and Harriet having no viable options but to do so. Nevertheless, a sense of possibility, of craving for change, pervades *No Telephone to Heaven,* as well as an insistent repetition that such change can only come through an awareness of the fictive nature of identity, allowing for genuine alternative agency. As Audre Lorde warned many years ago, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (*Sister Outsider* 112). In this sense, a queer person must never be defined, only self-named, for definition is one of the master's tools, like American fatigues, exotic travelers' tales, and the concealment of one's complex sexuality.

A FRAGMENTED PEOPLE

To illustrate the divisive binarism of the dominant discourse, Cliff presents us, in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven,* with a series of paired characters who are eventually pulled apart by the racial caste system that constitutes the social dynamics of Jamaica. In *Abeng,* the young Clare and her friend Zoe play together with an awareness, on Zoe's part, that their friendship cannot last and will soon be irrevocably affected by their class background.

> "Wunna is town gal, and wanna papa is buckra. Wunna talk buckra. Wunna leave here when wunna people come fe wunna…. Me will be here so all me life—me will be marketwoman like fe me mama. Me will have fe beg land fe me and fe me pickney to live pon. Wunna will go a England, den maybe America, to university, and when we meet later we will be different smaddy. But we is different smaddy now."…
>
> Clare was having trouble taking in all that Zoe said; she didn't want to believe it….
>
> "Chuch, gal," Zoe sucked her teeth long and slow…. "Well, gal, sometime dat is jus' de way t'ings be." (*A* 118)

In *No Telephone to Heaven,* another childhood friendship, that of Kitty and Dorothy, turns into a relationship of mistress and servant as the women grow up. Kitty and Dorothy were raised together as sisters, sleeping in the same bed. Kitty's mother, Miss Mattie, had adopted Dorothy, a dark foundling, to save her from the hardship awaiting her in merciless Jamaica. But even Miss Mattie's best intentions could not counter her country's stratification:

> "Dorothy, I don't know what I would do if Miss Mattie dead. What if she?" She spoke to her maid exclusively, as if this would be her own loss entirely, not giving room at all to the fact that Dorothy had been one of Miss Mattie's adoptions, and that Kitty and Dorothy had wet the same bed when they were small.
>
> "Nuh mus' go on." Dorothy rose in a sudden cool from the edge of the bed and walked out of the room. Out of the mistress's earshot she sucked her teeth. Dem never change. (70)

We have another illustration of a childhood friendship gone awry—indeed murderous—in the pair made up of Christopher and Paul H.Christopher, an orphaned child from the Dungle, Jamaica's most destitute slums, had been hired as a yardboy by Paul's family. The two children were close in age and grew up as friends, fishing together. Yet that initial camaraderie proved illusory, for Paul and Christopher did not grow up as equals. Instead, when they became young adults, Christopher carried and cleaned the guns for Paul's hunting trips. Drunk with rum and sadness one Christmas eve, Christopher asks Paul's father for a piece of land on which to bury his dead grandmother. When his request is denied, Christopher is overcome by a murderous frenzy, and kills Paul's father, mother, sister, and their houseservant while Paul is out partying with wealthy friends. Upon returning home and discovering the murder scene, the unsuspecting Paul calls Christopher for help in cleaning up.

> As Paul turned, the machete made a wide arc behind him, blade cracking against vertebrae. Him nuh know what hit him, bredda; or did he?
>
> It was ten years before. A light-skinned boy was calling outside the room of a dark-skinned boy. "Christopher, Christopher, it's me. Mek we go catch some crayfish by the moonlight." (49)

Also in *No Telephone to Heaven,* Clare and her sister are separated when Kitty, the darker of the two parents, returns to Jamaica taking Jenny, the darker of the two sisters, with her. Finally, we have the separation of Kitty and Boy along racial and gender lines. One characteristic of the power dynamics of various polarized binary relationships is the fact that the privileged member seems oblivious to class and racial tensions, refusing to acknowledge disturbing facts, while the underprivileged abide by their social role as listeners rather than speakers. Even Kitty, attuned as she is to the plight of the underprivileged, seems oblivious to these tensions in her dealings with Dorothy.

The dominant partner's refusal to get to know the subordinate also expresses itself in spatial segregation that allows the subordinate, generally a servant or domestic help, to enter the master's house while the master stays away from the servant's quarters. Thus Kitty has never been to Dorothy's family compound, while Dorothy lives in Kitty's, and later in Kitty and Boy's house. Paul has never been inside Christopher's Dungle shack or

Christopher's girlfriend's apartment, although he calls him and occasionally picks him up there. Christopher, on the other hand, is first kitchen help, then yardboy in Paul's parents villa. Zoe came to Clare's house daily, while Clare recalls: "I never visited Zoe's house the entire time I knew her. It was a given: never suggested, never raised" (*LLB* 60).

The blindness of the dominant discourse to the reality of the circumstances of their subordinates translates, in the United States, into an insularity that allows Americans to claim knowledge through an imposed definition of exoticized others with whom they have never truly interacted. Such fake communication is illustrated in the interview between Kitty and a potential employer, an executive at a major bank. Dialogue is impossible as the interviewer fails to inquire about Kitty's qualifications, asking instead "where does that musical voice come from?" (76) and offering, when she tells him she's Jamaican, "My wife and I have not had the pleasure of visiting your beautiful island, but we have heard all about it from our maid…ah, perhaps you know her…her name is Winsome" (*NTH* 76).

The focus on musicality here works as essentializing: it is a racist exoticizing gesture, reducing all Jamaicans to their "accent," albeit a pleasant one. The bank executive is also reducing all Jamaicans to a single, servile class on an island so small that all its inhabitants are bound to know each other. The reductionism is such that the international (British/U.S.) film crew on the island fail to distinguish between Coromantee and pidgin, for both languages are spoken with a twang. Taken to its logical extreme, this exotization leads to the dehumanization of the other, as witnessed in the film crew's demand that De Watchman not project any human characteristics, but howl like a monster instead: "Howl! Howl! I want you to bellow as loud as you can. Try to wake the dead…. Remember, you're not human. Action!" (*NTH* 217)

The cumulative effect—from the capacity to hear only a voice's musicality, rather than the earnest desire of its speaker to improve her living standards, up to the command to howl and forget your humanity—constitutes a fatal continuum, hence the death of the guerrilla fighters at the end of the novel. Yet Cliff also inscribes the power of the prelingual semiotic in that final scene, in Clare's epiphany before expiring:

> Shots found the bitterbush…
> Kitty-woo, kitty-woo, kitty-woo
> Whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip
> Back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw
> She remembered language.
> Then it was gone. (208)

This last passage of the novel is worth examining in detail, for Cliff calls the above utterances "language," thus elevating the semiotic to the status of

independent entity, and paying one final tribute to a tongue she had longed to know, as we are told earlier in the novel:

> Coromantee, a tongue barely alive. A tongue she could not speak. She who was educated in several tongues, the mastery of which should have kept her from that truck and stifled her longing to know Coromantee. (106)

While the above utterances are not Coromantee, it is no coincidence that the first word/sound Clare recalls is "kitty," her mother's name, a reminder that Jamaican Creole is her maternal tongue. "Whip" reproduces the sound of the disciplining tool, while retaining the African characteristic of onomatopoeia, of words "speaking their name." "Back-raw" describes the condition of a slave's back after whipping—thus again demonstrating the intrinsic contents/value of the semiotic as well as its multivalence, since "back-raw" is believed to have evolved into "backra," meaning white or white-identified.

The myopia of one partner and the multiple vision of another in a hierarchical relationship reflect the interaction of dominant and subordinate discourses: the Symbolic need not stoop to/understand the semiotic, while speakers of the semiotic are necessarily bilingual, competent in their own dialect as well as the dominant language, ever engaging in simultaneous translation as they interpret supposedly universal messages to fit their own circumstances. Such dynamics are also operative between hetero- and homosexual communities: homosexuals try to enter the master's house and secure magisterial rights and prerogatives ("our only difference lies in the choice of our partner's sex") while queers prefer to party in the woods. Moreover, the servant is only allowed into the master's house so long as s/he presents absolutely no threat. Queers, who will not adopt a servile attitude, are threatening. Thus Harry, who had been sheltered by his family as a harmless "battyman," (Jamaican pejorative slang for male homosexual) was thrown out when he declared himself Harriet, proclaiming agency.

The only pair that grows closer is Clare and Harry/Harriet, who had sought wholeness all along, foregrounding multiplicity in their physical and political consciousness. Through the Clare and Harry/Harriet couple, Cliff shows the possibility of reconciliation despite obvious differences. At first encounter, Clare and Harry/Harriet are worlds apart. She is the light-skinned prized daughter of a middle-class couple; he is the dark-skinned product of the rape of a black servant by her white master. He is initiated at a very early age into the world of Jamaican injustice, of rejection. Unlike Clare, who never felt disenfranchised until the school interview in New York, Harry/Harriet was still a young child when he realized he was "an odd quantity…outside" (*NTH* 124). And it is Harry/Harriet who bestows that crucial power of self-definition upon Clare, who had found herself, an immigrant child in the United States, as an unknown entity, unrecognizable to herself.

As the two friends share painful experiences, Harry/Harriet insists that his experience of rape, as a ten-year-old, by a white man in khaki uniform, working at the service of "Her Majesty" is not symbolic, to be interpreted as national allegory, reminding Clare of the reality of the pain experienced by many Jamaicans, which no amount of abstract theorizing will faithfully render:

> Darling, I know it is hard to listen to all of this; it is hard to tell. I have been tempted all my life to think *symbol*—that what he did to me is but a symbol for what they did to all of us, always bearing in mind that some of us, many of us, also do it to each other. But that's not right. I only suffered what my mother suffered—no more, no less. Not symbol, not allegory, not something in a story or a dialogue by Plato. No, man, I am merely a person who felt the overgrown cock of a big whiteman pierce the asshole of a lickle Black bwai—there it is. That is all there is to it. (129–130)

The brutalized, marginalized Harry/Harriet reminds Clare, privileged and educated in American and European universities, that abstract knowledge is an inappropriate tool for the understanding of the human experience of pain, exploitation, and abuse. Abstract knowledge is epitomized in hegemonic, phallocentric, academic discourses, which either produce ever more categories and subcategories—the 128 categories of the Spanish colonial system—or a reductionist binarism—"no place for in-betweens"—in the North American system.

Such reductionism and fragmentation are precisely what queer theorists and numerous postcolonial thinkers, Cliff among them, are resisting. Cliff had at one time described herself as a fragmented hybrid seeking wholeness. In a speech delivered at the First International Conference of Caribbean Women Writers, she explains:

> Part of my purpose as a writer of Afro-Caribbean (Indian, African, and white) experience and heritage has been to reject speechlessness by inventing my own peculiar speech, one that attempts to draw together everything I am and have been, both Caliban and Ariel and a liberated and synthesized version of each. ("Crossroads" 264)

Obviously, the solution cannot come from the creation of one more category, one more fragment. Instead, we have a model of synthesis and wholeness in the novel's lesbian, its most complete character.

Harry/Harriet achieves wholeness by ever being dual—physically a male, socially a woman. In doing/being so, she heals her community, both physically (as a nurse/medicine woman) and spiritually by politicizing and grounding the alienated Clare, reconnecting her to Jamaica. Thus Harry/Harriet also personifies the aim of queerness "not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and

contestable as to its meaning and political role" (Seidman 12). While the novel does not provide for a "Hollywood" ending, despite the American and British stage setting, it certainly points in the direction of genuine change.

"I find myself closer to my choice, girlfriend. How about you? Love and kisses, H/H" (*NTH* 140).

JOHN BROWN WAS A FRIEND OF HERS

The reconstruction, from scattered fossil fragments, of dinosaurs that lived millions of years ago, relying primarily on hypotheses and educated guesses, is termed "science." Imagining military battles that occurred thousands of years ago, based on cave paintings and the writings of poets who most likely used their license to embellish, is deemed "history." (We are told, after all, that these poets were paid to aggrandize the achievements of their sponsors.) But the recording of women's accomplishments over the last century and the first part of this one, based on interviews with people they knew, walks through gardens they planted, lingering memories of lullabies they sang to their grandchildren, bank accounts in their names, stamps in their passports, is deemed "fiction." At least, this is the classification under which Cliff's *Free Enterprise* falls, despite what must have been painstaking research on her part in the archives of San Francisco, eastern Massachusetts, and New Orleans.

Like *No Telephone to Heaven, Free Enterprise* does not follow a linear narrative pattern; instead, the story weaves its way in and out of the past, a literary representation of the close connections and continuities between past and present events. Interspersed throughout the novel are letters written by the main characters to each other. The epistolary style—a private form of communication par excellence—increases the sense of orality that pervades the book, creating at once a feeling of intimacy and reproducing the African story-telling tradition which preserves communal history. This in turn is reinforced by a chapter entitled "Oral History" where, to pass the time, each of the residents of a leper colony stands up and recounts their family's history, offering their version of events, from Captain James Cook's arrival in Hawaii—retold by the chief's great-grandson, who inherited the thigh bone engraved with depictions of the encounter—to the dynamiting, by white militiamen, of a cave in Kentucky in which Maroons lived. The cumulative effect, voice after voice telling stories and histories, culminates, in the last few pages of the novel, in a scene in the Free African School in Cuttyhunk, Massachusetts, where Miss Carey, the schoolmistress, instructs "each of her students to memorize, for recitation on command, a narrative in its entirety…." because "Books are fragile things…. What they contain can easily be lost. We must become talking books, talk it on, like the Africans, children. Talk it on" (*FE* 211).

We have seen how Cliff is concerned with inscribing women's historical accomplishments and highlighting their resistance, since knowledge of such resistance is itself empowering. This concern is explicit again in *Free Enterprise,* where she returns the gaze and redresses official versions of historical events, as Djebar had done and continues to do. While *Free Enterprise* is Cliff's first novel to depart from a fictionalized version of the author, it remains based in real-life characters. This time, going back in time to pre-emancipation days in the United States, Cliff weaves her story around the real-life characters of Mary Ellen Pleasant, Mary Shadd Carey, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Annie Christmas, and other historical women. Despite the disclaimer by Cliff on the inside copyright page that "This is a work of fiction…any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental," the author successfully and irreversibly alters our perspectives of the history we have been taught as she records imagined and reconstructed events that happened to these women between the years 1850 and 1920. As Blacks, their history is ignored, as black women, they are subaltern, yet each has overcome tremendous obstacles and achieved immense successes.

Looming in the shadows of *Free Enterprise,* which spotlights the phenomenal women mentioned previously, is the failed November 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Official history tells us that one white man, John Brown, spearheaded the conspiracy to free the slaves in Virginia. Upon his capture and subsequent death, a note was found in his pocket, signed MEP—Mary Ellen Pleasant, whose epitaph reads: "She was a friend of John Brown" (*FE* 18). But Cliff will not reconcile herself to such a version of history, and rewrites the story, making John Brown one of Mary Ellen's friends. Indeed, as Cliff denounces the obliteration of subaltern histories by the dominant discourse, she successfully makes of official history merely one more version of what may have happened.

> The failed revolutionary is claimed by them as one of them. A prodigal son. …Their wild-haired, wild-eyed boy determined to save the darkies, at the expense of family and fortune, and general social standing.
>
> What a farce!
>
> J.B. was a splendid ally; no more and no less. (*FE* 141)

Thanks to the work of Susheel Bibbs, scholar/performer who has researched Pleasant's life and was curator of a special exhibit in San Francisco, Mary Ellen Pleasant may be the better-known of the historical figures Cliff revives.[14] Pleasant lived in San Francisco, where she owned a chain of hotels that catered to wealthy whites and doubled as a shelter for runaway slaves. Her contacts allowed her to place countless fugitives in employment, thus ameliorating the life standards of Blacks in California. Born a slave in Georgia

(circa 1817), she headed West during the Gold Rush and became known as "the mother of Civil Rights in California." She amassed a fortune once estimated at 30 million dollars, yet her epitaph, "She was a friend of John Brown," appends a successful black woman to a defeated white man, instead of acknowledging that woman's efforts, resistance, accomplishments and victories (Bibbs).[15]

Mary Shadd Carey[16] was born free in Delaware in 1823, but relocated to Ontario upon the declaration of the Fugitive Slave Law, which threatened all people of African descent with bondage, regardless of former or current free status. There she opened an integrated school to educate black refugees, and became the first black woman in North America (thus probably in the world) to establish and run a newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman.* Her achievement gains even greater stature when we realize this was not the first black-owned newspaper in Ontario, and was not, therefore, filling a gaping void. Rather, it was because of her political differences with Henry Bibb, editor of the *Voice of the Fugitive,* that Cary established the *Provincial Freeman.* In his paper, Bibb, who advocated segregated schools and housing, openly attacked Cary's ideas and character, but was unsuccessful in undermining her popularity.

Because the character Annie Christmas has named herself, I have not been able to document her life, and Cliff claims her to be a fictional character. Yet Cliff obviously wants, through this protagonist, to remind us of the legendary Annie Christmas, "Tree Tall and Coal Black." The complexity of the character is underscored by the fact that the legendary Annie Christmas was very dark, while Cliff's is almost white. Annie, who lends her name to the first section of *Free Enterprise,* is an enigmatic character that serves multiple purposes in the novel. Cliff acknowledges she is her own fictional alter ego, and the two have many personal circumstances in common. Annie, like Cliff, is of Creole, Caribbean origins, and has left her privileged family behind to move to the United States as a young adult. On her native island, she says, the land was "divided and planted with feudal exactitude" (*FE* 10), echoing Cliff's own comments about Jamaica in the autobiographical *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise.* On Annie's island, as on Cliff's, "Spanish was the language of the categories," determining the exact designation of the offspring of mixed relationships, from *Torna atras* (throwback), *Lobo* (wolf), *Zambayo* (cross- eyed), and *Tente en el aire!* (suspended in the air), to *No te entiendo* (I don't understand you) and *Alli te esta!* (There you are!) *(FE* 8–9). Annie is very masculine, possibly lesbian and like Cliff, she is very light-skinned and can pass for white; but she chooses instead to use skindarkening lotions that cannot, however, conceal her hazel eyes.

In addition to being Cliff's alter-ego, Annie Christmas represents another "type" of Africana resister, alongside Pleasant (born a slave) and Carey (born free), namely the immigrant woman of Afro-Caribbean descent in the United States, thus allowing Cliff once again to rise above the binaries and other

hierarchical divisions she denounces in all of her writing. Finally, as I mentioned above, Annie is a reminder of the legendary Annie Christmas (1832–1879), a keelboat driver on the Mississippi River. As Pleasant bestows the nom de guerre upon her friend, she tells her that it is hers "inasmuch as your taking it is a way to keep the name alive, unforgotten" (*FE* 26). Pleasant then goes on to explain to the newly-named "Annie," and the eavesdropping readers, some of the historic woman's accomplishments: "She once towed a keelboat, a great flat-bottomed boat, from New Orleans to Natchez at a full run. No one would have dared slap any chains on her, believe you me" (26). The historic Annie is said to have been extremely dark, six feet eight inches tall and weighing over 250 pounds. There are slight variations in her life story, but there is consensus that she was a keelboat driver on the Mississippi River, who saved all the riders of the *Natchez Belle* when the ship was stranded in debris. When she died "of a broken heart," she was buried in a casket in the Mississippi river, after a funeral attended by over one thousand dockmen and riverboat workers, as well as her eleven or twelve sons. The (alternative) history lesson continues as Pleasant then compares Christmas to the Caribbean Nanny, thus informing us about that formidable woman's achievements as "great Maroon chieftainess…also conjurer, obeah-woman, science-woman, physician, warrior" (27).

As a fictional character, the complex Annie serves yet another role as she allows Cliff to articulate again her ideas on passing, racially and sexually. Through her, we witness another instance of "strategic passing" which turns against its user, when the latter is "outed." A member of the planned raid on Harpers Ferry, Annie had disguised herself as a man, an itinerant cooper. Eventually, as the raid fails, the conspirators are captured and killed or made to work on a chain gang. Annie, still passing, labored on one for years.

> I spent the years of the war on a Confederate chain gang…. I was chained, a man among men, until a guard spied a trickle of blood down my leg, and not from the chafing of the iron cuff.
>
> You can imagine what happened next to me…I was cuffed around the neck and led from man to man. They were not allowed to resist. (207)

Annie's downfall is aggravated further by the fact that now she is made to perform for someone else's entertainment, and no longer to secure her own ends:

> We put on quite a show.
>
> Chain against chain. Metal and flesh. The profoundly entertained keepers….
>
> I detached my nether parts from the rest of me. But I could not disown my mouth, the burning in my throat….
>
> There I was, my color long dissolved in springtime's torrents. There I was, a light-skinned woman on a leash. A thing of wonderment to some.
>
> "She's no more nigger than I am. What is she?" A woman friend of one of the keepers, come to enjoy the daily entertainment, asked. (207–208)

Yet the reader is left wondering, had Annie not tried to pass for a man, would her fate have been easier? Other women were part of the conspiracy, and they too were captured and most likely raped and tortured. Did the fact that Annie's rape was a show performed by fellow-victims, make the violence more traumatic? Why did the very light-skinned Annie, who could pass for white, use skin-blackener? Again, we can assume that, passing for white, she may have been more successful in her endeavors, whereas the embrace of her blackness led her to labor on a chain gang. Annie had earlier claimed that, as a New World person of African descent, disguise was her birthright.

> It was practically my birthright; you know that. Disguise. Masks. Never give out what you're thinking. The cane cutter in the iron mask, belled around the neck. The tribal story-teller taking on the face of each whose tale he tells. Disguise. How to pass through the nets…. We went South that way, to seek rebellion. (*FE* 194)

Disguise may well be her birthright, but Annie will not abandon part of her identity. When she does pass, it is not to secure personal profit; but to further a communal gain, the slave rebellion: as a black man, she is made to work on a chain gang, whereas as a white woman, she would have been protected, a lady. Like Harry/Harriet, whose ambiguities allow Cliff to explode imposed differences between various social and sexual categories, Annie Christmas opens up a space for questioning the differences between man and woman, black and white, slave and free, and, just as importantly, myth and reality, folklore and history.

In *No Telephone to Heaven,* Cliff wove her narrative through the various components of the diasporan, postcolonial subject, asserting the creative agency of the self-named hybrid. In *Free Enterprise,* Cliff irrevocably alters our reading of U.S. history, as Djebar, with *Fantasia,* has forever rewritten the history of France's occupation of Algeria. Like Djebar's *Fantasia,* which creates a polyglot effect by juxtaposing official history with counterdiscourse, Cliff's *Free Enterprise* features a number of women's voices. Despite the fact that both novels are written in the language of the dominant discourse (French in *Fantasia,* English, with very little patois or Creole in *Free Enterprise*), they nevertheless recreate and inscribe the intimate and unmediated feeling of orality through various devices, from interviews to story telling, because "we must become talking books, talk it on" (*FE* 211).

NOTES

1. A shorter version of my analysis of Harry/Harriet's pivotal role appears in *Callaloo,* 23/1 (2000), 352–365.

2. In *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (Gordon 1995), see the chapter on "Blackness and Effeminacy." In *Her Majesty's Other Children* (Gordon 1997), see "Sex, Race, and Matrices of Desire."

3. Some Arabs in Lebanon and Syria are blond and blue-eyed, and it is generally believed they are the result of rapes by European soldiers during the Crusades. The immense cultural pride of Arabs silences this fact, as it cannot approve of the living proof of rape, and these lighter-skinned people are considered extremely good-looking, regardless of individual features: whiter skin is best. Yet there is irrefutable linguistic proof that such preference for lightness is postcolonial, for the Arabic language is rich with words that value darkness, words that are lovingly bestowed by parents on their children, such as Samar, Samira, Samir, Samer, and others, all of which are derived from the root *samaar,* which means darkness. This stands in stark opposition to the various Latin-derived forms of European names such as Bianca, Blanca, Blanche, Claire, Clara. The Arabic name more commonly known in the West, Layla, derives from *layl,* meaning night. The Arabic expression equivalent to the American "you look like a million dollars" is "you look like the moon," another nocturnal attribute, while the expression for "to be exposed," with negative connotations, is "to be sunned." The climate in the Arabian peninsula explains this preference for shade over light: in the harsh desert climate, nighttime brings relief, while the sun shines murderously in the daytime, threatening dehydration and heat exhaustion.

4. I have in mind the use of "english" as identified by Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back*. In doing so, I establish equality between what is traditionally viewed as *patois*—the national languages of numerous islands denied validity—and those variations that have been granted separate identity, and which have nevertheless distorted words such as "medicine" into "medication" and substituted "elevator" for "lift," while claiming the status of "Standard English" for themselves and relegating other variations to the status of "vernacular."

5. See Judith Raiskin's discussion of Creole mentality in *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity,* particularly her chapters on Jean Rhys, a "white Creole," and Cliff, a "colored Creole."

6. Many people are unaware that *mulatto* is a derivative of mule, the sterile product of cross-breeding between two different animal species. The choice of the term *mulatto* to describe the perfectly healthy offspring of a black-white relationship nevertheless expresses the belief, among those who coined the expression, that the races are indeed different species, a conviction commented on by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth.*

7. The most recent manifestation of this problematic classification is the lengthy debate resulting in the introduction, as of the year 2000, of the category "multiracial," on federal forms that currently require "Choose one."

8. The belief that the Ku Klux Klan lynched primarily black men who "raped" white women, however loosely the term "rape" may be used, is simply erroneous, despite its prevalence. The Klan waged a much wider war of terrorism that targeted all blacks, men and women, old and young, even when the threat of rape was nonexistent. That said, the Klan and other white supremacist organizations remain to this day opposed to interracial relationships, even with the full consent of both partners.

9. Equiano's place of birth has been questioned since he first published his *Interesting Narrative* in 1789, with contemporaneous critics suggesting he was born in the West Indies, not West Africa. The most recent scholarship suggests that Equiano is almost certainly a Carolina-born slave, not an African native, as he states in his *Interesting Narrative.* Equiano's discussion of "Horrors of a slave ship" in Chapter Two of his *Interesting Narrative* would thus be fully fictional. For an examination of Equiano's identity construction, see Vincent Carretta, "Three West Indian Writers of the 1780's Revisited and Revised," *Research in African Literatures,* Winter 1998. Robin Sabino and Jennifer Hall, in "The Path Not Taken: Cultural Identity in the Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano," *MELUS,* Spring 1999, vol. 24, #1, provide a

synopsis of the charges that Equiano is a fraudulent writer, refuting these accusations by analyzing the Igbo worldview that transpires through his writing.

10. "Black History Blues," performance 12 Feb. 1998, Blackman Auditorium, Northeastern University, Boston.

11. Both cited in Glissant.

12. In my work, I distinguish between homosexuals as monosexual non heterosexual individuals (individuals who define themselves as men and women who prefer sexual relations with members of their own biological sex), and queers, who include bisexuals, pre-, post-, and nonoperative, transgendered transvestites, as well as non-queerphobic, gay liberationist homosexuals.

13. See Feinberg's *Trans Liberation* for an excellent discussion of these issues.

14. "Mary Ellen Pleasant: Mother of Civil Rights in California," San Francisco Art Commission, 26 Feb.-5 Apr. 1997, curated by Bibbs.

15. In her lifetime, Pleasant was known by many attributes, most of them negative. Cliff recalls the response of a man working in the Napa, California cemetery from whom she asked directions to Pleasant's grave, "Oh you mean Mammy Pleasant?" "In the 1990s," Cliff observes, Pleasant "is still known by the name she detested" (Hausmann Shea 32).

16. In my research, her name appeared consistently as Mary Ann Shadd Cary.

CHAPTER 4

"I'm Breaking My Vow of Silence"

Reclaiming Speech in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters*

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you sicken and die of them, still in silence?

—AUDRE LORDE, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible.

—BELL HOOKS, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive

—AUDRE LORDE, "Litany for Survival"

In the four novels we have looked at so far, women's alternative narratives are the source of empowerment, liberation, and survival. We recall that in *Fantasia,* the multitude of women's voices delegitimize official discourse, making it simply one more version of the Franco-Algerian encounter. *A Sister*

to Scheherazade foregrounds the female archetype of storytelling as life-saving device. Towards the end of *No Telephone to Heaven,* we are told that Clare remembered language, and the semiotic sounds she utters, beginning with her own mother's name "kitty-woo, kitty-woo," remedy what might otherwise be read as a narrative of defeat. *Free Enterprise* reiterates the urgent plea made in all the novels we examine in this study, namely: "We must become talking books; talk it on, like the Africans" (211), for only then will the dominant discourse be disrupted, the subordinate inscribed, and its speakers validated. As the chorus of once-unheard voices gains momentum, one is reminded of the Kenyan proverb: "Until the lions have their historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter."

The silencing of tales of resistance as well as their recovery and eventual transmission, is at the heart of the two recent novels by Paule Marshall that are the focus of this chapter, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and *Daughters* (1991). Marshall was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Barbadian parents. Alienation in her work appears to be a result not of the Diaspora, but rather of self-silencing. There are examples in all of her writings of characters, mostly women, who are geographically displaced, but culturally connected, and consequently spiritually whole. In this chapter, I am primarily concerned with examining women's complicity in their own silencing, their reclamation of alternative speech as their only viable mode of expression, and their ensuing spiritual enrichment as it appears in Marshall's two novels.

Like the works of Djebar and Cliff, *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters* are novels that illustrate storytelling as locus of empowerment, resistance, and liberation, not just for individual characters, but for the community as a whole. Additionally, because Marshall's characters are at once oppressed minorities (as immigrant women of color) and postcolonial, I will be comparing and highlighting similarities between the silence of oppression and the silence of colonization. This peripatetic approach is faithful to Marshall's own work, which navigates various nodes along the Africana continuum. In fact, a journey covering at least one leg of the Middle Passage is central to each of Marshall's novels. *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* Marshall's first novel, (published 1959) narrates one family's emigration from Barbados to the United States, and the husband's return to the Caribbean. *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (published 1969) tells the story, among others, of Merle Kinbona, a Caribbean woman who has married a Kenyan while in Europe and plans a trip to Africa to reclaim her daughter. Both *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters* feature a number of trips by the main protagonists between the United States and the Caribbean islands, and by some lesser characters between the United States, the Caribbean, and the African continent. *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* is a collection of four novellas situated in four different locales, Brooklyn, Barbados, British Guiana, and Brazil, foregrounding commonalities between the circumstances of people of

African descent in various parts of the Diaspora. It is noteworthy that, although all Marshall's stories are contemporary, set in the second half of the twentieth century, they all feature travel by boat and/or ship (rather than the more common plane), to reinscribe the Africana cultural memory of the Middle Passage.[1] Finally, since both "people of color" and postcolonials function within a broader context that includes the dominant discourse, liberation for them necessarily entails making incursions within that discourse, challenging its insularity, and disrupting its impermeability. One can even argue that not to do so would be to admit defeat, an acceptance of one's place outside the text of history. Hence, their narratives of resistance, while embracing their alternative history, must also awaken a reluctant dominant discourse, in a way that is comprehensible to its speakers. In *Talking Back,* bell hooks argues for such disruptive incursions when she explains that black women need not learn to speak, but need to be heard: "Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard" (6). It must be pointed out that in the conscious decision to break a vow of silence, a decision Estelle takes at the end of *Daughters,* there is acknowledgement that one is not silent prior to taking the vow. Because the people of color Marshall writes about are also postcolonial, overcoming silence for them as individuals also points toward the possibility of postcolonial liberation, the end of national cultural dependency.

In both of Marshall's novels, the characters silence their spontaneous, "native" utterances, which constitute local, micronarratives, in order to access the dominant discourse, only to betray it in their ultimate emancipatory move. I am particularly interested in examining the dynamics of oppression that prompt strong women to take a vow of silence, keeping their pain, misery, or outrage to themselves, before realizing that "Silence *is* like starvation" (Moraga 29). I argue that this individual self-silencing is similar in nature to the oppression of women by women, in duplication of internalized phallocentric discourse—an oppression we have seen perpetrated, for example, by Touma upon her own daughter Hajila in *A Sister to Scheherazade.* Touma's ultimate goal, material comfort in the form of a roof over her head, is no different from what motivates Marshall's heroines, all of whom seek middle-class comforts. While the desire for an easier life is not reprehensible in itself, Marshall's characters err in the means to achieve it, for they merely seek to escape oppression rather than overthrow the oppressive system(s).

Such yearning for a leisurely life is epitomized by Silla Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* where Silla, an immigrant from Barbados, is so intent on "buying house" in New York that she cheats her husband out of his land in the Caribbean in order to pay for the New York house, an endeavor that costs her her marriage and results in the suicide of her estranged husband. Far from being

naive, Silla realizes that "buying house" will necessitate exploitative, soul-damning acts on her part, such as "making the closets-self into rooms" and overcharging tenants; and she boasts, in front of her friends, that "Even if I got to see my soul fall into hell I gon do it…. I gon fix he [her husband] and fix he good. I gon show the world Silla ain nice!" (75). Yet even as Silla finally buys the brownstone, imitating the powerful, declaring "Take this world. It wun always be white. No, mahn. It gon be somebody else turn soon—maybe even people looking near like us" (225), she is reminded that, as speaker of the dominant discourse, she will always be considered a "hacker" making occasional successful incursions, but never fully admitted into the ranks. A white, uniformed policeman who has come to arrest her husband, reminds her, silencing her discursive initiative: "All right, all right, lady. I'm asking the questions, not you" (181).

Brown Girl, Brownstones is Marshall's first novel, and the first in the trilogy concluding with *Praisesong for the Widow.* Already it establishes what has become a central concern in all of Marshall's writing, especially *Praisesong:* the silence I call the price of "upward/upword mobility." No study of silence in Marshall's work would be complete without a discussion of Eugenia DeLamotte's excellent *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom: The Fiction of Paule Marshall,* in which she writes that silence takes on different guises, which include:

> "direct suppressions of voice through physical, economic, social, political, and cultural intimidation and through denial of access" to means of communication;
>
> a "censored mode of hearing," similar to what I have described in the previous chapter as partial or self-inflicted deafness; "ventriloquism," or the duplication, by the oppressed, of the oppressor's discourse;
>
> a self-defeating obsession with the oppressor, which fixates the oppressed "in a helpless orbit" around the hegemonic discourse, and "away from affinities with other members of the dominated group" (2).

While I share DeLamotte's thesis that Marshall explores these and other modes of silencing and reclamation of speech, I differ with her claim that Marshall's novels "trace a heroine's journey from the silence of oppression to the self-possessed voice of liberation" (3). Instead, I would argue that a distinguishing feature of Marshall's writing is that her heroines generally start out as voluble, if fluent in an alternative language, the Africana fusion of body and voice, a spirituality manifested sensually in the appreciation of good food, rich music, joyful sex, and community-based living. As such, women of color differ from white women, in that the oppression of white women has historically translated into silence, while it manifests itself differently for black women. To quote bell hooks

again: "This emphasis on women's silence may be an accurate remembering of what has taken place in the households of women from WASP backgrounds in the United States, but in black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent" (*TB* 6). Similarly, Paula Gunn Allen, Laguna Pueblo on her mother's side, compares images of white and Native American women thus:

> Among Christians, the madonna is the female prototype, and she is portrayed as essentially passive…. I cast about in my mind for negative images of Indian women, and I find none that are directed to Indian women alone…. I remember laughter and good food, especially the sweet bread and the oven bread they gave us…. And I remember the women who drank, who got into fights with other women and with the men, and who often won those battles. (18–19)

Following a number of examples of the "practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence, wit, and competence" of Native American women, Gunn Allen writes that "We were far indeed from 'the weaker sex,' the designation that white aristocratic sisters unhappily earned for all of us" (21).

While some of the male characters in Marshall's works are expert "ventriloquists" (Jerome Johnson in *Praisesong,* Primus Mackenzie and Lowell Carruthers in *Daughters*), Marshall's female characters generally steer away from the gyrocentric attraction of hegemonic discourse, even as they consciously seek to escape their underprivileged circumstances.[2] The one exception discussed above, *Brown Girl, Brownstones'*s Silla, unable to oppose that discourse, is eventually crushed by it. On the other hand, her young daughter Selina, while occasionally rendered speechless by the dominant discourse and her own mother's attempt to duplicate it, nevertheless struggles to oppose it, and is portrayed optimistically at the end of the novel as a capable young woman.

The distinction I make between "the silence of oppression" and "alternative speech" would only be moot if one failed to see any power and/or agency in alternative speech. But I differ from that perception in my argument, here and elsewhere, that even among the subordinate, there is power. As bell hooks explains in another essay, "Refusing to Be a Victim," even under "the cruel injustice of racial apartheid" in the pre-Civil Rights U.S. South, "I lived in a world where women gained strength by sharing knowledge and resources, not by bonding on the basis of being victims…. We identified more by the experience of resistance and triumph than by the nature of our victimization" (*KR* 52). Special attention must be paid to the ambivalence of this power-despite-oppression, for only then can we understand why the dominant discourse seeks to silence it. Simply put, in the very desire to silence that resistance is the recognition of its power: herein lies a tool that is not the master's, the only tool with the power to dismantle the master's house.

However, speakers of alternative discourses frequently are oblivious to the potency of their tool, and in their attempt to move up, dismiss it as a hindrance. On the other hand, Marshall's examples demonstrate that women of color, and postcolonial people generally, can only be powerful when they are alternative and truly independent. On another level, if we agree to the conflation of the silence of oppression with the silence of colonization and claim that the heroic journey is one from silence into speech, we would be implying that the colonized also move from silence into speech, that they had no speech or history prior to colonization. Yet surely we know otherwise, or should we continue to say Africa had no history, no culture, or no philosophy before literacy? Nevertheless, for that philosophy to be recognized in today's postcolonial world, it must be written—made visible to the dominant discourse. The contents may not change; the form has to. Similarly, postcolonial thinkers can use Europhone languages and genres, and certainly a written medium, to articulate their opposition to Europe and the West.

The "heroic journey" of Marshall's women characters is from alternative speech into silence, then into alternative speech again with a newly-acquired awareness that one's power derives from that matrix of alterity. Marshall's women are only silent as they engage in self-censorship in order to enter the dominant discourse that always-already negates their existence and its truthful articulation. Women of color are always objects in the dominant discourse and, as bell hooks remarks, "Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (*TB* 12). Clearly Marshall's objective in her later novels, particularly *Praisesong* and *Daughters,* is the validation of alternative discourse rather than the search for access into the hegemonic discourse, which she has shown, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* to be harmful to people of color from the very start. In the continuum from people of color to postcolonials, the desire to be like the powerful is equivalent to the colonized countries' desire to become like the colonizer, the neocolonial phenomenon unfortunately common in all corners of the world today that Marshall denounces quite successfully in *Daughters.*

Marshall's protagonists become accomplices in their own silencing as they attempt to access the dominant discourse and return to their initial alternative discourse upon realizing the cost of upward/upword mobility. Because of the advantage they already had as members of an extended support network, the recovery of their voices not only allows these women to regain their own self-esteem and remedy their temporary alienation, it also enables them to facilitate community and cultural independence. Moreover, since their initial volubility is an Africana characteristic, the recovery of speech is accompanied by a greater appreciation of Africana culture.

Marshall has repeatedly claimed that her writing prompts and constitutes a "reverse Middle Passage." But the completion of this voyage does not merely bring the traveler back to the beginning. Instead, it is a leap into community,

culture, home, a nurturing matrix. At the end of *Praisesong,* a "connected" Avatara is reaching out to the estranged members of her community, the "fiercely articulate token few" (*PW* 255) in the New York rat race, while *Daughters* ends with Ursa and Estelle selflessly denouncing the corruption of their father and husband, seeking little personal gain from that action, but benefitting the Majority World colonized people with whom they identify.

"THE MOST VALUABLE PART OF THEMSELVES"

Praisesong for the Widow is the last in Marshall's trilogy that also includes her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People,* written after a hiatus during which she published numerous short stories and a collection of novellas. The three novels feature women vacillating between the ebullience of their home speech and the stifling constraints involved in their incursions into the dominant discourse. *Praisesong* is also Marshall's first novel that deals with an African American (rather than Caribbean) protagonist, Avatara (Avey) Williams Johnson, reflecting the author's growing comfort and familiarity with North American culture, the culture she herself was born into, to immigrant parents. Nevertheless the novel foregrounds the continuity of Afrodiasporan culture when Avey takes a cruise to the Caribbean where she is awakened to the similarities between the two cultures. Through that connection, the culturally-estranged Avey can then relate to the African heritage celebrated in the Caribbean throughout the year, especially during the ceremonial pilgrimage she participates in. That Africana continuum is expressed in the title of the novel: a praisesong is at once an African traditional heroic poem and a religious tradition in the African American church; "widow" is a relational term defined by family loss, a primal breach acutely felt by all Afrodiasporans.

Dreams of relatives long dead, memories of early childhood spent in an extended family network, stream-of-consciousness, and feverish delirium induced by sea-sickness combine to make of *Praisesong* a multilayered novel. It presents us with the story of Avatara Williams Johnson, her late husband Jay/Jerome, and her great-aunt Cuney, a repository of African American beliefs, and the collective memory of Afrodiasporans brought over on slave ships to various parts of the Caribbean and North America. In four days—the actual time span of the story—Avey evolves from being a wealthy suburban widow who had put her less-than-fortunate past behind her into a reawakened, sensual woman who commits to a life of community activism. Her journey, from widow, a lacking woman, to heroine, as suggested by the title of the novel (praisesongs celebrate heroic achievements, not everyday happenings), is not the result of psychotherapy, the Eurocentric attempt, through guided monologue, to recover the past only to put it where it can no longer interfere with our daily lives. Instead, Avey's experience is one of visceral, guttural,

sensual, hands-on empathy. Avey, at first lost on a foreign island (as her enslaved African ancestors were), throws up, sweats, her body is bathed, kneaded, rubbed by well-wishing healing hands, and she senses the connection with the Africans shackled in slaveships centuries ago. But her ultimate victory, which earns her the titular praisesong, only occurs when, of her own volition, she steps into an ancestral dance, exercising her agency to claim a place among those remembering their African heritage. And she realizes that her loss did not occur at the point of her husband Jerome Johnson's death, but many years earlier, when she and Jay (as he was then known) silenced their cherished nurturing culture in order to rise above the squalor of Halsey Street, where they had lived for years as a poor but happy couple. That realization prompts her to embrace that past again, and to make sure others, alienated as she had become upon rejecting it, are also cognizant of its riches.

The silencing in *Praisesong* takes two forms, with Jerome becoming a "ventriloquist" and Avey engaging in self-censorship, but the end result is the same—the loss of sustaining culture which escorts Jerome to his death, and which Avey finally recovers from, in symbolic rebirth, through her joining a ceremonial dance. The initial motivation for silencing that culture, however, is the same for both Avey and Jerome: a desire to overcome economic hardship, and a misguided perception that their poverty is the result not of racism, but of African Americans preferring sensual pleasures to hard work.

A poor couple with two young children living in a cramped apartment in a run-down building, Avey and Jay nevertheless were sustained through their love for each other, buoyed by evenings of poetry and music. During many long years of exuberant married life, they cherished their black culture. The year they were married, Avey had taken Jay to the Landing, and told him the story of the Ibos walking on water all the way back home, to Africa. It was a story she had heard repeatedly from her great-aunt Cuney, who herself knew it from her grandmother Avatara. Cuney had entrusted that story, and the mission to pass it on, to the young child, reminding her that her name, Avey, was short for Avatara (ancestor), the name of the woman who had herself witnessed the miracle.

> Nobody remembers how many of 'em it was, but they was a good few 'cording to my gran' who was a little girl no bigger than you when it happened. The small boats was drawed up here and the ship they had just come from was out in the deep water…. And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good long look….
>
> They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em…and they didn't bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here—boats take too much time. They just kept walking right on out over the river.

> …Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here! (*PW* 37–39)

Avey had initially assumed her communal responsibility when she took Jay to Ibo Landing. She expected him to dismiss the story, but instead he quietly asserted: "I'm with your aunt Cuney and the old woman you were named for. I believe it, Avey. Every word" (115).

A pilgrimage South to the old house Avey's great-aunt Cuney had left her became their annual summer vacation, keeping alive the memory of Avey's miraculous ancestry. The rest of the year, blues, gospel, and poetry helped them recuperate from the hardship of their workday, Avey in an insufficiently heated rooftop apartment caring for two children, and Jay in a store working overtime to support his family.

Marshall's writing is exceptional in its portrayal of the beauty of poor, urban, black life, constituting a genuine celebration of what Amiri Baraka has called "the strong nigger feeling," a quote she uses in the epigraph to the novel (*PW* 8), and deserves to be recognized as such. Thus Jay, a serious, dependable, hard-working, exploited employee in the daytime, would let music soothe him in the evening, allowing for quality time with his family.

> [H]e would lower his tall frame into the armchair, lean his head back, close his eyes, and let Coleman Hawkins, The Count, Lester Young (old Prez himself), the Duke—along with the singers he loved: Mr. B., Lady Day, Lil Green, Ella—work their magic, their special mojo on him….
>
> As the voices rose one after the other out of the primitive recordings to fill the apartment, he would remain standing, head bowed, in front of the phonograph.
>
> "You can't keep a good man down," Mamie Smith sang on the oldest and most priceless of the 78s. He always saved this one for the last. (94–95)

Emerging rejuvenated from this therapy, Jay would read aloud the poetry of black writers he had studied in his segregated school in the South, and of which Avey, growing up in the North, was ignorant. This was followed by passionate love-making when the children went to bed, to which Avey responded in a manner that would shame a "proper" white woman.

> One morning she awoke to find Jay—propped on his elbow on the pillow next to hers—gazing down at her with a smile that was both playful and amazed.
>
> "I hope you know how you carried on somethin' disgraceful last night, Miz Johnson, ma'am. *Almost had to turn on the lights and call the Law?* He was misquoting a line from a Billy Daniels record. She pushed him away in mock indignation, even as she fought back her laughter. "There you go getting your women mixed up again, Jay Johnson. I don't know a thing about that hussy you had in here with you last night." (128–129)

The crisis that forever ends these wonderful evenings occurs when Avey, eight months pregnant with a third child she had unsuccessfully tried to abort, depressed, distressed over her looks, and wrongly suspicious of Jay's late nights at work, threatens to leave, screaming at him as he returns home: *"Goddam you nigger, I'll take my babies and go!"* (*PW* 106).

With that sentence, Avey slipped into the speech of members of the African American community who see only the negative and not the sustaining aspects of their culture. Avey's outcry comes to symbolize to Jay and Avey the ever-menacing possibility of becoming like the couple from five stories below, where a woman "sent her grievances echoing up and down the deserted street…[and] acquainted the sleeping houses with her sorrow," her voice "loud, aggrieved, unsparing" (107). Avey's slippage acts out the hegemonic portrayal of Blacks as both unworthy and incapable of commitment, and moves away from the alternative/counter-hegemonic, positive view of African American culture. Such internalization of the hegemonic portrayal of African American culture is not restricted to any social class: Thomasina Moore, Avey's middle-class friend, expresses an attitude identical to that of the poor woman on Halsey Street when, angered at Avey's decision to leave the cruise, she cries out: "That's why if I've said it once I've said it a thousand times: it…don't…pay…to…go…no…place…with…niggers! They'll mess up ever' time!" (*PW* 27).

There is no ideal, flawless culture or community, and African American communities are riddled with their own problems, some brought about by the trauma of slavery, others shared with members of other social groups in similar socioeconomic circumstances. Self-perception, whether one views oneself as a member of a proud culture or a victim, is a determining factor in celebrating or despising oneself. Until that night, Jay and Avey had thought very positively of themselves as black people, despite their poverty, their struggle against the racism they were aware of, and their knowledge that Jay was being exploited at work, doing his white boss's work without getting credit for it. They knew their own worth, a worth that nevertheless remained on the margins of "success" as defined by the dominant discourse. They were very much like the community bell hooks grew up in, who identified not as victims, but in terms of their triumphs over hardship. They believed in the uncanonized miracle of the Ibos, that they were the descendants of great people, people with superhuman powers. When Jay made love to Avey, it was with awe as much as pleasure:

> He would lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple of some kind, and hangs back, overcome by the magnificence of the place, and sensing around him the invisible forms of the deities who reside there: Erzulie with her jewels and gossamer veils, Yemoja to whom the rivers and seas are sacred; Oya, first wife of the thunder god and herself in charge of winds and rains. (127)

The deities Jay thinks of are all African, showing at once his rich knowledge of that culture and his celebration of it. But that wonderful pride came to an end when Avey threatened Jay, sounding like the angry woman from five floors below who had to retrieve her alcoholic husband before all the money from his pay envelope was spent. That woman was not alone in her misery; she is representative of numerous women who see their lives defeated by the impact of poverty, discrimination, hardship—all factors that Avey faced.

> Her rage those dark mornings spoke not only for herself but for the thousands like her for blocks around, lying sleepless in the cold-water flats and one-room kitchenettes,…waiting, all of them, for some fool to come home with his sodden breath and half his pay envelope gone. (108)

Few people are immune to the dominant discourse, a system of empowerment for its speakers, oppression for the "spoken-for." We know that Jay was aware that discrimination, not "laziness" on his part, was the reason he could only get exploitative, menial jobs. Music and poetry did not distract him from hard work; they revitalized him, enabling him to better face the next day. But racism, poverty, lack of opportunity, and extreme overwork took their toll on him, reshaping his perception of his worth, making him abandon the most meaningful aspects of his life. These are all facets of the oppressive mechanisms bell hooks warns about when she writes: "There would be no need to even speak of the oppressed and exploited coming to voice, articulating and redefining reality, if there were no oppressive mechanisms of silencing, suppressing, and censoring" (*TB* 16).

Anxious never to let Avey sound like their harried, neglected neighbor again, Jay turned into Jerome, a man determined to leave Halsey Street and move to the suburbs. In his eagerness to forget that night when Avey threatened to leave him and he considered leaving her and their children, he gave up all of his life on Halsey Street: "Like someone unable to recover from childhood trauma—hunger, injury, abuse, a parent suddenly and inexplicably gone—Jerome Johnson never got over Halsey Street" (88). With the poetry and music gone and silence descended upon Jay and Avey, upward/upword mobility became possible, through Jay's ventriloquism, and Avey's self-censorship. An irate man working two, sometimes three jobs at a time, Jerome distanced himself from the people whose culture he had once cherished and started to sound like a white man.

> On occasion, glancing at him, she would surprise what almost looked like the vague, pale outline of another face superimposed on his…[T]here it was every so often, this strange pallid face…
>
> Worse, during the same period, he began speaking in a way at times she found hard to recognize. The voice was clearly his, but the tone, and more important, the things he said were so unlike him they might have

> come from someone…who had slipped in when he wasn't looking and taken up residency behind his dark skin…
>
> "If it was left to me I'd close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That's the only way these Negroes out here'll begin making any progress!"
>
> Jay took to saying things like that. Or rather, it was Jerome Johnson who spoke. (131–132)

We notice that the well-meaning, if condescending Jerome uses the respectful word "Negroes," not "nigger," as Avey had called him that fateful night, and as Thomasina had called her as she decided to leave the cruise. Avey and Thomasina's use of the value-laden word is not, however, subversive reclamation of a term that strips it of its negative connotations: both Avey and Thomasina mean the word "nigger" to be derogatory.

Additionally, while Avey does not make statements such as Jerome's, suggesting what Blacks should and should not do, she nevertheless shuts off her culture. Practicing self-censorship without direct prompting from anyone, but out of allegiance to her husband, she too stops playing the music she loved as much as Jay did: in their happier days, Jay frequently came home to find Avey already playing his favorite music, but this welcome had now stopped. The lovemaking that generally followed, with its flirtatious talk, ceased; Avey and Jerome abandoned their annual trip to South Carolina, going instead on company outings during which Jerome could network with white colleagues; and Avey no longer told the story of the Ibos, even growing resentful that her great-aunt taught her the story of the Ibos in the first place, along with the duty to transmit it:

> And there year after year [Cuney] had filled her head with some far-fetched story of people walking on water which she in her childish faith had believed till the age of ten.
>
> Moreover, in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. It had taken her years to rid herself of the notion. (*PW* 42)

Instead, Avey developed what she described as her "special silence" (*PW* 14), but which her daughter Marion called "that infuriating silence of yours" (14), while her close friend, colleague, and fellow cruise-taker Clarice thought of as "that special intimidating silence of hers" (21).

It was a silence which, while it allowed Avey and Jerome to move to North White Plains, also signalled their cultural estrangement and consequent spiritual death.[3] Yet it is important to point out that Marshall in no way suggests that all African Americans are alienated: Avey's great-aunt Cuney, an "Ibo American," is a prime example of cultural consciousness and pride. But Cuney, a matrix of Africana culture, remains ever outside the U.S.

dominant discourse. In fact, the discourse she questions is the dominant, never hers. Once, when she was ten, Avey had asked her, upon hearing the story of the Ibos, how they could not have drowned.

> [H]er great-aunt had turned and regarded her in silence for the longest time. It was to take Avey years to forget the look on the face under the field hat, the disappointment and sadness there…. And long after she had stopped going to Tatem and the old woman was dead, she was to catch herself flinching whenever she remembered the voice with the quietly dangerous note that had issued finally from under the wide hat brim.
>
> "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday school book your momma always sends with you?"
>
> "No, ma'am."
>
> "I din' think so. You got any more questions?" (39–40)

By staying fully in the margins of mainstream culture, Cuney cannot be an effective counter-hegemonic force, and her beliefs cannot impact the dominant discourse. For her, a poor, black, rural, southern woman, the preservation of alternative culture is inevitable yet lacking in transformative power. That potential power can only be achieved by proxy through Avatara, whose liminal position as middle-class Black allows her to mediate between alternative and altered speeches, where "altered" means alternative with an awareness of the intrinsic value of that alterity. Yet the preservation of alternative culture is a greater challenge when one is successful and in contact with the dominant discourse, as was the case of Avey and Jerome when they finally "made it." We recall, for example, that Jay, who went to school in the segregated South, knew the poetry of Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and others, and introduced them to Avey, a northerner. That exchange stopped, however, when Jay turned into Jerome Johnson. Similarly, Avey introduced Jay to the story of the Ibos, but stopped telling it as the Johnsons moved to North White Plains.

Yet Marshall does not suggest that all successful, middle-class African Americans must necessarily abandon their heritage. Instead, she tackles the question raised by many African Americans when the Civil Rights era finally opened up the field for possible social advancement for Blacks, namely:

> Would it have been possible to have done both? That is, to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves! (139)

In other words, can one access the dominant discourse and still retain one's individuality, one's alterity, and one's link with one's cultural history? Jerome

Johnson worked himself to death, a shadow of a white man, a marionette with no life of its own. Avey was more fortunate: she had the opportunity to reconnect with her community, and the novel ends with her determined to live up to her ancestral name and mission. The preservation, safeguarding, and treasuring of "the most valuable part of themselves" only became possible, however, once Avey fully realized the price of upward/ up word mobility:

> What would it have taken? What would it have called for? The answers were as formless as the questions inundating her mind…. Awareness. It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard it. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would either destroy it or claim it as their own. (139)

That awareness came to Avey as a sixty-four year old widow when, on a Caribbean cruise aboard the *Bianca Pride* with two other equally wealthy African American women friends, she woke up one morning after a restless night during which one particular dream distressed her greatly. She was fighting with her great-aunt who insisted on taking her once again to Ibo Landing, pulling on her arm, silently beckoning *"Come, won't you come?"* (44). Avey comments repeatedly on the fact that Cuney's plea is silent. The older woman gestures, waves, tugs at Avey's arm, grabs her wrist, drags her, and finally rains blows on her, but never utters a word: "[h]er voice, unlike her body, had apparently not been able to out-fox the grave" (41). This eerie silence must be interpreted in two ways: On a personal level, Avey, as she revives her greataunt in a dream and fights with her as she never had done in real life, still silences the voice that would undoubtedly have recounted, one more time, the story Avey had stopped believing in and no longer wanted to transmit. On a cultural level, we become aware that death puts an end to individual voices, hence it is of utmost importance for community members to assume the role of griots, if unwritten, oral, counter-historical narratives are to be preserved. The reader is reminded of Miss Carey's admonition at the end of *Free Enterprise,* to "talk it on, like the Africans" (211).

Avey's self-censorship is evident again in her recollection of that fight, where she is reproachful of her voice that shattered the quiet of North White Plains:

> Brawling like fishwives! Like proverbial niggers on a Saturday night! With the fur-stole like her hard-won life of the past thirty years being trampled into the dirt underfoot. And the clothes being torn from her body. The wood of cedar and oak rang with her inflamed cry. And the sound went on endlessly, ranging over Tatem and up and down her quiet streets at home. (*PW* 45)

Yet that dream already presages the victory of the past, as Avey is stripped of her fashionable outfit and her cry disturbs the quiet of her suburbs.

Growing gradually more uncomfortable, Avey impulsively decides to leave the cruise and fly to New York the next morning. But circumstances would have it otherwise. Her planned departure coincides with the annual excursion of the out-islanders to Carriacou, where they will celebrate their origins and ancestry. Still acting uncharacteristically on impulse, Avey joins them.

Avey's decision to participate in the excursion precipitates a series of events that lead to her recovery of her pre-North White Plains self, the self that invited and responded to blues, poetry, and the story of the miracle of the Ibos. That transformation is actually a regression to her previous life. In the Afrocentric worldview, such a regression is positive, signifying renewal, restoration, recovery, remembering and re-membering an otherwise disrupted, disjointed existence.

Avey had started out on that cruise feeling completely isolated, incapable of communicating with her daughter, Marion, who did not approve of her vacation plans. Marion, who had visited Africa, is loud, vocally expressing her anger:

> And the noisy necklace of cowrie shells and amber she had brought back from Togo her last visit had sounded her angry despair with its rattle each time she breathed.
>
> "Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks anyway?" (13)

It is a question to which Avey responds with her "infuriating silence."

As she decides to leave the two-week cruise after only three days, she realizes she cannot even explain her reasons to her friend:

> She had it in mind to say something of this order crossing the room, to assure Clarice that she was in no way to blame. But the moment she drew up in front of her friend…her tongue balked. (29)

As Avey leaves the cruise, ridding herself of some of the masking layers of middle-class life, she is able to connect with the Caribbean people and to see the similarities between their culture and hers, as a manifestation of a much larger culture, not some idiosyncratic behavior of an eccentric aunt. In fact, her own gradual awareness that she belongs among those people is simply knowledge that they have had all along, that middle-class accoutrement does not necessarily transform the person donning it.

> What was the matter with these people? It was as if the moment they caught sight of her standing there, their eyes immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of the homemade cotton

> prints the women were wearing…. Their eyes also banished the six suitcases at her side, and placing a small overnight bag like the one they were carrying in her hand, they were all set to take her along wherever it was they were going. (72)

To the out-islanders setting out on the excursion, financial success and an embrace of their cultural heritage and roots are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they smoothly negotiate the multiplicity that comes from being Afrodiasporan, at ease in mainstream culture during the year, and intent on honoring their ancestors during the excursion. Still trying to find a taxi that would take her to a hotel where she is to make plane reservations for her abrupt return to New York, Avey is approached by many out-islanders, all friendly, all seeking to include her in the trip.

Looking around, Avey notices many similarities between the out-islanders and her own people in Tatem, South Carolina, all indications that she, too, can achieve their wholeness. Her first recognition is of the patois they speak, which reminds her of her great-aunt:

> But reaching her clearly now was the flood of unintelligible words and the peculiar cadence and lilt of the Patois she had heard for the first time in Martinique three days ago…it had called to mind the way people spoke in Tatem long ago. There had been the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words. She had heard it and that night, out of nowhere her greataunt had stood waiting in her sleep. (67)

However, her cultural estrangement is such that she cannot relate to them yet, for she views herself as a New Yorker, not an Afrodiasporan. When her guide, Lebert Joseph, asks her about her nation, she cannot even comprehend the question, even as she is disturbed by its sounds:

> "What's your nation?" he asked her, his manner curious, interested, even friendly all of a sudden. "Arada…? Is you an Arada?…Cromanti maybe…?
> …Yarraba then…? Moko…?"
> …
>
> What was the man going on about? What were those names? Each one made her head ache all the more. *She thought she heard in them the faint rattle of the necklace of cowrie shells Marion always wore.* Africa? Did they have something to do with Africa?…
>
> Avey Johnson was shaking her head back and forth *as if trying to clear it of the sound of his voice*…
>
> "I'm a visitor, a tourist, just someone here for the day," she said lamely…. I'm afraid you've mistaken me for someone around here…I'm from the States. New York…" and she repeated it, "New York." (167–168, emphasis added)

Joseph's visible disappointment and sincere pain at her answer prompt her to explain. Much to her surprise, she talks freely, in a "searching" voice. "Caught up in the sudden need to talk" (171), she tells Joseph about all the incidents that had happened to her on the cruise, recounting her dream, her discomfort, until "her voice faltered" as she tried but could not bring herself to speak of "Jerome Johnson's disapproving figure," and "the yawning hole down which her life of the past thirty years had vanished" (172). Joseph is persistent, reluctant to believe Avey could have forgotten everything about her origins, and finally convinces her to join the excursion, to witness, experience, and take part in a celebration of her heritage.

Another shock of recognition occurs as Avey boards the *Emmanuel* C, the schooner taking her to Carriacou, for the women already sitting there were "the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist (her own mother's church long ago)" (194), speaking to her in patois, "soothing, lilting words full of maternal solicitude (197)." Avey soon becomes violently seasick and is led by two women to the deckhouse where, delirious, she undergoes her own experience of the Middle Passage:

> She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence. (209)

More dead than alive, Avey finally arrives in Carriacou and, as she watches the dancers, hears Jerome's voice repeating his disapproval: "If it was up to me I'd close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum" (247), only this time, rather than heed it, she walks closer to the musicians, "away from the voice in her ear" (247). And the music works its magic on her until finally, when all the nation dances are done, and the Creole dances start, which everyone can join, Avey gets up, enters the circle of dancers, and "[h]er feet of their own accord began to glide forward, but in such a way they scarcely left the ground" (248). She is transported back many decades, to when she was a child standing by her great-aunt, "performing the dance that wasn't supposed to be dancing…The Ring Shout" (248).

The ring shout, a semi-religious rite preserving West African dance disguised as a form of religious expression, prohibits any movement resembling overt dancing, which is considered irreverent or profane in the Christian church. A perfect illustration of the fusion of the African and Euro-Christian traditions, the ring shout prohibits free foot movement and allows little versatility in the steps, reflecting the Christian emphasis on sobriety and

restraint. The participants shuffle in single file around a central point, singing, stamping, and clicking their heels, even, in some cases, tapping the floor rhythmically with sticks, reproducing the percussion of African drums. The ring shout is punctuated by acceptable exclamations such as "Yes, Lord," but if participants get carried away and engage in ecstatic seizures or possessions—in trances, vociferations, and most seriously, dances—they are evicted from the service.[4]

As a young child, Cuney had been caught crossing her feet during a ring shout and was ordered out of the circle. Outraged, insisting on her innocence, Cuney had stopped attending regular service, and "[p]eople in Tatem said she had made the Landing her religion after that" (*PW* 34). Later, the young Avatara and her great-aunt would watch the ring shout from a distance, with Avatara shuffling her own feet, longing to join in, but too intimidated by her great-aunt. Avey's regression continues until she experiences the pre-birth connection, the unsevered umbilical cord that unites her with those celebrating their various African nations.

> Now, suddenly, as if she were that girl again, with her entire life yet to live, she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her in Lebert Joseph's yard. From their seared eyes. From their navels and their cast-iron hearts. And their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming even in the face of the bare bones and the burnt-out ends. She began to dance then. (249)

And when she joins in, she is one of them, symbolically connected to each and everyone through a shining umbilical cord, representative of semiotic life, the most intimate, life-sustaining connection with the mother, the link that must be severed as we are hurled, screaming, into the world of alienation, of patriarchal discourse.

As she prepares to leave Carriacou at the end of the excursion to reenter the world of mainstream culture, Avatara resolves never to be silent again about the miracle of the Ibos and her own living room floor in Halsey Street, where she had felt "centered and sustained" (254). She would begin with the taxi-driver, but would also tell her fellow African Americans,

> on the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train station. As well the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers. And whenever she spotted one of them amid the crowd, those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom her generation had worked the two or three jobs, she would stop them. (255)

To those "fiercely articulate token few," she will spread the word about middle-class alienation, and the necessity to preserve an alternative lifestyle, lest they, too, silence their ancestors, turning into vacuous echoes of a discourse that rejects them. Free from the stifling self-hatred inculcated by the dominant discourse that had infiltrated the very intimacy of their household as Jay gave in to the pressures of poverty and overwork, Avatara finally lifts her self-censorship and lives up to her name and her ancestor-ordained mission.

BEYOND THE BLACK MEN'S WHITE SPEECH

Up until *Praisesong for the Widow,* Marshall was exploring the impact of upward social mobility on Afrodiasporans. That impact was seen primarily in terms of alienation, a spiritual impoverishment that goes hand in hand with acceptability in the dominant white culture. While the desire for upward mobility seems to be shared by men and women equally at first, Marshall shows women to be somewhat more capable of resisting or overcoming its silencing impact, no doubt because of the additional buffer provided by their gender that distances them further from the dominant discourse. *Daughters* presents a new development in Marshall's exploration of silence and restoration of speech. Here we have women already comfortable with their middle-class status, not culturally alienated, and trying to break free from the silencing effect of the men they love, black men whose ventriloquism introduces white discourse as a wedge between them.

Daughters is a complex novel, made up of four books, with chapters featuring the voices of different female characters presenting urban, North American, Caribbean, middle- and lower-class views, giving the work "a sense of the power these [black] women achieve through language" (Washington 48). Nevertheless, I will attempt to summarize the novel very briefly: Ursa, 34, returns to the island of Triunion after a four-year hiatus, on the eve of elections in which her father, Primus Mackenzie, nicknamed "the Prime Minister," or "PM," is running again. Over the years, the PM had grown corrupt, caving in to North American neoimperialism, betraying the workingclass people who had long supported him and from whom he hails. His gradual corruption alienates his wife, North American-born Estelle Harrison Mackenzie who, on the night before the elections, "breaks her vow of silence" and shows Ursa the blueprint of a resort scheme. The blueprint shows two swimming pools, a golf course, a casino, a health spa, and a private airport, which the PM plans to develop upon his re-election, to cater to rich tourists. The plan would deprive the people of their best stretch of beach as well as any eventual revenues, since their poverty prevents them from initial investment in the resort scheme. Enraged, Ursa smuggles the copy to her father's opponent, an independent candidate, who immediately publicizes it

by printing flyers and distributing them among the electorate. The novel ends with the news that Primus Mackenzie has lost his seat. Fleshing out this central narrative, we also learn of:

- Estelle and the PM's gradual estrangement as the PM's personal and political allegiances shift;
- The deterioration of the relationship between Ursa and her lover, Lowell Carruthers, following a pattern parallel to that of Ursa's parents, as Ursa quits her secure position to work freelance, while Lowell grows daily more obsessed with his corporate job. The novel opens with Ursa aborting Lowell's fetus, and ends with her feeling the final twinges of abortion pain as she lies in bed in Triunion the morning of her father's defeat. It is a symbolic depiction of her cleansing herself of the effects of both of these assimilationist, materialist men;
- The friendship between Ursa and Vincereta (Viney) Daniels, a fiercely independent, successful black professional, who nevertheless maintains her ties with working-class Blacks as well as her culture's heritage of slavery and resistance. Viney is a model of a successful black person who can move up, but not away, providing Ursa with the home, family, and culture that sustain her.

There are other, equally important aspects of the novel that I will not touch upon here, since they fall outside of my present focus on selfcensorship, and have been discussed in other studies of Marshall's work.[5] Marshall departs from her depiction of temporary alienation in *Daughters,* where black women are fully grounded in their cultural heritage, never losing their commitment to their communities. Instead, their sense of connectedness grows stronger as they move away from it, as if to compensate for the geographical distance. Connecticut-born Estelle, pregnant in the Caribbean, wonders if she wants to "bring a black child into this world" when she reads about a lynching in the United States (171). Although Estelle is not Caribbean, she is the person who introduced Ursa-Bea to the island's heroic slave rebels, Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, after having educated herself about them. (Ursa-Bea was named after her Caribbean and North American grandmothers, but Estelle is the only one to call her by both names, thus foregrounding both of her identities). A member of the Hospitality Committee hosting a group of young Caribbean lawyers visiting her city of Hartford, Connecticut, Estelle had read about the islands, and was enchanted by "all the slave revolts," and "the woman who was one of the leaders" (*D* 29). Estelle and Primus Mackenzie met at the hospitality reception and subsequently got married and moved to Triunion shortly before the island's independence. Estelle is disturbed to see the island catering primarily to tourists: Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe are national heroes

in Triunion, and a monument is erected to them upon independence—but it is strategically located in the remote hilly

country, not in town, so as not to offend the white people. Another indicator of the island's cultural dependence is the fact that the Triunion Arts Council, which is supposed to promote local arts and artists, puts on play after play by Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, but rejects Estelle's suggestion that someone write a play about Congo Jane.

Ursa, sent to school in the United States, wants to write her senior thesis on the nature of relationships among enslaved couples in the Caribbean and the United States, to express her interest in, and appreciation of, both cultures. As an adult, she consistently chooses jobs that deal with minorities, quitting the one she thought would hurt Blacks, to get involved in "putting some money where our mouth is" (48). Viney, Ursa's best friend since their college days, is a successful professional, yet she sells her fancy apartment in New York's Upper West Side for a run-down house in Brooklyn so that her son, Robeson, will not be the only dark child on the block. The home she creates there becomes an oasis for Robeson, his friend/substitute-sister Dee Dee and Ursa herself who, every time she steps into its entryway, "feels as if the small rowboat that she imagines her life to be…has finally made it to port" (82). When these women are silenced, it is because of their attachment to a man from their community, who works as mediator for the dominant discourse. Jerome Johnson, in *Praisesong,* was the direct catalyst for Avey's loss of identity; in *Daughters,* Lowell Carruthers's dissatisfaction with his job leads him to engage in lengthy diatribes when he is with Ursa, who stops talking in order to provide the listening ear he so desperately needs. Ursa is also stymied by her infatuation with her father, an extremely charismatic man whose expectations of her have governed her life since early childhood. She acknowledges her self-censorship as she talks to Viney before travelling to the island for the elections:

> That won't help. Not anymore. I can't hide from it anymore, even if I don't go near that town….
>
> And the PM's party can't do a damn thing about it. Some people here say they're even part of the problem. *For years I've refused to let myself think that could be true,* but I can't hide from it anymore either. (*D* 107, emphasis added)

We have another instance of Ursa's self-censorship, when she redirects her apprehension of what her mother and Celestine (who helped bring her up) would say about her having an abortion, by keeping it secret for a week from Viney, despite their intimacy and solid friendship.

It is certainly noteworthy that Ursa immediately detects white efforts at silencing her, and denounces or rejects them just as fast. As a senior student at "Mt. H," she had proposed to write a thesis on *"the relatively egalitarian,*

mutually supportive relations that existed between the bondsmen and women and their significance for and contribution to the various forms of resistance to enslavement found in the United States and the Caribbean," (11) but her white teacher turned it down, despite the fact that "the man was known to be the most progressive-thinking member of the small history/sociology department, and the friendliest" (12).

Erasure and forced invisibility are among the most effective oppressive mechanisms, rendering the very articulation of a problem impossible. In an essay analyzing the obstacles black women historians and academics confront in their attempt to document their history, Barbara Omolade writes that "a Black woman historian of Black women is not merely a contradiction in terms, but an ontological impossibility, for all Black women within the academy are regarded as nonbeings and therefore without a history outside the white world" ("The Silence and the Song" 286). It is an ontological impossibility that Ursa encounters and rejects, when her topic is turned down. Rather than question the validity of her thesis, her methodology, or her sources, Ursa insists. *"Why!* What was wrong with the [topic] she had? She didn't understand his objections. She didn't buy the reasons he had given" (*D* 12). Ursa's reaction is similar to Cuney's response to the young Avatara's questioning of the Ibos's capacity to walk on water in *Praise song for the Widow,* namely a painful realization that somebody is seeking to discredit her. Just as Cuney could not (yet) affect any significant change around her, despite her personal beliefs, so Ursa, although convinced of the validity of her topic, sources, and methodology, was still incapable of writing the thesis. Unable to change her professor's mind, she must change her own topic or fail to graduate.

Years later, Ursa resigned her executive position at the National Consumer Research Corporation, because she realized the Fortune 500 firm was targeting Blacks and other minorities for its marketing of tobacco and alcohol. A white institution, NCRC had tried to silence Ursa personally: "Afros, dreads, and braids had not been allowed at NCRC", and Ursa had had to straighten her hair in addition to wearing "all those NCRC suits" (*D* 48). More importantly, although the job had allowed her a comfortable lifestyle, she resigned because of how it would impact other Blacks. "I'd *ruther* drink muddy water and sleep in a hollow log than work another day for NCRC," she tells Viney, quoting a Civil Rights era song (*D* 90). However, Ursa's awareness of white discourse oppressing her does not immediately translate into an awareness of disguised white discourse, namely that paraphrased by her father and her lover Lowell Carruthers. Viney points out that discrepancy to her as she wonders aloud why a woman who can resign a well-paying job can not walk out of a stagnant relationship that consists of occasional evenings and nights together, during which Lowell speaks incessantly about his frustration with Davison, his white colleague. Ursa's infatuation with her father, as well as her geographical distance from the island since she was sent

to school in the United States, had momentarily blinded her to the truth about his corruption. Upon realizing it, she engages in a silent protest against her parents: she keeps her letters home to a minimum and does not travel to the island for four years. Estelle, on the other hand, possibly because of her proximity to the problem, had long been aware of it, but exercised self-censorship. In one of her early letters to her "homefolks," years before the PM had joined the ranks of corrupt politicians, she had written about her "adjustment" to Triunion:

> The things I've accepted, gone along with, living here! They sometimes make me feel like a stranger to myself.
>
> Oh, how I wish I was home sometimes!…I need to be marching or sitting-in or demonstrating somewhere. (*D* 223)

Yet as Primus Mackenzie grows gradually more corrupt, Estelle is more circumspect in her frequent letters to her family in Connecticut. She no longer makes reference to political turmoil or to her husband's long-term extramarital affair and her consequent estrangement from him, thus silencing her most intimate feelings and thoughts. At a high psychological and physical cost to her, Estelle takes a vow of silence about her husband's scheming, in order to secure his continued political success. Yet when Estelle breaks that vow of silence, disclosing the PM's corrupt deals to Ursa, she brings about his defeat and the election of a candidate who promises to have more integrity than the PM. Significantly, her act, that of a self-liberated woman, makes Triunion's cultural independence possible.

The usurpation of Ursa and Estelle's speech had been treacherous, coming in the guise of a black man's love, hence their difficulty in overcoming it, despite their awareness of other oppressive mechanisms. In the letter to her "homefolks," which I referred to above, Estelle had indicated her dissatisfaction with Triunion's politicians, with the exception of her husband. After a round of apparently-rigged elections that brought the Democratic National Party to power, she had written: "I needn't tell you that Primus was devastated…. And it's not only because he was robbed of his one real chance to head up the government" (222). What she should have told them, instead, was that for the last five years, Primus had been having an affair with Astral Forde, whom he also hired to manage his hotel, a betrayal that completely devastated Estelle. Estelle had repeatedly confronted Primus about his affair, and he just as insistently refused to answer. His silence had paralyzed her, preventing her from taking definitive action. "He won't say yes or no! Why won't he say yes or no?" (202). Their growing personal distance is matched by their now significant political differences, as the PM decides his best chance to improve the lot of his constituents—the poor people in Morlands who had voted him in—is to talk not to them, but to investors. "I wonder,

Estelle, if you've ever thought about how someone like myself—a so-called representative of the people—feels having to go up to a place like Morlands all the time with my two arms long down and my hands empty?" (232), he asks her one evening, as he chooses not to celebrate "cropover" with the farmers, but to meet instead with American businessmen. Against her better judgment, Estelle joins him. As his wining and dining with wealthy white Americans becomes more frequent, Primus delegates Estelle to meet with the people instead of him, but does not make time to hear what she has to report, thereby silencing her individual and community voices.

Estelle and the PM's flawed relationship is mirrored in that of Ursa and Lowell, not because Lowell has a mistress, but because the younger couple has agreed not to talk. That decision came one evening as Lowell "had been going on again about her leaving NCRC when she finally blew up and told him she didn't want to hear it anymore. He was to keep his criticism to himself and to stay out of her business. Seizing on this, he in turn forbade her to tell him what he should and shouldn't do concerning the job" (263). Their agreement lasted three years, but it did not stop Lowell from engaging in his "usual nonstop railing" (262), complaining at length every time they got together about his circumstances at work. Lowell's endless complaining, more than their agreement not to give each other advice about their jobs, prevented communication. Ursa felt obliged to listen, but could not speak herself. One evening, after she had been free-lancing for a while, securing odd jobs here and there, Ursa met Lowell for dinner shortly after signing a contract for a long-term project she was extremely excited about. She arrived radiant, a briefcase in hand, wearing one of her better suits. Lowell, however, had no eyes or ears for her, and engaged in another of his lengthy diatribes about work. Ursa explodes:

> "Why don't you quit that job, Lowell? Just tell that man and Halcon Electronics Inc. to take their little kiss-muh-ass job and do what they know with it."
>
> She's surprised at how easy it is to say this out loud again. She repeats it to herself nearly every time she sees him, but it's been three years since she's actually said the words aloud….
>
> She suddenly breaks [the agreement] now and surprises herself at how easy it is to do. "Just quit, Lowell. Enough is enough"…
>
> Stop, she tells herself, you've said enough, but she can't stop, it's been held in too long. (262–264)

Clearly, Ursa's silence, as well as her obligation to listen to Lowell, had been extremely hard on her. Her resumption of speech, however, leads to the break-up of the relationship, and Ursa leaves Lowell's apartment, taking her toothbrush and other toiletry, knowing she will never return. So long as she was silent, offering a listening ear but not allowed to respond, Ursa was stifled, stuck in a

losing situation. "The bastard didn't even notice the way she was dressed or the suitcase in her hand" (271), she thinks, and she never got the opportunity to tell him her good news! She recalls Viney's words: "A relationship like a bad case of constipation. Going nowhere. Good riddance" (272).

Ursa's first emancipatory breach of silence, her recovery of her own voice, liberates her as a woman. We recall that her voice had been silenced against her will, when she was a senior student at "Mt. H." With Lowell, Ursa had *agreed* to keep silent about certain matters, thus becoming an accomplice in her own oppression. By engaging only in selective censorship, however, she was better able to contrast the power of speech, which she still exercised elsewhere, with the misery of silence. Ursa's agency in oppression and liberation, in silence and restoration of speech, now paves the way for a more sweeping move, as she is finally capable of realigning her own allegiances, of escaping her father's influence to restore communication, both public and private, personal and political, which had come to a standstill under his aegis. Prior to that, however, Ursa must realize the similarities between the circumstances of African Americans and Caribbeans, between black politicians in the United States and their Caribbean counterparts, and between the usurpation of black women's speech in the United States and the Caribbean. This awareness comes to her as a revelation, similar to Avey's "shock of recognition," as she reports to her boss in Jersey, where she is to conduct her new study.

Ursa had been in Jersey four years earlier, when she started free-lancing, and there had met a young black lawyer, Sandy Lawson, as he was running for the mayoral seat. Like her own father, the lawyer-politician Primus Mackenzie, Lawson was a charismatic man, and Ursa remembers falling for his smile at a campaign strategy meeting. "Too bad," she had thought at the time, "that there was Dorothy Lawson to consider. And Lowell Carruthers" (*D* 280). Lawson had been elected Mayor, thanks in great part to the indefatigable Mae Ryland's efforts. Returning now to Jersey to conduct a study on the city's development under a black mayor, Ursa meets Lawson again, but much has changed over the last few years, and none of it to the better. In fact, her first reunion with Lawson follows a pattern that is now familiar to Ursa and which she knows to be abusive—a charming black man talking, and not giving her a chance to put in a word. His flood of words is interrupted by a phone call from "the folks I'm having lunch with" (283), and he takes leave of her, but not before adding: "We need to have a much longer session so I can really explain my position…. And once that's out of the way I'm taking you to lunch…a lunch just to eat. No heavy talk" (284).

Ursa gets to see Lawson leave, flanked by two white men, "almost shouldering him between them. And both of them talking to him at once. His head is turning from one to the other, back and forth repeatedly like someone at a tennis match. There's his smile. And then all three of them are laughing"

(285). The sight of the smiling, speechless mayor, crowded in between the talking white men, is so disturbing to Ursa that it takes her a while before she can leave the spot herself, and she drives over to Mae Ryland. There, Ursa finds out that what Lawson needed was a much longer session to explain his falling out with Mae over political disagreements, and particularly over Mae's disapproval of his allowing an expressway overpass to be built over the black neighborhood of Midland City, so that "certain folks'll be able to zip in and out of downtown without having to so much as glance at the rest of Midland City" (292). Ursa immediately makes the connection between this project and an earlier one in Triunion:

> Triunion! Triunion all over again! While she was still in high school, the P[lanning] and D[evelopment] Board had completely rebuilt the road between the airport and town, turning it into a highway for the benefit of the tourists and the would-be money people, with a section that bypassed Armory Hill altogether, and that had cost a fortune. Where am I? Which place? What country? (292)

Another detail further illustrates that Lawson's allegiance goes to white politicians, while Mae's are with her own community: Unlike Lawson, who wanted a chance to explain his position at length to Ursa, and only then take her out to lunch where he hoped there would be little talk, Mae delays her own explanation, offering instead: "Before I get started on Sandy Lawson and his road I'm gonna feed us" (293).

Still reeling from what she clearly views as Sandy Lawson's betrayal of his black constituents, the people who voted him in, Ursa returns to New York, where a package awaits her from her mother in Triunion. In it is a copy of the resort scheme the PM has planned for the island, which is to be kept secret until after the impending elections. Ursa reads it at night and, reversing her earlier decision not to fly home for the elections, catches the first plane headed there. As they greet her at the airport, Ursa's parents inform her that they have made a pact between them not to discuss politics with her even though she has come for the elections. Later that same night, however, Estelle taps gently at Ursa's bedroom door, explaining: "I saw light under your door and thought I'd come visit for a while. Your father's fast asleep…. And I'm breaking my vow of silence on certain subjects" (*D* 358).

In the intimacy of a woman's bedroom, away from man's hearing, the mother and daughter engage in a long-overdue conversation about their dissatisfaction with the PM's politics. The resort scheme the PM has planned is to cater to rich Americans, "Daddy Warbucks" as Estelle calls them (358). Although built on Morlands public property, the Morlands people themselves "won't stand a chance at a job cleaning the toilets" because "all the help—maids, waiters, maintenance, security guards, everybody—are to come from the hotel training school in town" (359). In a twist ironically similar to what

Mayor Lawson had agreed to, "the place is to have its own airfield. They're going to fly the moguls straight up from the airport so they won't be subjected to that miserable road we'll be taking tomorrow or to the sight of some little boy missing the seat of his pants" (358).

Only after having vented their political frustrations, and come up with a strategy to defeat the PM's plan, do the women talk about their personal lives, as Ursa offers: "You asked me about my love life in the car this afternoon…" (364).

A few hours later, Ursa drives to the Morlands, to the headquarters of the opposition candidate, Mr. Beaufils, and delivers the incriminating blueprint of the resort scheme, which her mother had smuggled to her. Mr. Beaufils and his wife make flyers of the projects and, on election day, an unknowing Primus Mackenzie has to respond to an angry crowd:

> "Tell us about what's on this paper! We want to hear about how you're letting them give away Government Lands!…"
>
> Even those who couldn't help but love him started shouting. (407)

For the first time in decades, the PM is defeated, losing his seat to the "Independent" candidate.

By making the connection between urban Blacks and postcolonial Caribbeans, Ursa had been able to see the similar mechanisms of oppression functioning through the co-option of influential black men's voices, and the usurpation of black women's voices by proxy, through these black ventriloquists. Ursa's own resumption of speech, after a voluntary self-censorship that lasted three years, freed her from a stagnant relationship. Estelle's breach of silence allowed for mother and daughter to shake off the influence of the central black man in their lives, a liberation that translated into his political defeat and opened up the possibility of community improvement. In all of the above instances, Ursa and Estelle were strong black women who had temporarily taken back stage, only to realize the detrimental effect of their complicity in their erasure, their self-censorship. Moreover, they were able to detect and denounce the corruption of their beloved black men as they saw in it a duplication of the exploitative effects of the black/white, rich/poor, industrialized/developing, imperial/postcolonial, male/female divides. In view of the accusation generally leveled at black women writers who portray empowered female characters, it is important to point out that at no point does Marshall engage in "male-bashing." The charge of male-bashing is itself an unfortunate manifestation of the attempt to silence black women, who are pressured not to denounce some aspects of their oppression, namely the sexism within the black communities, in order to present a more unified front against racism. Black feminists and womanists realize, however, that such a front can neither shield nor empower their communities, who are

instead weakened by the resentment and inequities simmering within. In *Praisesong for the Widow* Marshall portrayed Jay/Jerome sympathetically, as a sensitive man knowledgeable and proud of his culture who tragically caves in under the weight of racism, overwork, and poverty. Lowell Carruthers is a good man, a caring uncle and substitute father for his orphaned nephews, and a brother eager to recruit fellow Blacks into respectable, well-paying jobs. Sandy Lawson and Primus Mackenzie are in no way power-greedy opportunists, but represent the co-option of black politicians by an inhuman(e) institution: capitalism. The outcome of resistance to exploitation nevertheless falls along gender lines, as the women come out of their temporary silence victorious, enriched, and more spiritually-grounded, while the men die, symbolically or literally, with the loss of their voices.

CAN'T KEEP A GOOD WOMAN DOWN:

In both *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters,* women must break free from the values imposed by speakers of the dominant discourse in order to assert their personal and cultural independence. In *Praisesong,* Avey must break free from Jerome Johnson's assimilationist, materialistic, racist beliefs before she can reconcile herself to her personal identity as Avatara. This finally allows her to transmit to the younger generation their cultural history of resistance to enslavement. In *Daughters,* Estelle grows gradually more distant from the husband she had loved when he was still siding politically with the underdog, until the couple are quasi strangers at the end of the novel. Ursa, who had also felt the need to stay away from Triunion, breaks the Law of the Father when she finally comes down for elections and betrays her father by publicizing his corrupt scheming, leading to his defeat. The life-giving semiotic link with one's ancestry is illustrated in *Praisesong* in a number of ways, from the "shiny strings" Avatara imagines entering her through the navel, to the "lilting maternal" patois the out-islanders speak while on the excursion—despite the fact that they can speak "the King's English good as me and you" (*PW* 187) the rest of the year—to the physical tending and cleansing Rosalie and Milda offer Avatara aboard the schooner to Carriacou, and again on the island, before the dance. In *Daughters,* mother and daughter communicate again after many years' silence, during which Estelle did not write to Ursa, but was content with simply appending a brief postscript to her husband's letters.

Yet Estelle had written her homefolks when Ursa was still a child, "I'm going to send Ursa-Bea to take my place at the barricades as soon as she's old enough" (*D* 223), thus realizing the importance of passing down a tradition of resistance. It is therefore only appropriate that the two women commit an act of transgression together. The restoration of the semiotic, mother-daughter link occurs immediately prior to their transgression of the Law of the Father/Estranged Husband, leading to liberation, as Avatara's

transgression of the law of her estranged husband against dancing led to her liberation. The vital importance of maintaining that semiotic link is further illustrated by the failure of those characters who seek to move beyond or away from their culture, characters such as Jay, the PM, Mayor Sandy Lawson, even Silla in *Brown Girl, Brownstones.*

Moreover, Marshall makes it clear that any attempt to enter the dominant discourse and claim it as one's own is doomed to failure. The Johnsons, as they move into North White Plains, precipitate "white flight," and Avey remarks that in a short time there were only two remaining white families there. The PM, as he meets with North American investors to discuss various development plans, cannot speak of his constituency's needs, since U.S. neocolonial capitalism, which he is catering to, does not allow for means of achieving self-sufficiency for natives anywhere. Mayor Sandy Lawson, flanked by two smiling white politicians as he makes his speech, has to render his black community invisible, by hiding the ghetto from suburban commuters. Silla, in Marshall's earliest novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* serves a special purpose as she illustrates that the doomed attempt to access the dominant discourse is not a masculine failure, but a racial issue, for in this novel it is the woman who wants to achieve middle-class (white) status and "buy house" in the North American metropolis, while Deighton, her husband, holds onto his Caribbean identity and a piece of the island. Yet even as Silla achieves the status as property owner, she is silenced by the white policeman, who reminds her of her subordinate position. Having dealt with the issue of racism in that first novel, Marshall foregrounds sexism in her subsequent works, in which corruption consistently affects men to a significantly greater degree than it does women.

In *Praisesong for the Widow,* Aunt Cuney recounted to a young Avatara the story of the Ibos who walked on water, all the way back to Africa. After decades of silence, Avatara realized the importance to her and to her broader cultural community of passing on that liberatory myth to the younger generation. In *Daughters,* Estelle leaks her husband's plans to their daughter, UrsaBea, who then distributes them to the opposition party candidates, thus securing her corrupt father's electoral defeat. In both novels, the central character's decision to speak comes after years of self-imposed silence which proved detrimental both to the individual and her community. In *Praisesong,* Avey had shut off her black heritage, with its languorous evenings of loving and dancing to the sounds of blues and jazz recordings, and its annual pilgrimage to Ibo Landing, in order to better fit into middle-class suburban North White Plains, an exquisitely symbolic if factual place. In *Daughters,* Estelle, the politician's wife, had long kept her knowledge of her husband's gradual betrayal of the people to herself, until the eve of elections that would have secured him one more term in office, when she finally broke her vow of silence. In turn, Ursa-Bea distributed copies of her father's development

project, on public land, bringing about his defeat. These two women, mother and daughter, had to wrestle themselves free from the influence of a central male figure in order to achieve greater independence for themselves and their island's people. These women of color are also seeking to overthrow white discourse imposed on them by politicians, teachers (Ursa's professor), and the forces of "law and order" (the policemen who arrest Deighton in *Praisesong,* and Robeson in *Daughters*). These are representative of the administrative system in a colonized country, where oppressive rule is perpetrated through political, educational, and judicial means.

We also see in Marshall's work illustrations of neocolonial oppression, as white discourse penetrates the black household through a loved person. The struggle of Marshall's heroines, then, is a struggle for the liberation of black women and postcolonial peoples from the silencing effects of sexism and racism, both overt and internalized. It is a struggle won through female solidarity that transcends national and class lines, deriving its power to resist from sources that counter the messages of the dominant discourse: Avey silences Jerome's voice, better to hear Cuney's again, and Estelle and Ursa provide an empowering example of a mother and daughter joining against the patriarchal discourse they had long internalized. This is particularly refreshing in light of the fact that patriarchy has survived for so long because it has so successfully infiltrated women's minds, making mothers circumsize their daughters, physically and spiritually, or marry them off to the highest bidder, after training them into submission, domesticity, and femininity.

Finally, one cannot fail to notice that in the works of the three authors we have looked at so far, Djebar, Cliff, and Marshall, discourse is gendered, with men seeking to duplicate the dominant discourse even as they secretly realize it is oppressing them: In *Fantasia,* Djebar's father is a French teacher who never pauses to think of the consequences of fluency in that language and familiarity with that culture, while both his daughter and wife have ambiguous feelings about being conversant in French and realize the alienating effects of that language and culture. In *A Sister to Scheherazade,* Isma initially thrives in her access to French, France, and a Western lifestyle that allows her to escape the harem; yet she eventually returns to Algeria. The nameless husband, on the other hand, aware that French completely shuts off his second wife, continues to use it with Meriem, the daughter he had with Isma. In *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven,* the father wants to access whiteness at whatever cost, including the loss of his wife and darker daughter, while the female characters, despite the fact that they are light-skinned by Jamaican standards, embrace their blackness even more after their encounter with North American racism. In *Free Enterprise,* Annie Christmas uses skin blackener. In *Praisesong,* Jay silences his black culture to become the successful Jerome Johnson, while Avatara suffocates as Mrs. Avey Johnson, wealthy cruise-goer, and reverses that stifling course to become an eccentric woman—gyrating

away from the pull of the hegemonic discourse—harrying black folks on street corners, and telling them of their heritage. Finally, in *Daughters,* Estelle and Ursa-Bea betray the dominant discourse they can claim for themselves, Estelle as an American citizen in the Majority World, Ursa-Bea as American-born and -educated politician's daughter, once they appreciate the devastating effect on their island of their insular comfort. Each of these women demonstrates an Africana value, the interconnectedness of personal and community emancipation. The PM, on the other hand, seems incapable of escaping the centripetal force of wealth, success, and material comfort. It seems only women realize their survival rests in steering away from it. In the words of June Jordan:

> We will not help ourselves into extinction by deluding our Black selves into the belief that we should/can become white, that we can/should sound white, think white because we will be *like* the powerful and therefore we will *be* powerful; that is just a terrible, sad joke: you cannot obliterate yourself and do anything else. (*Moving Towards Home* 33)

In our next chapter, we will see again, in Morrison's two novels, *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise,* the devastating effects on Afrodiasporic people of the desire to be *like* the powerful.

NOTES

1. The fact that Marshall's family hails from an island nation may explain her predilection for sea travel, but it is not a compelling reason—Cliff too is from a Caribbean island, yet her characters are not sailors.

2. Over the last two decades, there has been a growing awareness, among women of color, that "whiteness" is not a desirable status to be achieved by those who can "pass." Michelle Cliff is a prime example. See also Elia, "But Bleaching Is Like Starvation," forthcoming in *This Bridge Called My Back, Twenty Years Later.*

3. Avey practices self-censorship as she refrains from playing the music she and Jay once loved, in order for the couple to better fit in North White Plains. This is in sharp contrast to Kitty and Boy Savage, in *No Telephone To Heaven,* where Boy forbids his wife from shopping in ethnic neighborhoods, and she leaves him, preferring not to abandon her culture.

4. See "The Religious Shout," in Courlander, 365–368.

5. See Denniston, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall,* and Pettis, *Towards Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction.*

CHAPTER 5

"Under the Weight of Memory and Music"

Contact Zones and Healing in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*

Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself. Such as fire-worship as signified in the Christian church by the alter and the candles. And the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism.

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *Mules and Men*

They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet.

—TONI MORRISON, *Song of Solomon*

Now the radio was across afield, down one road, then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was …nothing. Just an absence, which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio.

—TONI MORRISON, *Paradise*

The ethnography of a score of freed slaves setting up an isolated community in Oklahoma in 1890, *Paradise* (1998) may seem to have little in common with Morrison's earlier novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), which traces the inner development of a young man born to a middle-class family

in a white Michigan town in 1931. Yet as we look beyond the cosmetic differences, *Paradise* appears as a magnified detail of *Song of Solomon,* foregrounding, in the tension between the town of Ruby and the Convent, the unresolved hostility that had marred the relation of Macon and Pilate Dead in the earlier novel. Morrison conceived *Paradise* as the last in the trilogy she began in 1987 with *Beloved,* the haunting tale of a mother who loved her daughter so fiercely she preferred to kill her rather than risk having her enslaved. This was followed in 1992 by *Jazz,* in which a man's obsessive love for a younger woman turns murderous. *Paradise* continues Morrison's investigation into the consequences of excessive love, this time for God, and law and order. But *Paradise* is more than a variation on a theme, albeit a fertile one. As Paul Gray points out, "One of the many pleasures *of Paradise,* for longtime Morrison readers, is the way it picks up and elaborates on subjects and themes from the author's earlier works" ("Paradise Found" 64). Neither of the examples Gray cites are from the previous installments in the trilogy, namely women rebelling against patriarchy (from *Sula),* and internalized racism (from *Tar Baby*).

I am particularly interested in ways Morrison's latest novel, *Paradise,* elaborates on the rivalry between feminine and masculine spaces, fluidity and rigidity, and permeability and insularity, first introduced in *Song of Solomon,* in the relationship between the estranged sister and brother, Pilate and Macon Dead. My focus in this chapter, then, will be on the similarities between the two works, both of which present gendered polarities in conflict, while clearly suggesting that survival requires some degree of androgyny, a "contact zone," a term used by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation.* Pratt uses the term to refer to "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6). Pratt immediately avoids the equation of "contact zone" with the more familiar European expansionist concept of "colonial frontier," by underscoring that her coinage "is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term 'contact' I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination" (7).

In both of Morrison's novels, we have a patriarchal community—Macon Dead's household in *Song of Solomon,* and the town of Ruby in *Paradise,* both of which represent emotionally bankrupt communities. Both novels also feature a completely marginal female community—Pilate's three-generational women's household in *Song of Solomon,* and the Convent in *Paradise,* offering temporary or long-term shelter for women on the run, recovering

from physical or spiritual abuse, and representing the life-affirming qualities of women who create, preserve, and nurture the body and soul. I believe a parallel rather than a sequential analysis of the two novels is more instructive for our examination of Morrison's elaboration of the dialectics of binary interaction in a contact zone, hence my departure from the format of the previous chapters, which analyzed two works by one author separately before showing their continuities.

The two polarities express alternative modes of being and knowing, alternative epistemologies. When the poles interact harmoniously, the broader community is enriched: in *Song of Solomon,* by learning from Pilate and by learning to love Pilate, Milkman grew his wings. We will see in the following discussion how this accomplishment represents a communal as well as an individual gain. But when these poles clash, death is imminent: Morrison explains that she wanted to title her latest novel *War,* but her publishers wouldn't let her. The book opens with a shooting spree crystallizing Ruby's xenophobia, racism, and sexism. It is an investigation of "why paradise necessitates exclusion," adds Morrison about her ironically titled infernal novel (Mulrine 71).

I also argue that the two poles respectively represent the Western and Africana polarities, and the different sets of values that go with these epistemologies: materialism, individualism, and linearity in the Western sphere, spirituality, communality and cyclicality in the Africana sphere. As in Pratt's coinage, "contact zone," where unequal systems come together, the interaction of these epistemologies parallels that of dominant/subordinate discourses, in that the first also seeks to impose its values on the subordinate, unaware that in doing so, it necessarily renders the subordinate polyvocal: it is impossible to ever completely erase alternative or unofficial knowledge, only temporarily suppress it. In *Song of Solomon,* Macon tries to silence his sister by not allowing Milkman, his son, to go to her house. Yet the father's attempt fails, as Milkman is attracted to the music coming out of Pilate's house, music that turns out to be the tune to the song that will explain his family history to him. In *Paradise,* the arcane, Latinate words of the Ruby patriarchs represent the dominant discourse's attachment to words, while the subordinate prefers song, communal dreaming, and other semiotic endeavors. Thus the patriarchs are obsessed with finding out whether they have been admonished by their forefathers to "Be the Furrow" or "Beware the Furrow" in God's brow, even as they engage in acts which neither "being" nor "bewaring" that furrow would condone. The Convent women, on the other hand, stretching the meaning of "the Word"—Christianity—raise the dead and feed the living from a miraculously endless supply of bread, wine, and aphrodisiacs.

This chapter also examines Morrison's use of music as the voice of a community. In *Song of Solomon,* Macon comments on the fact that "there was

no music" in his house, as he walks over to Pilate's because he "wanted just a bit of music…. he wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen" (*Song* 28–29). Milkman, devastated by the unsolicited knowledge of his mother's incestuous tendencies, explains to his friend Guitar that "I need some music" (83), and the latter again takes him to Pilate's. In that woman's house, there is complete harmony, as three women, of three generations, sing "with effortless beauty" (29) about their ancestry, Pilate's grandfather who flew away, and her grandmother whose chagrin at her abandonment drove her insane, repeating:

> O Sugarman don't leave me here
> Cotton balls to choke me
> O Sugarman don't leave me here
> Buckra's arms to yoke me…
> Sugarman done fly away
> Sugarman done gone
> Sugarman cut across the sky
> Sugarman gone home. (49)

Their melody reflects their inner peace, just as the absence of music from Macon's house reflects spiritual death, an essential void. In the epigraphs to this chapter, I have opposed the singing in Pilate's house to the anguished silence and lack of music that Mavis, like the other Convent women, finds so frustrating. The two novels are replete with such passages, and while the women hum soothing tunes in *Song of Solomon, Paradise,* true to its author's intended title, echoes with "the screams of a hurt woman…indistinguishable from everyday traffic" (*P* 135), which the Convent residents are always trying to cover up with whatever music is being played on the radio. In turn, the cacophony that reverberates throughout *Paradise* expresses the inner turmoil of that novel's characters: both in Ruby and at the Convent, people are "apparently tone-deaf from raucous music" (*P* 157), as they listen (rather than sing) to whatever tunes are in fashion, blaring out of boom boxes. Only towards the end of the novel, when the Convent women merge their voices to engage in collective remembering, forgiving, and "murmurs of love" (*P* 264), do they stop being haunted by past abuses.

BLESSED MALELESSNESS, OR FEMALE MALICE?

"Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things," Macon Dead tells the twelve-year old Milkman as the young boy inquires about the reasons he is not to go over to his aunt's house (*Song* 55). But Macon's prohibition comes too late, for Milkman is already

under the spell of the woman who mocked his school learning, invited him into her house—womb-like, fluid-filled, pervaded with the smell of fermenting fruit—and explained to him how to cook the perfect soft-boiled egg.

The diametrically opposed views of Macon and Pilate Dead, a brother and sister leading totally different lifestyles as Macon seeks wealth, social status, and white approval through material possessions, while Pilate is content as a bootlegger, are paralleled, in *Paradise,* in the two neighboring communities, Ruby and the Convent. Similarly, Macon's mistrust of Pilate is paralleled in Ruby's disapproval of the Convent. Once known as "Christ the King," a Catholic school for Arapaho girls, the Convent now provides refuge for women on the run, in distress, or otherwise needing respite. Unlike the "stilled" Arapaho girls, who were forcibly taken to it from their families and taught to forget their native culture (*P* 4), these women now think of it as "a place where you can collect yourself…think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time" (176), because the house is "permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too" (177). But seventeen miles away in Ruby, a rigid, patriarchal small town, the men think of the Convent as a nexus of "female malice" (4), "sheer destructive power" (17), its inhabitants "[b]itches. More like witches" (276), for it is "not a convent, but a coven" (276). Ruby, Oklahoma, is settled by the descendants of a handful of families who had founded Haven, an earlier town, when, as freed slaves, they were denied the right to join other communities of ex-slaves because they were too dark. This was the traumatic "Disallowing," which came as

> disbelievable words formed in the mouths of men to other men, men like them in all ways but one. Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. (*P* 189)

Despite the apparent irreconcilability of the two pairs (Macon/Pilate, Ruby/Convent), they are in constant interaction, even as the dominant discourse denies the existence of such a flux. Macon wants nothing to do with his sister, whom he finds unacceptably free from social conditioning into propriety, gendering, and patriarchy:

> A regular source of embarrassment, if he would allow it. But he would not allow it. Finally he told her not to come again until she could show some respect for herself…. "Why can't you dress like a woman?…What

> are you trying to make me look like in this town?" He trembled at the thought of the white men in the bank…discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister. That the propertied Negro who handled his business so well and who lived in the big house on Not Doctor Street had a sister who had a daughter but no husband, and that daughter had a daughter but no husband. A collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the streets. (*Song* 20)

Yet Pilate's presence pervades Macon's home, for she is responsible for Milkman's life: she prepared the aphrodisiac potions that Ruth fed Macon, her husband, when he had stopped all conjugal contact with her, and thus was instrumental in Milkman's conception. At the age of twelve, Milkman starts going to Pilate's, despite his father's prohibition. It is there he first learns about his southern roots and the murder of his grandfather by a white mob; there he falls in love for the first time, and there he first hears the song that encodes his family's history, the song of Solomon sung in perfect harmony by his female relatives.

> Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy—wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy his company and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (47)

Unable to stop Milkman from going to Pilate's, Macon seeks to counter the woman's teaching, burying it deep under layers of advice on upward mobility: "Own things," he tells Milkman after informing him that Pilate can't teach him anything useful. "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how" (55). Macon's desire to teach his son to own people is hideous in itself, and more outrageously so coming from a slave's son; yet it is in keeping with the dominant discourse he seeks to emulate. Macon's belief that illiteracy led to his father's murder, rather than the fact that his father owned a farm that his white neighbors coveted, is equally erroneous. Nevertheless, Macon's fear of illiteracy is comprehensible, for he is aware that his father's lack of education got the family its name, "Dead."

> Papa couldn't read, couldn't even sign his name. Had a mark he used. They tricked him…. Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn't read. Got his name mixed up because he couldn't read. (53)

I do not wish to dispute the well-developed tradition of criticism and fiction commenting on the value of literacy for the African American culture—I am

aware that literacy has at times made the difference between slavery and freedom. My argument in this chapter, as elsewhere in this book, is against the unquestioning embrace of white discourse disguised as literacy. Macon's belief in literacy as a solution to any potential problems reflects a Euro/Western perspective, the valuing of the written word over the spoken, of formal education over practical knowledge. But Macon is wrong. He should realize that it is racism that killed his father, not his father's illiteracy: white lynch mobs are not known for inquiring about a black person's education, sparing the literate. His father was a former slave who owned a farm in the South during Reconstruction, when white backlash was rampant.

That education cannot guarantee social success for Blacks is made clear later in the novel, when Macon's daughter, First Corinthians, who was educated at Bryn Mawr, and spent her junior year in Paris where she gained fluency in French, can only find work as a maid.

> Bryn Mawr had done what a four-year dose of liberal education was designed to do: unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world. First, by training her for leisure time, enrichments, and domestic mindlessness. Second, by a clear implication that she was too good for such work. After graduation she returned to a work world in which colored girls, regardless of their backgrounds, were in demand for one and only one kind of work. And by 1963, Corinthians' main concern was simply that her family not know that she had been doing it for two years. (189)

Pilate, who as a child also witnessed the killing of her father, is clear about the guilty party—the white murderers, not the illiteracy of a former slave. Unlike Macon, she does not blame the victim or attempt to emulate the dominant discourse; nor does she send her daughter to school or try to fit in. Instead, she lives illegally, selling moonshine prepared with sugar purchased on the black (sic) market. Her household is a macrocosmic replica of Africana epistemology. She communicates with the dead father, her "mentor—the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things" (*Song* 150). She is an ancestor figure to Milkman, serving as culture bearer and history preserver. She is also a "natural healer" (150) and believes in community responsibility within limits: she helped Ruth conceive and deliver Milkman, and left when her brother asked her. Upon her death, she charges Milkman with the care of her daughter, expressing her own fathomless love: "Watch Reba for me…. I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (337). Her pursuit of happiness does not entail material possessions, but self-sufficiency: "She tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to stay alive?" (149). Pilate also trusts her intuitive knowledge, and guides her life with "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149),

unlike her brother, who evicted tenants who could not afford the rent, regardless of their family circumstances. While brother and sister have not talked to each other in years, Milkman breaks his father's law by going to Pilate every chance he gets, thanks to his job as his father's agent.

A similar "illicit" shuttle, from the dominant discourse into the ostracized alternative, takes place in *Paradise,* where Ruby citizens openly condemn the Convent, while they secretly go there to satisfy their various needs. Deacon Morgan, a married father of two and, at twenty-nine, already one of the most prominent men in Ruby, has an affair with the thirty-nine year old Connie (Consolata Sosa) when the town is first settled. The age difference is narratively important, for an older woman is generally believed to have seduced an otherwise "helpless" man, regardless of mutual attraction or the obvious advantage that the man has in this particular case: Deacon has the car that makes the trysts possible, and chooses where to take Connie. He determines and informs Connie when they are to meet: Fridays at noon, a convenient time for him, even if it necessitates creative alibis from her; she is the Convent's maid, kidnapped in Brazil at the age of nine and made to serve the Lord and his nuns. Deacon is the one who eventually puts an end to the affair, simply by no longer showing up. Connie, despite Deacon's attempt to cast her in the role of seductress, has no say in the matter; she could not once get him to meet on her terms, and only realizes, when he stops coming on Fridays, that the affair is over.

Deacon's wife, Soane, goes to the Convent to have an abortion, which Connie refuses to perform, because Soane's motives are misdirected. Soane and Connie become good friends, and Connie instead gives Soane a tonic and starts supplying her regularly with concoctions and brews, at first aphrodisiacs to regain and retain Deacon's love, and later a potion that sustains Soane after her two sons are killed in the Vietnam war, leaving her with an otherwise unbearable absence and guilt: she had encouraged them to enlist, thinking them safer in Vietnam than in Chicago, Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, Watts, Money, or Jackson; in fact she "had thought war was safer than any city in the United States" (*P* 101).

Arnette Fleetwood also goes to the Convent to deliver the fruit of an unplanned pregnancy, and another Ruby woman, Billie Delia, goes there after a fight with her mother, and "[w]hat she saw and learned there changed her forever" (152). KD, nephew of Deacon Morgan and his twin brother Steward, has an affair with Gigi, one of the Convent women, which only ends when Gigi calls it off. The fact that Gigi exercised her agency at all is unforgivable, and motivates KD on the killing spree: "The girl whose name he now scandalized he had stalked for years till she threw him out the door. Take a whole lot of healthy babies to make him forget that. He's a Morgan, after all, and they haven't forgotten a thing since 1755" (278).

Along with this illicit traffic, underscoring contact between the two communities, the women of Ruby and the Convent have recourse to an additional method of communication—smoke signals, retaining the native, subordinate discourse that education and technology have neither eliminated nor rendered redundant. When the Convent's mother superior dies and the women there have no telephone or any means of transportation to quickly communicate the news, Connie lights a fire in the fields, and a plume of black smoke is visible in Ruby, where Anna Flood sees it, informs Soane, and the two arrange for a funeral.

The comparison of *Song of Solomon* with *Paradise* makes it clear that an undercurrent flowing between the two poles, rather than only one way, is essential for survival. Without it, life—nurturing, caring, preservation, knowledge—would come to an end. In *Song of Solomon,* Milkman learns, through Pilate, his real name and ancestry, that he is the grandson of Jake, son of Solomon, who flew back to Africa, not of "Macon Dead Sr.," shot dead by white men who wanted his land. He learns, however, not as a passive recipient of Pilate's storytelling, but through an active search on a trip to the South, where he strips himself of his middle-class accoutrement—the three-piece suit, the fine leather shoes, the watch—and joins townsfolk on a hunt. He experiences community with them, senses immense fear in the woods, embraces Pilate to death literally, and sings, modifying the family's song to suit his circumstances by substituting Sugargirl for Sugarman, and expressing his love of Pilate, as Ryna had expressed her love of her husband, Jake.[1] It is only when he partook of the singing, adapting the words to suit his own ancestor figure, Pilate as Sugargirl, that he realized "[i]f you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (*Song* 337).

> "Sing," she said. "Sing a little somethin for me."
>
> Milkman knew no songs, and had no singing voice that anybody would want to hear, but he couldn't ignore the urgency in her voice. Speaking the words without the least bit of a tune, he sang for the lady. "Sugargirl don't leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Buckra's arms to yoke me."…[H]e could not stop the worn old words from coming, louder and louder as though sheer volume would wake her….
>
> Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. (*Song* 336)

Had Milkman not loved Pilate, he might have lived longer, but he would not have been a free, proud, "Flying African" upon death. Receiving love and generosity without returning such feelings is exploitation, illustrated by his abusive relationship with Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar. Milkman loved Pilate differently, offering to help her finally bury her long-dead father's bones in the South, and it is only in the ultimate moment, when he shelters her from

Guitar's bullets with his own body, that he realizes: "If you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it." (*Song* 337) It is this harmonious interaction between him and Pilate that brings about his enrichment, his empowering knowledge.

Paradise—war, indeed—is characterized by the refusal of the dominant to learn from the subordinate, for, unlike Milkman, who embraces Pilate's knowledge, the Ruby patriarchs are terminally opposed to it. They have guns, cars, and generations of bitterness poisoning their minds and hearts. Milkman had gone out of his way to meet Pilate, first as a young boy running errands for his father, then as a young man going South. More importantly, Milkman had gone out of his way spiritually, by accepting the unwritten alternative historical knowledge Pilate transmitted to him. In an interview with Anne Koenen, Morrison explained that the protagonist in *Song of Solomon* "had to be a man. Men have more to learn in certain ways than women do…. What I wanted was a character who had everything to learn, who would start from zero, and had no reason to learn anything, because he's comfortable, he doesn't need money, he's just flabby and pampered (75)." In fact, Milkman's transformation, from dominant to knowledgeable, brought about by his contact with Pilate, is so complete that he is now willing to die for a woman, whereas his previous actions with his sisters, mother, and Hagar, all show extreme disrespect for them. On the other hand, the Ruby folks, despite their frequent visits to the Convent, in no way attempt to understand the Convent women on their terms. Not one of them fosters feelings of affection toward the women: Deacon's affair with Connie, like his nephew KD's affair with Gigi, is strictly lustful, not loving. Even Menus, broken-hearted because his father had opposed his marriage to an outsider, the "redbone woman," and whom the Convent women had repeatedly nursed and tended during his bouts of depression, now wants to prove his strength and superiority: "Getting rid of some unattached women who had wiped up after him, washed his drawers, removed his vomit, listened to his curses as well as his sobs might convince him for a while that he was truly a man unpolluted by his mother's weakness, worthy of his father's patience and that he was right to let the redbone go" (*P* 278). Arguably, the Ruby women also abuse their relationships with the Convent women when they fail to interfere successfully on their behalf at critical moments. More importantly, with the exception of Lone, who interpreted the signs she had received too late, the Ruby women are unable to intuit the danger looming over the Convent, even as their fathers, brothers, and husbands plan it.

Paradise is also an exploration of the betrayal made possible by class, wealth, privileged skin color, and the identity that results from allegiance to patriarchal rather than alternative communities. Thus Soane seeks to establish a distance, rather than a common ground, between herself and the Convent in her first meeting with one of the Convent women—besides Connie, who has been providing her with the "you-know-what" potion (44) for years. "Mavis Albright, this is Soane Morgan," Connie says, introducing the two women.

Mavis responds "Hi, hon," which Soane immediately rectifies by informing Mavis of her patriarchal status: "Morgan. Mrs. Morgan" (43). Mavis then becomes aware of the class difference that should have been obvious and should have prevented the familiar, equalizing "Hi, hon":

> Mavis's face warmed, but she smiled anyway and said, "Sorry, Mrs. Morgan," while taking note of the woman's expensive oxford shoes, sheer stockings, wool cardigan and the cut of her dress: summer-weight crepe, pale blue with a white collar. (*P* 43)

The Ruby women's allegiance to their kinsmen rather than their women friends, prevents them from intervening on behalf of their friends when danger looms, either because they fail to believe there is such a threat, or because they will not go against their husbands or fathers. Lone, who overhears the conspirators while she is out on a predawn walk to collect medicinal herbs, feels she cannot enlist the women's help: "She couldn't go to Soane because of Deek [Deacon]…She thought about Kate but knew she would not go up against her father. She considered Penelope but dismissed her, since she was not only married to Wisdom, she was Sargeant's daughter" (281). These women, "whose identity rested on the men they married" (187), are oblivious to the scheming their men are engaging in, and even Soane, Connie's closest friend, wrongly believes "The Convent women were no longer haunted. Or hunted either" (266).

Betrayal is also manifest in the Ruby men's duplication of the exclusionary methods they once fled from, the "Disallowing" they had experienced themselves. Having been rejected, they now reject all outsiders, regardless of their circumstances. Reverend Misner, the preacher, exclaims: "I know I'm an outsider, but I'm not an enemy" (*P* 212). But Patricia, one of the Ruby women, replies: "No you're not. But in this town these two words mean the same thing" (212). The betrayal of community, of the values that had made the "Old Fathers" found Haven as a Christian refuge for the "disallowed," is best articulated towards the end of the novel by Deacon, who confesses to Misner, after the attack on the Convent, that "his long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout, and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different" (302).

SING A LITTLE SOMETHIN FOR ME

Pilate, having guided Milkman in keeping with her aural/oral homonym, "like a riverboat pilot" (*Song* 19) dies at the end of *Song of Solomon.* In all likelihood, so does Milkman. But one of Morrison's achievements, and a conscious objective in her work, is the inscription of Black experience into the dominant discourse. I propose that Milkman's is a communal as well as

individual gain because it inscribes the history of the "Flying Africans" for all African Americans, and in the collective memories of various literate people who would otherwise have remained deaf to it. We live in the age of the printed word, and oral history is threatened with extinction if it is not inscribed in the form of oraliterature, which provides the contact zone between orality and the written text. By writing down history that has been transmitted for generations in the form of song and storytelling, but which is now threatened by the very access of Africana people to print, Morrison, like Paule Marshall, Zora Neale Hurston (who recorded Black folklore) and African writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, is preserving that heritage in the most appropriate form available, without the counterproductive romanticization and fossilization of the articulate past. As more and more people get access into the dominant discourse, that is, the printed word, the subordinate, or spoken word, gets pushed aside, unless it is allowed to make its incursions into the dominant.[2] Black literature today bears testimony to the success of such incursions, which encode the specifics of Black experience in the enduring written medium which it has invaded and rendered its vehicle. Such an inscription is essentially subversive. Certainly, the bildungsroman and a questing male hero are readily recognizable and are still cherished themes in Anglo-European literature, making the semiotic message in *Song of Solomon* all the more subversive: anything beyond a cursory reading shows us Pilate, an accomplished alternative black conjure woman, taking flight at the end as the hero sings for her, and a bird carries the box with her name up in the sky. It is only fitting that as the 1993 Nobel prize was awarded to an American citizen, its laureate was not a member of the dominant discourse, but a gray-haired black woman writing about a system that dehumanized mothers as it drove them to kill their children. Similarly, the much-quoted opening sentence of *Paradise,* "They shoot the white girl first," resonates with the dominant discourse's fear for the safety of white womanhood, a fear that supposedly justified the post-Reconstruction lynchings and the more contemporary assumption that black men are irrational subhumans out to rape and kill white women.[3] The opening scene of *Paradise* shows the epitome of the American stereotype—men taking the law into their own hands, with God on their side. "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18). Nor are these vigilantes, on a mission to cleanse the world of evil and its practicing cult members, ordinary men: having overcome racial and economic discrimination, and reversals of fortune that turned politicians into impoverished exiles, they nevertheless were able to retain their pride and dignity, settle new towns, fear God, and succeed as individuals and patriarchs—truly American heroes. As one (Canadian) reviewer writes:

> Few images better symbolize America to the world than men with guns. Men taking the law into their own hands. Men saving the world with a

> Winchester or a Saturday-night special. From the shoot-outs of early Hollywood westerns to the bloody fire-storms of *L.A.Confidential,* all-American guys have long balanced the scales of justice by filling the pans with hot lead. It has become a kind of archetype, but also a cliché. So when an important U.S. writer like Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison opens her latest novel, *Paradise,* with a scene in which a bunch of heavily armed men are bent on vengeance, it seems appropriate to ask whether she has succumbed to the national obsession with violent solutions (*Maclean's* 65).

She has not, as the reviewer promptly reassures us. In fact, all of *Paradise* can be read as a "Signifyin(g)" novel, the repetition, with a difference, of some of the favorite activities of our "all-American guys." The rest of the novel highlights the flip side of this brilliant coin, as we learn of victims becoming victimizers, dispossessing the natives and scapegoating the defenseless, rather than assuming responsibility for their own actions. *Paradise* shines the light on the other side of the dominant discourse, the *War* Morrison's publishers sought to conceal. This latest novel may well be her most broadly subversive yet, for while the previous works have focused on addressing the unwritten Black experience and redressing its textual misrepresentation, *Paradise* takes on all of American history, redressing the depiction of Blacks as victims, but also debunking the myth of the Christian settlers as righteous pilgrims harmlessly in search of the New Eden. Critics have pointed out that the town of Ruby, Oklahoma, set in the heart of "Indian territory," stands for an allegorical representation of the whole United States of America. Incidentally, Morrison's criticism must not be taken for a lack of love for her country. She herself claims that, upon receiving the Nobel Prize "I was surprised at how patriotic I felt, being the first native-born American since Steinbeck in 1962" (Gray 64). (Other American laureates had emigrated to the United States). Instead, it must be interpreted for what it is, which many Americans fail to understand: constructive criticism to improve on what is viewed as potentially good gone awry.

In her early essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," as well as the later collection *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Morrison argues convincingly that an Africanist presence has always pervaded American literature, but that such a presence was a reflection of how powerful whites viewed their black subordinates, hence it was not an expression of African or African American experience. Her work, as well as that of other black writers, is a vehicle for the articulation of that experience as viewed and lived by its own subjects. Morrison's novels, despite critical (mostly white) praise for their universality, foreground, above all, the black experience: a mother's love is universal, a runaway mother's love so intense it drives a woman to kill her daughter is black; wanderlust may affect members of any and all communities,

the unquenchable yearning for a flight back home is Afrodiasporan;[4] poetic license is the purview of all great wordsmiths, and while Signifyin(g), the double-voiced rhetorical use of repetition, homonyms, play of difference, naming, indirection, "loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on" is African American.[5]

In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison explained that she wants her readers to "hear" the story of black people. Rather than stress the reading, she emphasizes the "hearing," the oral history which, in *Song of Solomon,* as in real life, has been preserved in song.

> Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard. There was an articulate literature before there was print. There were griots. They memorized it. People heard it. It is important that there is sound in my books—that you can hear it, that I can hear it. (McKay 408)

With *Song of Solomon,* she has achieved her objective superbly, by informing readers around the world that African Americans are the descendants not of slaves, but of Africans who rose above cotton bales, yokes, the iron bit that paralyzed the tongue and, more recently, the muzzle of censorship—S*ong of Solomon* was banned in libraries in Morrison's home state of Ohio until 1993, the year she received the Nobel Prize.

An emphasis on orality and double-voicedness pervades *Song of Solomon,* beginning with the opening scene that takes place on "Not Doctor Street, a name the post office did not recognize" (*Song* 4).[6] The reader gets a simple explanation at the beginning of why this street is called Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street. Already we become aware of the dominant discourse's fear of ambivalence and the black community's need for it. At the turn of the century, the only black doctor in the city lived and died on that street. Later, other Blacks moved there, and when they were drafted in 1918, gave their address as Doctor Street. City legislators responded by posting notices saying the avenue

> had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.
>
> It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street, and were inclined to call the charity at its northern end No Mercy Hospital. (*Song* 4)

Here, in the opening scene of *Song of Solomon,* we have an illustration of the dominant discourse's recourse to the mutually-exclusive binary opposition, along with the subordinate's intrinsic polysemy: to them, the street is *both* Mains *and* Not Doctor, the conjunction *and* bringing together, not pushing away, two names. The dominant discourse seeks to eliminate ambivalence, to

preserve the logocentrism it is least threatened by, while speakers of the subordinate discourse, who are attuned to polyphony, are satisfied with the duality of the street's name, retaining the trace memory that city legislators could not erase.

Polysemy is further validated as rich and highly productive through frequent illustrations in the novel, showing that alternative meanings do not render each other worthless or redundant. Pilate's name is supposed to be "like a Christ-killing Pilate" (*Song* 19), and she is the immediate cause of the death of Milkman at the age of thirty-three, just like Jesus Christ. But Pilate is also Milkman's "pilot," his spiritual guide on his journey to self-realization. Elsewhere, we find that Pilate had misunderstood her father's call, "Sing," believing it to be an admonition to her, "which she did, beautifully, [and it] relieved her gloom immediately" (147). Less immediately, Pilate's singing creates blessed harmony in her house, preserves the rhyme that tells her family's history, and conveys that history to Milkman. As she lies dying, she asks Milkman to "Sing. Sing a little somethin for me," which he does, as beautifully as Pilate—even though his voice is unmelodious—because of the immense, selfless love which now motivates him. One is left to wonder what, if anything, would have been gained if Pilate had understood that her father was simply calling out his wife Sing's name.

At the end of the novel, however, as Milkman gains awareness of the importance of "names that had meaning" (329), the reader also realizes the scope of the political conflict, the dire need for a venue for semiotic, Signifyin(g), polysemic expressions that make an African American community overlook internal differences so as to assert its accomplishments, against the odds. Now Milkman fully comprehends:

> Like the street he lived on, recorded as Mains Avenue, but called Not Doctor Street by the Negroes in memory of his grandfather, who was the first colored man of consequence in that city. Never mind he probably didn't deserve their honor—they knew what kind of man he was: arrogant, color-struck, snobbish. They didn't care about that. *They were paying their respect to whatever it was that made him be a doctor in the first place, when the odds were that he'd be a yardman all his life. So they named a street after him.* (329, emphasis added)

It is noteworthy that even Macon Dead, who seeks to duplicate the dominant discourse, articulates a black consciousness when it comes to naming and the persistence of unofficial memory. He acknowledges that, at best, the dominant discourse can only cover up the semiotic, never fully erase it. Macon had an office on Not Doctor Street.

> At least he thought of it as his office, had even painted the word OFFICE on the door. But the plate-glass window contradicted him. In peeling gold

> letters arranged in a semicircle, his business establishment was declared to be Sonny's Shop. Scraping the previous owner's name was hardly worth the trouble since he couldn't scrape it from anybody's mind. His storefront office was never called anything but Sonny's Shop, although nobody now could remember thirty years back, when, presumably, Sonny did something or other there. (17)

Song of Solomon not only opens with the inscription of black experience and the determination to honor black achievement, it also ends with an African American spiritual tradition, Milkman's final call and response as he cries out to his best friend, and nature returns his call, echoing and magnifying his final ecstatic word *"Life life life life"* (336). The ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding this final scene, which we see repeated in *Paradise,* is also, Morrison tells us, a characteristic of black music:

> Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final cord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be…. Or the musicians. One always has the feeling, whether it is true or not, they may be absolutely parched, but one has the feeling that there's some more. They have the ability to make you want it, and remember the want. That is a part of what I want to put in my books. They will never fully satisfy—never fully. (McKay 411)

I disagree; *Song of Solomon* is a masterpiece that fully satisfies me, even if it makes me want some more.

Paradise, on the other hand, while also bathed in music, has little if any of the harmony that buoys *Song of Solomon.* The music in *Paradise,* until the metamorphosis of the Convent's residents at the very end, is impersonal. Its listeners are passive recipients, hence it cannot be empowering. Only at the end of the novel does music express a semiotic, erotic consciousness.[7] When Connie announces to her fellow Convent residents that she is Consolata Sosa, not a servant but the woman in charge of the Convent, and coaches them into spiritual therapy, the Convent women finally recover from their past physical and spiritual abuses. Interestingly, this is also the time when Consolata reclaims her name, no longer going by "Connie," which the white nuns who had kidnapped her gave her, with others following suit. "I call myself Consolata Sosa," she avers, asserting her agency. "And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (*P* 262).

In "Experiencing *Jazz,*" Eusebio Rodrigues explains that, "By the time she came to the writing of *Jazz,* Morrison had created a medium for herself that had a tonal stretch and an intrinsic musicality" (736). Commenting on the evolution of Morrison's style in her first four novels, Rodrigues shows how she

> had gradually…to make the language she inherited her very own, then transform it…into a powerful instrument that could play her music…. Words of all kinds flow smoothly along. Black idiom does not call attention to itself, nor is the language surface disturbed by heavy abstract Latinate words. (736–737)

In *Paradise,* Morrison intentionally reintroduces the "heavy abstract Latinate words" to illustrate their disruptive effect of the black town and its vicinity. Thus Ruby's mantra, with its arcane "…the Furrow in His Brow" chiseled into the town's communal oven, fails to unite the community, dividing it instead into two camps, each promoting one interpretation of the forgotten command: Should they "Be the Furrow," or "Beware" it? Despite the fact that the command was etched in iron, it has been forgotten, for it was first written, but never spoken, by one of the free, proud, Old Fathers. Originating in print rather than orality, the admonition was never allowed to inscribe itself in the semiotic.

However, Morrison's own style has changed significantly in the two novels, for while *Song of Solomon* frequently relies on phonetic spelling, *Paradise* is above all a written text. The following pair of citations, from the two novels illustrate this contrast. In *Song of Solomon,* an elated, euphoric Milkman tells Sweet that his great-grandfather could fly: "You hear me, Sweet? That motherfucker could fly! Could fly! He didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!" (*Song* 328). The emphasis here is clearly on hearing ("You hear me, Sweet?") and phonetics (tee double you ay). In *Paradise,* on the other hand, even in the most auditory context of the black call and-response tradition, the printed word imposes itself: "Twenty varieties of 'Amen' italicized Deek's pronouncement," (*P* 86) we read. But italics are a visual clue, the very existence of which depends on the printed text, and this comes as a disappointment from an author who comments on the importance of sound in her novels.

It is therefore not surprising that, in *Paradise,* the women seem to long for music. They are always turning the radio on, and spinning the dial to find a better station, while the music they hear, chosen for them by an anonymous, uncaring and remote disc jockey, cannot offer them the therapy that Pilate's song about her family offers her, or the albums lovingly selected and tended by Jay and Avey Johnson offers them in *Praisesong for the Widow.* Moreover, the music in *Paradise* is frequently interrupted by factors outside the women's control: the ride in a truck is over; the broadcast area ends as the car drives on; the women don't remember the radio station playing the music they had enjoyed. Throughout the novel, the women fumble with the dials, settling for second-best, musical renditions that only approximate the human voice. References to death (which I have italicized in the quotations that follow) invariably accompany

references to music. Mavis, for example, remembers the silence left behind by Bennie, who hitched a ride with her, singing all the way:

> Not a talker, small or big, Bennie sang. Songs of true love, false love, redemption; songs of unreasonable joy…. Mavis sang along once in a while, but mostly she listened and in one hundred and seventy-two miles never got tired of hearing her…. The quiet Bennie left in the Cadillac was unbearable. Mavis kept the radio on, and if one of Bennie's songs came on, she sang too, *mourning the inferior rendition.* (*P* 34–35, emphasis added)

But even the inferior rendition is soon lost as Mavis drives on, disconsolate: "Now the radio was across a field, down one road, then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was…nothing. Just an absence, which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio" (42). Such interruptions would simply not exist if music came from the women, as it does from Pilate, who, with no recourse to, or need of, a car, a radio station, electricity, or batteries, is always humming a tune. When they find the music they want, it offers them short-term relief:

> Gigi had found her station and was dancing the radio over to the open back door for reception. She danced back to the table then and poured herself more wine. Eyes closed, hips grinding, she circled her arms to enclose the neck of a magic dancer…. When last year's top tune, *"Killing Me Softly,"* came on, it was not long before they all followed suit. Even Mavis. First apart, imagining partners. Then partnered, imagining each other.
>
> Wine-soothed, they slept *deep as death* that night. (*P* 179, emphasis added)

The failure of radio music to heal, cure, or rejuvenate, stands in stark contrast to the effect of song on the protagonists in *Song of Solomon.* There, music and memory came together. But in *Paradise,* the women hope music will silence their memories. In the town of Ruby, radio music—the only music there now seems to be in Ruby—is not only an inferior rendition, it is profane, desecrating the sanctity of Ruby's most cherished meeting place, where the townsfolk gathered "to report on what done or what needed; on illness, births, deaths, comings and goings. The Oven that had witnessed the baptized entering sanctified life was now reduced to watching the lazy young…. The Oven whose every brick had heard live chords was now subject to radio music, record music—*music already dead* when it filtered through a black wire trailing from Anna's store to the Oven like a snake" (*P* 111, emphasis added).

To the Ruby patriarchs, music is evil, a snake slithering its venomous ways into their midst. To the Convent women, its offers temporary, deadening, numbing relief. Instead of serving as an aid to memory, it erases their memories. It is bound to leave the women hungry.

WHY PARADISE NECESSITATES EXCLUSION

As she finally claims agency and her real name, Consolata teaches the Convent women the necessity of wedding spirituality with sensuality, the spirit with the body, that is, the need for a contact zone where dualities come together, creating rich hybrids. Consolata tells the Convent women that, as a child, she had been taught by the nuns "my body is nothing my spirit everything" (*P* 263), which left her feeling incomplete, lacking a vital dimension. "Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263), she continues, explaining the intrinsic link between body and soul, even if one must be subjected to the other. Since the Convent women had been leading a life devoid of spirituality, she coaches them into it through "loud dreaming," the therapeutic sharing of the most intimate aspirations and heart-rending disappointments. The "loud dreaming" merges their experiences together, creating collective memories that articulate the pains of women who have been beaten, gang raped, and abused, women who have lost their children, who were betrayed by their mothers, who were turned into sex toys, or who somehow made a mess of their own lives. As they voice the emotional pain that accompanies this abuse, they are able to rise above it:

> In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love…. With Consolata in charge, like a new Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below. (264–265)

Connie/Consolata herself is a "contact zone," a young Native American child brought over from South America into the United States by Catholic nuns, and her behavior articulates the duality she lives. Her Christian upbringing makes her cringe at the use of magic, yet her love for the Reverend Mother also makes her resort to it repeatedly, to keep her alive.

> At first she tried it out of the weakness of devotion turned to panic—nothing seemed to relieve the sick woman—then, angered by helplessness, she assumed an attitude of command…. Reviving, even raising, her from time to time…. *So she had practiced,* and although it was for the benefit of the woman she loved, she knew it was anathema, that Mary Magna would have recoiled in disgust and fury knowing her life was prolonged by evil…. Troubling as it was, yoking the sin of pride to *witchcraft,* she came to terms with it in a way she persuaded herself would not offend Him or place her soul in peril. *It was a question of language. Lone called it "stepping in." Consolata said it was "seeing in."* Thus the gift was "in sight." Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it. *It was devious but it settled the argument.* (247, emphasis added)

In her discussion of the expression she coined in *Imperial Eyes,* Pratt explains that a "contact zone" is a site of "interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (7), adding that her choice of the word "contact" aims "to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters" (7). A kidnapped foreign child made to forget her own language and serve the nuns in a convent, who nevertheless grows to love Mother Superior to the point of raising her from death over and over again by practicing witchcraft, Connie/Consolata certainly illustrates the productive contact zone. Her deliberate choice of alternative terminology, "it was a question of language," reveals her aptitude at negotiating discourses, even as she is losing hers:

> The first to go were the rudiments of her first language. Every now and then she found herself speaking and thinking in that in-between place, the valley between the regulations of the first language and the vocabulary of the second. (242)

Yet her assumption of command, together with her reclamation of her Brazilian name, confirm that her agency had always been there, even if it had been suppressed by servitude.

Contact zones are productive because they are hybrid, deriving their energy from the interaction of disparate cultures, beliefs, and languages. Their growth is dependent upon such coming together. Again, *Paradise* demonstrates this by expounding on its opposite: Haven, Ruby, and the Convent all experience initial growth that eventually dissipates as they become increasingly more isolated from the rest of the world. Haven was founded in 1870 by nine disparate families, a band of wayfarers who had held different occupations in Louisiana and Mississippi and pooled their experiences and resources together in order to form a community united by their "Disallowing." "Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them" (189). The "Disallowing" explains why "neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13), and the town shrank and shrivelled away: "One thousand citizens in 1905 becoming five hundred by 1934. Then two hundred, then eighty as cotton collapsed or railroad companies laid their tracks elsewhere" (6). Finally, Haven became "a town slipping into erasure forever in every place except the heart" (201). In 1949, Haven men who had served in World War II came home to another "Disallowing" as they realized that even their serving in the U.S. Army did not remedy American racism. "So, like the ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks before they took apart their own beds. Before first light in the middle of August, fifteen families moved out of Haven—headed…deeper into Oklahoma, as far

as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfathers had made" (16). Again, the founders of Ruby sought isolation.

But Ruby cannot last. Emanating from a negative raison d'être, named after the woman who died during the willed voyage into greater isolation, the new and smaller town bears the seeds of its own destruction. The Oven, which in Haven was always on, always alive, providing the throbbing nucleus around which the townsfolk "gathered for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game" (15), had been dismantled and moved to Ruby. There, however, it proved a divisive factor. The town's population argued about the exact wording of the Old Fathers' command that had been taken apart in the move. In Ruby, the Oven was "[n]o longer the meeting place to report on what done or what needed; on illness, births, deaths, comings and goings" (111). Instead of the "live chords praising His Name" which had surrounded it in Haven, the Oven was now subjected to "dead" music. It had been desecrated by graffiti of a clenched fist; the Convent women had once danced around it, scantily dressed; and, quiet as it's kept, KD may have raped Arnette right by the Oven—or had she voluntarily taken her pants down for him?

Justifying *War,* her intended title for the novel, Morrison explains: "I wanted to open with somebody's finger on the trigger, to close when it was pulled, and to have the whole novel exist in that moment of the decision to kill or not" (Mulrine 71). Indeed, not only the framing moment of violence, but the whole novel itself is pervaded by hostility. This hostility, which culminated in the attack on the Convent, is expressed primarily in the form of exclusion by the powerful and privileged of those who are different. The Ruby townsfolk, and the founders of Haven before them, although they never got over the "Disallowing," now engage in similar practices, as they consider all outsiders as enemies. The Ruby men were pleased with the fact that their town was "unique and isolated," with "nothing for ninety miles around," "nothing at the edge," beyond the town's limits (8–9), for "neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13). Only the Convent, which had been there long before Ruby was built, stood seventeen miles away, and the townsfolk had first thought about it as "a true if aloof neighbor" (10), its residents "strange but harmless. More than harmless, helpful even on occasion" (11). But the patriarchs' love of isolation could not sufficiently buffer Ruby from the outside world that seeped in in the form of the Vietnam war, disco music blaring out of boom boxes, college, and a preacher, Reverend Misner, a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement who advocated civic disobedience and the questioning of authority! A self-righteous community, Ruby would not assume responsibility for these changes, and needed a scapegoat. "Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence… [and] the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women" (11).

The Ruby patriarchs knew isolation did not guarantee safety, yet they persevered in their intention to cut off the town from the rest of the world. Even in 1976, with no paved road leading to Ruby, the founders delighted in "being off the county road, accessible only to the lost and the knowledgeable" (186). Ruby's rejection of the outside world is a rejection of the acculturation, evolution, and hybridity which Pratt indicates are essential for healthy, productive contact zones. To the Ruby patriarchs, contact with the world is a dangerous development that threatens their cherished "racial purity" which Patricia Best, the historian conducting the genealogies of the founding families—genealogies she later destroys—chose to label "8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them" (193). Marrying an outsider, anyone who is not descended from the original families, was simply unacceptable: Menus had wanted to marry the "redbone girl" he had fallen in love with while serving in the war, but his father strongly opposed the marriage, and Menus eventually caved in to paternal pressure. Patricia's father, Roger Best, did marry an outside woman, whom he had met at an "AME Zion picnic for colored soldiers stationed at the base in Tennessee" (200), but the rest of the Ruby men never forgave him, despising him for marrying "a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering" (197). Patricia's mother died during a difficult labor, as these men refused to call a doctor. "All of the excuses were valid, reasonable. Even with their wives begging they came up with excuses, because they looked down on [the light-skinned mother] and despised [Roger] for marrying a wife with no last name" (197). Years later, the Best family was no longer represented in the annual version of the nativity play performed by the Ruby children.

Seventeen miles away, the Convent can also only be reached by dirt road, and it too follows a pattern of initial growth followed by disintegration. At first, the Convent is brewing with life brought in from the outside by the women from widely differing walks of life who take temporary shelter there. Its productivity is symbolized by the constant activity in the kitchen, where the stove is always on, bread is always rising or baking, peppers are drying, and barbecue sauce and stews are simmering. The Convent "took people in—lost folks or folks who needed a rest "(11), who stayed there until they replenished their energy, and moved on. Gradually, four women take up residence there, sharing everything, merging memories, but no longer making contact with the outside world. The Convent grows decrepit, turning into a virtual prison for these five bodies, even as their souls transcend the physical decay. The Convent has no electricity or running water; it is badly in needs of repairs that will not be made. In fact, it is going against Consolata's teachings of harmonious binary. As it gradually stops being a "contact zone," the Convent too is doomed.

Just as Macon Dead, the son of a slave, duplicated the dominant discourse by wanting to "own people" and place material possessions above any consideration for less privileged people, the Ruby patriarchs' exclusion of "the needy, the defenseless, the different" is a duplication of the dominant discourse that had once targeted them, the racism the Old Fathers had encountered as they unsuccessfully sought to join an already-existing community, upon gaining their freedom. Now, they are "Disallowing" all others: Ruby had "nothing to serve a traveler: no diner, no police, no gas station, no public phone, no movie house, no hospital" (12). An outsider in Ruby had better behave and leave promptly, for they are "Ninety miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety from the nearest badge" (13). Only Reverend Misner, reluctantly allowed into Ruby because he is a preacher, a necessary person the town could not sprout by itself, realizes the cost of isolation: "We live in the world, Pat. The whole world," he tells his friend, herself the barely tolerated fruit of the unwelcome union of Roger with a woman "of racial tampering." "Separating us, isolating us—that's always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future" (210).

Despite her discomfort with labels because they are too confining, Morrison acknowledges an affinity with Gabriel García Marquez. "I follow Marquez. I read anything by Marquez," she says of the writer who singlehandedly introduced magical realism to the literate world (Jaffrey). Magical realism is especially appropriate for African American narratives because it consciously and politically dissolves the dichotomies of reality and fiction, mystifying history instead of presenting it as absolute fact. By blurring distinctions between various dichotomies, magical realism is also the most appropriate vehicle for presenting the town of Ruby simultaneously as a successful community whose members, ex-slaves, have achieved property ownership, wealth, and independence, even though they are the victims of racism and discrimination on the part of whites and other Blacks, a racism they perpetuate themselves as they valorize certain skin shades over others. With the ghosts of babies running around the Convent, as well as the occasional apparition, accompanied by a flurry of butterflies, of a friendly stranger in a Ruby garden, *Paradise* borrows from magical realism, even if it does not readily qualify as a magical realist novel. In its depiction of the disintegration of a town that cherished its isolation, it does, however, resonate deeply with echoes of Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* one of the most powerful illustrations of the importance of permeability in diasporic and postcolonial communities.

In Marquez's masterpiece, the House of Buendia eventually goes to ruin because it would no longer allow outsiders to join in. Ursula Buendia, possibly driven by her obsessive fear of the incest taboo, but more probably motivated by a conviction that a community can only thrive, evolve, and develop as it incorporates outside elements into its everyday regime, had been ever

welcoming strangers into the household. Indeed, even as she perceives that strangers may and most probably will disturb the order, sanity, and hygiene of the household, she trusts their long-term effect will be beneficial, even essential for survival:

> "Open the windows and the doors," she shouted. "Cook some meat and fish, buy the largest turtles around, let strangers come and spread their mats in the corners and urinate in the rose bushes and sit down and eat as many times as they want, and belch and rant and muddy everything with their boots, and let them do whatever they want to us, because it's the only way to drive off ruin." (*HYS* 336).

But Ursula is getting very old and has been pushed aside by Fernanda, the new "lady of the house" among whose first decisions is the prohibition of her own brother-in-law from visiting after he takes a job as a foreman in the banana company. "For her, with no further questions asked, proper people were those who had nothing to do with the banana company. Even José Arcadi Segundo, her brother-in-law, was the victim of her discriminatory jealousy…. 'He won't ever come into this house again,' Fernanda said, 'as long as he carries the rash of the foreigners'" (254). Eventually, Fernanda, who had initiated the custom of closing the doors and windows to avoid the sun during siesta time, until "in the end they were closed for good" (200), is in complete command, imposing her hermetic rule upon the house shortly before the final destruction scene:

> As long as Ursula had full use of her faculties some of the old customs survived and the life of the family kept some quality of her impulsiveness, but when she lost her sight and the weight of her years relegated her to a corner, the circle of rigidity begun by Fernanda from the moment she arrived finally closed completely and no one but she determined the fate of the family…. The doors of the house, wide open from dawn until bedtime, were closed during siesta time under the pretext that the sun heated up the bedrooms and in the end they were closed for good. (*HYS* 213)

Ursula offers a healthy model of domestic stability along with openness. She is intent on maintaining order and "the old customs" in the Buendia household, while welcoming outside input into the village of Macondo. While some scholars have read her as a domestic tyrant, the stereotypical Latin American matriarch, Ursula is a dynamic force who, in many ways, opens up the town of Macondo to the rest of the world. When her son, José Arcadi, is missing, Ursula goes out searching for him, and returns "exalted, rejuvenated, with new clothes in a style that was unknown in the village" (40). She also brings with her a number of men and women she met during her five-month absence, people who lived "only two days away, where there were towns that

received mail every month in the year and where they were familiar with the implements of good living" (40). As these outsiders join Macondo, the Buendia household grows and prospers.

This openness is clearly different from the Ruby people, who never allowed their community to become a contact zone, never welcomed an outsider. While Ursula takes in the numerous illegitimate children fathered by Colonel Aureliano, children who are largely racially mixed, Ruby does not abide by "racial tampering," accepting only one shade, "8-R." By contrast, race is irrelevant in the Convent—were it not for the opening sentence of *Paradise,* we would not know there is a "white girl" there. The fault line that leads to the ultimate demise of Ruby is its incapacity to translate its own inner fluidity, the change of its members from slaves to successful patriarchs, onto the outside environment. Instead, Ruby is outwardly rigid, rigorously intolerant and inflexible, resisting change and all outside contributions. Geographically, demographically, and historically located at an optimal contact point, it fails to live up to its potential. By sealing itself off from the rest of the world, it is bringing about its own doom. Hybridity is essential for survival in the diaspora.

Ursula has no control over the exploitation of Macondo by the North American banana company, just as the Haven and Ruby patriarchs themselves have no control over the racism they experience from whites and lighter-skinned Blacks. However, the responses of Ursula and the Haven and Ruby patriarchs to the outside threat again are essentially different. Fearing the collapse of her household, Ursula frantically seeks to open it up to the outside world, thus acknowledging that isolation is death. Ruby, on the other hand, had sought further isolation and the rejection of any possible contact with the rest of the world. Writing about the interaction between dominant and subordinate, Pratt explained that "[w]hile subjugated people cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their culture, and what they use it for" (6). What the Ruby people absorb is the very evil they suffer from, a stifling racism that eventually leads to their own destruction. With a single, belated exception, they remain unaware that they are duplicating the exclusionary methods of the dominant discourse they are seeking to escape. Only at the very end, after the attack, does one of the Ruby patriarchs, Deacon, comment on the ugliness of their behavior. Trying to justify their attack to the rest of the Ruby folks, Steward states: "The evil is in this house…. Go down in that cellar and see for yourself." But Deacon interjects: "My brother is lying. This is our doing. Ours alone. And we bear the responsibility" (*P* 291).

The rejection, by lighter-skinned Blacks, of the founders of Haven, is a duplication, through internalization, of white racism. The racism of Haven and Ruby, their rejection of anyone who is not extremely dark, an "8-R," is also a duplication, and continuation through reversal, of the discourse of racial

exclusion. Marquez concludes his saga with the observation that "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth" (*HYS* 416). Similarly, the Ruby patriarchs, cherishing their isolation, can not thrive long:

> Born out of an old hatred…their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to [Misner], was an unnecessary failure. (*P* 306)

THEY GOT POWERS

We have examined, so far, the tension between Milkman and Pilate, and Ruby and the Convent, in terms of patriarchal and matriarchal households and communities. The patriarchal articulates a dominant discourse, holding a rigid exclusionary viewpoint and fronting a Western epistemology favoring literacy, individualism, and linearity; the matriarchal expresses an alternative discourse with a flexible viewpoint, favoring an Africana, oral, communal, cyclical, epistemology. While none of the above traits alone would qualify either household or community as masculinist or feminist, it soon becomes obvious that, as clusters, they do fall along such gendered lines. Yet just as she rejects the label "magical realism," Morrison also refuses to be called a "feminist" writer, because she is intrinsically uncomfortable with any label. "I don't write 'ist' novels," she told an interviewer who inquired whether *Paradise* was a "feminist novel" (Jaffrey). There is little doubt, however, that her work favors the women's communities, presenting them as capable and spiritually wholesome, not unlike the strong women who peopled her own childhood, even as they remained "unlabeled":

> I think I merged those two words, black and feminist, growing up, because I was surrounded by black women who were very tough and very aggressive and who always assumed they had to work and rear children and manage homes. They had enormously high expectations of their daughters, and cut no quarters with us; it never occurred to me that that was feminist activity. (Jaffrey)

In keeping with the polysemy of the subordinate in both *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise,* women initiate the contact between the two communities, functioning as mediators between the two poles, as they ignore arbitrary restrictions and prohibitions imposed by men. In *Song of Solomon,* Pilate, after years of wandering various states, simply showed up one day in Macon's house, and guessing he had not touched his wife Ruth in ten years, prepared an aphrodisiac brew that resulted in Ruth's pregnancy with Milkman. Years

later, she introduces young Milkman to his extended family and cultural history, despite her brother's prohibition of any communication between the aunt (his sister) and nephew (his son). Yet it is that relationship that gives Milkman his wings. In *Paradise,* the Ruby patriarchs condemn all interaction with the Convent, yet their wives go there for aphrodisiacs and abortive potions, that is, for agency, the means to control their own bodies, and their sons for their first experience of love, given freely by the Convent women. In fact, the Convent provides its residents and visitors with a space of nurturing, spirituality, sensuality and recovery, much like Pilate's cabin, in *Song of Solomon,* provided Milkman with food, drink, laughter, song, love, family, and eventually, the power to fly. Finally, in both novels, the alternative communities are characterized by music and/or song: Milkman's first impression of Pilate's house is directly and very closely associated with the song the three women were singing in chorus as they went about their business, and Milkman acquires the power to fly when he finally learns the lyrics to the song Pilate was humming. The Convent women are equally associated with music, even if it is not ancestral music that tells them their history, but music they hear on the radio, on the road, on the run.

Macon Dead and his household are literate, but spiritually and culturally dead, with the exception of Milkman, who becomes attuned to sounds as he travels South in search of his ancestry. From the sounds of nature, which he must hear during the hunt, to the aural effect of Solomon/Shalimar/Shalimone, which he must understand and interpret in order to locate the town where his ancestor took flight, to his final participation in a call and response with nature, Milkman evolves into orality. Raised by former slaves and later herself a migrant worker child, Pilate has a minimal education—she first went to school when she was twelve, but the preacher molested her, and she left shortly afterwards, with the fourth-grade geography book she always cherished—and it is safe to assume that Reba and Hagar have no schooling. Yet Pilate's illiterate household keeps alive the memory, talking, and even singing it. In *Paradise,* Ruby has its own school, and even the Ruby women, brought into the fold, are critical of the Convent residents' poor orthography. The Ruby patriarchs are literate, yet the townsfolk are seen as obsessive about trivial details, even as their actions belie the motives of their concern. Education cannot prevent the town's corruption. In the Convent, formal education is presented in a negative light as the forced assimilation of Arapaho girls, and later Connie, into European Christian discourse. We are told, however, that Connie, who revives the decrepit building with humming and "murmurs of love," has remained unlettered: "Consolata learned to manage any and every thing that did not require paper" (*P* 242).

Whether it is acknowledged or not, Morrison's preference for one type of community over the other is further illustrated in the examples of Macon's household: devoid of love, culture, intimacy, self-confidence, and music; and

of Ruby: hostile, racist, violent. They are countered by the two female communities, Pilate's house and the Convent, both of which are always open to outsiders, welcoming all visitors. To better articulate the dilemma of double consciousness, and the polysemy of the diasporan, the hyphenated American, both Pilate's house and the Convent are female places that are not exclusionary—both welcome men, offering them shelter, food, drink, music, and love as needed. Most importantly, both center around a rootworker, the conjure woman so dreaded by the dominant discourse, for she possesses powers that undo the master's. The tension would not have erupted in violence were it not for Ruby's fear of the powers of Consolata and her disciples.

Conjuring, a syncretic blend of world religions and beliefs, operates on a number of levels in Africana literature. Like the ring shout, which developed among slaves who were not allowed to openly practice their religious beliefs, conjuring allows for the articulation, in a hostile environment, of African worldviews about the spiritual world. An early illustration of this fusion appears in the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* where Douglass takes the root that Sandy offers him as a protection against the brutality of Covey, the "Negro breaker." Douglass had been a devout Christian up to the point when he was given to Covey, where his treatment was so harsh as to make him consider the "black art."

> My religious views on the subject of resisting my master has suffered a serious shock by the savage persecution to which I had been subjected, and my hands were no longer tied by my religion. Master Thomas's indifference had severed the last link. I had backslidden from this point in the slaves' religious creed, and I soon had occasion to make my fallen state known to my Sunday-pious brother, Covey. (121)

Armed with the root, Douglass feels empowered, as "[t]he very color of the man was forgotten" (121), and he fights back, returning blow for blow as Covey wrestles with him but fails to whip him even once. "I was a changed being after that fight. I was *nothing* before; I was a *man* now," (124) he recalls, and he determines to take flight, which he does, successfully. And he remains Christian.

Some conjurers, or rootworkers, are affiliated with organized religion, where they function as ministers, counselors, or teachers. Others dissociate themselves completely from Christianity. Yet just as a biracial person will often be designated by their "otherness"—part Asian, part African, part Latina, with the unmodified signifier, "part Euro/White," mostly silenced—conjuring is generally thought of as African. In this light, it must be emphasized that conjuring is fully a product of the American "contact zone," a mix of various native African animist religions that blended together as the Yoruba, Akan, Asante, Mandingo, and other Africans became enslaved Americans, together with Islam—for while no records were kept of the religions of the enslaved

Africans, it is now believed that between 10 and 20 percent of the captured Africans were Muslim. These, then, are the disparate beliefs brought over from the continent. In the Americas, they mixed with Christianity as well as various Native American religions and the skills of Native shamans, together with their knowledge of the properties and powers of native herbs.[8] It is only to be expected that conjuring should occur among the less acculturated or assimilated communities, as it is heavily frowned upon by Christianity. Nevertheless, hoodoo beliefs, as they have been recorded, illustrate the fusion of African slave culture with Christianity. Zora Neale Hurston, whose *Mules and Men* (1935) is generally regarded as the first collection of African American folklore and beliefs collected by an African American, writes that the great variety of Negro folklore shows the adaptability of African Americans for whom "nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low" (*Norton* 1024). The hoodoo version of Genesis, for example, tells of "six days of magic spells and mighty words, and the world with its elements above and below was made" (*Mules* 193). Further, Hurston adds "the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of white civilization, *everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.* He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, *and most certainly the religion of his new country"* (*Norton* 1025, emphasis added). Hurston demonstrates the latter claim in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), which explores the myth of Moses as appropriated in the oral traditions of American slaves that fuse the leader of the enslaved Israelites with an African American hoodoo priest.

Certainly conjuring has an immense appeal to subjugated peoples, as it gives them hope against the odds, suggesting that, with the right skills, medicinal preparations, spells, and spiritual aptitude, one can modify the unfortunate course of one's life. Significantly, the conjurer, frequently a woman, is endowed with intuitive knowledge and powers of agency and resistance that can undo negative circumstances by overriding the power of the oppressor. According to Carol S.Taylor Johnson, the conjurer "is expected to provide a diagnosis, identify the source of the problem, cast a spell upon a selected victim through the use of charms and/or poison for the purpose of avenging the malignant deeds of an enemy, provide counteractants to remove a spell that has been placed maliciously upon a victim, provide a protective 'hand' or charm for a client to help him [or her] control antagonistic circumstances" (168).

Over the last century, numerous studies of conjuring and voodoo have been published by white and black writers, revealing a wide array of beliefs (and disbeliefs) about these practices; from Newbell Niles Puckett's dismissive *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926), the ground-breaking work of Zora Neale Hurston, and the five-volume *Hoodoo, Conjuration, Witchcraft, Rootwork,* by Henry Middleton Hyatt (1970), to the more recent *A Peculiar People: Slave*

Religion and Community Culture Among the Gullahs (1988) by Margaret Washington Creel, to name but a few. From these, and various articles, can be deducted a composite image of the conjurer. Among their characteristics are: a very dark skin which, according to Lindsay Tucker in "Recovering the Conjure Woman," suggests "these conjurers may have been more recently arrived Africans or perhaps the least acculturated" (186 5n). Indeed, Frederick Douglass describes his savior, Sandy, as "a genuine African, [who] had inherited some of the so-called magical powers said to be possessed by the Eastern nations" (118). Conjurers are experts in herbal medicine, and generally select an apprentice whose power they detect even as it lay dormant, for they are eager to transmit their knowledge to a trustworthy disciple. They are supposed to have psychic, intuitive powers: the Ibos, according to the story of the Flying Africans—surely the greatest conjurers of all—could tell, immediately upon landing in the Americas, what the future held for them, and they simply turned around and headed back for Africa. Frederick Douglass says of his friend: "I saw in Sandy too deep an insight into human nature, with all his superstition, not to have some respect for his advice" (119). Conjurers are said to live, or at least practice, in mysterious places: on the edges of towns, in caves, or in seemingly-abandoned shacks. The marginality of the locale strikes me as fully understandable, as the practice itself is frowned upon. Hurston notes that a snake, live or in replica, was present wherever she observed hoodoo being practiced. Other, less-consistent traits are androgyny, the trickster capacity to alter one's appearance, and a providential birth.

Critics have already pointed out that Pilate is a conjure woman: she was born under unique circumstances, "birthing herself when her mother died in labor, and immediately her umbilical cord disappeared, leaving her with a smooth belly. As a teenager, she lived for three years with a rootworker who taught her a lot, before asking her to leave because a navel is "for people who were born natural" (*Song* 143), and Pilate obviously wasn't. Putting her knowledge to good use, Pilate brewed the aphrodisiac potion that brought Macon to his wife, against all but his most immediate wishes. Ruth recalls:

> She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food…. It worked too. Macon came to me for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came…. And two months later I was pregnant. When he found out about it, he immediately suspected Pilate and he told me to get rid of the baby. But I wouldn't and Pilate helped me stand him off. (*Song* 125)

Pilate is also a trickster, capable of physically altering her appearance to sound more convincing as a small, weak woman, preventing the police from

incarcerating Milkman and Guitar. Her strength is nevertheless phenomenal: with her bare hands she knocks out Reba's abusive lover as well as Milkman, when he returns from his journey South. Her house, lit only with candles, is pervaded with a "piny-winy smell" that Milkman found "narcotic" (40). Pilate looks African, as Macon remarks to his son before repeating his prohibition:

> If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too…. I haven't changed my mind, Macon [Milkman]. I don't want you over there…. That woman's no good. She's a snake, and can charm you like a snake, but still a snake. (54)

Acting like an African, Pilate preserved the Africana history of resistance, empowering the next generation.

Paradise features not one, but two rootworkers/conjurers: Lone DuPres and Consolata, each of whom displays many of the characteristics traditionally associated with conjurers. Lone, for example, was orphaned at the very young age of two, but was saved by "a gift from something that, whatever it was, was not God, and which she had used as early as two, when she positioned herself to be found in the yard when her mother was dead in the bed" (*P* 272). Lone is aware of her psychic powers, which give her knowledge "neither memory nor history can say or record: the 'trick' of life and its 'reason'" (272). Adopted by the DuPreses, she serves as an apprentice to Faith, the midwife and medicine woman. Lone, who has birthed all the Ruby mothers, is a skilled midwife and has never lost a woman in childbirth. Even when her midwifing services are no longer needed, she continues to prepare medicinal potions, gathering herbs and roots at specific hours to ensure their best effect. "She spent her time gathering medicinal herbs…and surveying the fields, which invited her not because they were open but because they were full of secrets" (272). It was as she gathered herbs at four o'clock in the morning that she overheard the men discussing the ambush. Lone, like many conjurers, never marries, preferring to mentor an apprentice instead.

Her apprentice is Consolata, unaware of her own powers until Lone forces her to use them to revive Soane and Deacon's son, Scout Morgan.

> Lone didn't visit often, but when she did she gave Consolata information that made her uneasy. Consolata explained that she didn't believe in magic; that the church and everything holy forbade its claims to knowingness and its practice. Lone wasn't aggressive. She simply said, "Sometimes folks need more." (244)

When Consolata objected, Lone responded with the emphasis on wholeness that Consolata herself is later heard to impress on her followers.

> "Never," said Consolata. "In my faith, faith is all I need."
>
> "You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world." (244)

Consolata gradually overcomes her reluctance and joins the practice, just in time. Scout was fifteen years old, drunk, and driving his friend's father's truck, when he fell asleep at the wheel.

> Lone, sitting at Consolata's table, sensed rather than heard the accident…. She rose and grabbed Consolata's arm…. When they arrived, Easter and July had pulled Scout from the cab and were howling over his dead body. Lone turned to Consolata, saying: "I'm too old now. Can't do it anymore, but you can."
>
> …"Step in. Just step on in. Help him, girl!"
>
> Consolata looked at the body and without hesitation removed her glasses and focussed on the trickles of red discoloring his hair. (244–245)

When Consolata successfully brings Scout back to life, Lone comments: "You gifted. I knew it from the start" (245).

Consolata features countless conjure-woman traits. Little is known of her birth, but she seems to have been an orphaned child in an urban Brazilian slum when she was kidnapped by the nuns. Consolata is photophobic, nearly blind, but visionary. "Her colorless eyes saw nothing clearly except what took place in the minds of others" (248). Her home, like that of many conjurers, is shrouded in mystery: a former "pleasure house" retaining traces of the decadent and obscene taste of its previous owner, shaped like a bullet (or a phallus?), surrounded by a well-tended garden, seventeen miles from a tiny town, ninety miles from civilization. There, she raises the dead.

A conjurer par excellence, Connie/Consolata represents the eclectic fusion of religious systems that characterizes many contact zones, including the postcolonial Native American, African, and Afrodiasporan communities. Unlike most conjurers, however, she does not look African, but is distinguished instead by "tea-colored hair" tied up in "Hiawatha braids [that] trailed down her shoulders" (38), and eyes "like mint leaves" (228). As she acquires her powers to raise the dead, the greenness fades, until her eyes eventually lose all color. She reconciles the Christianity imposed upon her with trances, dances, and vociferations, and such non-Christian rituals as communal chanting, loud dreaming, and collective memories that negate or disregard individual pain and responsibility, seeking instead to redeem an entire community, whatever its size. Under her guidance, the Convent becomes a sacred space of cyclicality inhabited by both dead and living—the five women as well as Mary Magna and the dead and never-born babies. Most importantly, she practices witchcraft countless times to raise her Catholic adoptive mother, because she can not bear the thought of letting her go. Only

when Mary Magna finally dies does Consolata renounce Christianity with a special farewell to God: "I'll miss You," she told Him. "I really will" (*P* 251).

Her metamorphosis, from the child, Consolata, to the Convent maid, Connie, to Consolata again, illustrates the cyclicality of her life, and takes her back to her roots. After bidding Christianity farewell, Consolata is visited by a man whose presence makes her feel "light, weightless, as though she could move, if she wanted to, without standing up" (252). Since she is virtually blind, she cannot distinguish his features at first, and he comes very close. "Not six inches from her face, he removed his tall hat. Fresh, tea-colored hair came tumbling down, cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He took off his glasses then and winked, a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes, she saw, were as round and green as new apples" (252).

Long before Consolata's metamorphosis, however, Ruby had grown suspicious, feeling threatened by the "bevy of strange Catholic women with no male mission to control them" (233). In fact, the men's distrust is a result of their awareness of the power of these women who undo their work and will not come under their control. Such power is a challenge to them, an affront they must thwart. It is particularly significant that the Ruby patriarchs do not resent the Convent women's agency when it pampers their needs: they fully appreciate the Convent's peppers, which no one in Ruby has ever been able to grow. They thoroughly enjoy the sex which the Convent women offer freely, profusely. Even Deacon, who would only marry an "8-R," finds the brown-haired, green-eyed Consolata extremely beautiful. Yet they are unforgiving when the women's agency threatens their masculinity, their patriarchal status. Deacon Morgan, for example, "did not trust the medicine she [his wife Soane] took and he certainly did not trust its source" (112), although that "source" is also where he got the peppers he relished. Deacon's nephew, KD, had a four-year affair with Gigi, a Convent woman, and must have been relieved that no child came of that relationship. But when he impregnated Arnette, a Ruby girl, he resented the Convent's undoing of his paternity. His own uncles (and guardians since his father's death) regret the fact that this union between two Ruby families was not allowed to come to fruition. "Perhaps they had made a mistake in 1970, discouraging KD and Fleet's daughter. She was pregnant but, after a short stay at the Convent, she sure didn't have it" (113), they think. Arnette, a pregnant teenager with college ambitions, is irrelevant to them, for in their minds, she is first and foremost Fleet's daughter. But Arnette lost the baby and did go to college. As one of the attackers tells his fellow-conspirators before the pre-dawn raid: "You think they got powers? I *know* they got powers. Question is whose power is stronger…. If they stayed to themselves, that'd be something. But they don't. They meddle…and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families" (275–276).

Macon's prohibition could not stop Milkman from going to Pilate's and acquiring the knowledge, maturity, and love his father was denying him.

Similarly, the Ruby patriarch's pre-dawn attack cannot end the effect of the Convent. Armed with guns, ropes, and handcuffs, nine men attack the Convent with its five residents. "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18). They shoot the white girl first, then Consolata, but her visionary power radiates still: "Soane and Lone DuPres close the two pale eyes but can do nothing about the third one, wet and lipless, in between" (291). Then Dovey comes in, announcing: "'She's gone.' 'You sure?' asks Lone. 'Go look for yourself.' 'I will,'" replies Lone (291).

What else does Lone do, besides "look"? The gift was in sight, Consolata had believed. The next morning, when the caretaker comes to prepare the five bodies for the funeral, none is to be found. "Three women were down in the grass, he'd been told. One in the kitchen. Another across the hall. He searched everywhere…. No bodies. Nothing. Even the Cadillac was gone" (292). The shooting spree nevertheless visits retribution on Ruby with the town's first mortality, Save-Marie, an innocent child. Equally devastating to the Ruby patriarchs is the state of the Oven as the would-be killers return to town: "Rain cascading off the Oven's head meets mud speckled with grout flakes washed away from bricks. The Oven shifts, just slightly, on one side. The impacted ground on which it rests is undermined" (287). The "mess" has seeped into Ruby, brought about not by the harmless if powerful women, but by the hateful men, and it undermines their homes, their families, and the Oven.

The final questions remain: Did the Ruby men kill these women or merely set them free from a building that was growing decrepit after it had stopped being such a welcoming place? Did these women escape, once again, the wrath, violence, and murderous intolerance of the dominant discourse? Were these women witches, and if so, did the Ruby vigilantes inadvertently release three, four, or even five conjure-women into the world? The rumors, reports, gossip, and guessing aggrandize the legends of the occupants of the Convent. No bodies are to be found that would provide evidence of death. And we know, from African American folklore, that the disappearance of a body is one indicator of the magical powers of its inhabitant:

> If you want to find out for sure if she was a witch, all you have to do is go to Richland County's cemetery, find her grave, and dig. Folks in Lee's Meadow say ain't nothing there but an empty hole. Witches don't lie down too long, you know. (McGill 319)

NOTES

1. Milkman's active search closely parallels that of Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow,* as both protagonists must make a trip south (to the Caribbean in Avey's case), abandon their middle-class accoutrements (three-piece suit in Milkman's case, fur stole in Avey's), temporarily forget time (both loose their watches), and agree to join in a community activity (the hunt in Milkman's case, the excursion in Avey's),

before they can recover their cultural heritage. *Song of Solomon* was published in 1977, *Praisesong* in 1983. Whether she was conscious of it or not, the fact that Marshall produced an episode so similar to one by Morrison strikes me as an expression of the "tradition of black women writing" which Morrison herself wrote about when she explained that her work continues where that of Hurston leaves off, despite the fact that she had never read the works of her predecessor. The Black aesthetic tradition features a number of recurrent motifs, and many of the elements in Milkman's and Avey's journeys are amongst them.

2. On the threat of the dissolution of African American culture heralded by social integration, see bell hooks, "Black Identity," where she writes "Ultimately it was racial integration, and the new class divisions among blacks which it created, that led to the formation of a radically different cultural context so disruptive it created a black identity crisis…. Racial integration altered the face of blackness. The separate and distinct culture of blackness that had been constructed in the midst of racial apartheid was disrupted by profound changes in economic opportunity, geographical shifts, and access to white institutions that had once been segregated" (*KR* 241–42).

3. Morrison has written about this in *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J.Simpson Case,* a collection of essays she co-edited with Claudia Brodsky Lacour. In an 1999 interview (Jaffrey), she claims: "I have never been more convinced of anything than that [Simpson's innocence], precisely because of 'motive' and 'opportunity.'"

4. I distinguish between the diaspora of people of African descent, who have a large continent teeming with different cultures and languages, but no specific country to return to, and the diaspora of Jews and Palestinians, for example, whose homeland and culture are very specific, if still unattainable for the latter.

5. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism,* 52–53. See also Smitherman, *Talkin' and Signifyin': The Language of Black America.*

6. For an excellent analysis of orality in *Song of Solomon,* see Middleton, "From Orality to Literacy," in *New Essays on Song of Solomon,* ed. Valerie Smith.

7. I use the term "erotic" with the connotations Lorde underscores in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power," in *Sister Outsider* where she explains: "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (55).

8. I will be analyzing conjuring as a contact zone phenomenon at greater length in my next book, tentatively entitled *Spell-Bound, Unbound: Conjuring as the Practice of Freedom.*

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: "With Nomad Memory and Intermittent Voice"

The Africana Women's Aesthetic Tradition

Aunt Habiba's most popular tale, which she narrated on special occasions only, was about "The Woman With Wings," who could fly away from the courtyard whenever she wanted to. Every time Aunt Habiba told the story, the women in the courtyard would tuck their caftans into their belts, and dance with their arms spread wide as if they were about to fly. Cousin Chama, who was seventeen, had me confused for years, because she managed to convince me that all women had invisible wings, and that mine would develop too, when I was older.

—FATIMA MERNISSI, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*

We will not survive by joining the game according to the rules set out by our enemies; we will not survive by imitating the doublespeak bullshit/nonthink standard English of the powers that be.

—JUNE JORDAN, "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation"

The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew. Our words are not without meaning. They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

—BELL HOOKS, "On Self-Recovery"

In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, another Africana novelist who experienced the inhibiting alienation resulting from the fact that "the writers I had been taught to love were either male or white" (Naylor 189), Toni Morrison explained that she herself had never read any of Zora Neale Hurston's writings until after she published her first two novels. Morrison adds, however, that she is not surprised at the similarities between her work and Hurston's. Both writers belong to what she called the black aesthetic tradition:

> And many people who are trying to show certain kinds of connections between myself and Zora Neale Hurston are always dismayed and disappointed in me because I hadn't read Zora Neale Hurston except for one little short story before I began to write…. In their efforts to establish a tradition, that bothers them a little bit. And I said, "No, no, you should be happy about that." Because the fact that I had never read Zora Neale Hurston and wrote *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* anyway means that the tradition really exists. You know, if I had read her, then you could say that I consciously was following in the footsteps of her, but the fact that I never read her and still there may be whatever they're finding…makes the cheese more binding, not less, because it means the world as perceived by black women at certain times does exist, however they treat it and whatever they select out of it to record, there is that. (Naylor 213–214)

In my study, I have tried to demonstrate that there is an equally vibrant tradition that unites Africana women writers in various countries, both continental and diasporan. This tradition hinges on a number of factors these women have in common, first amongst them being the African heritage they celebrate, preserve, and transmit. By so doing, they are already engaging in an act of resistance against the efforts of the dominant discourse to erase, if not completely obliterate, that heritage. Consider, for a moment, the implications of the sentence you have just read, if the words "erase," or "obliterate," were replaced with "denigrate" or "blacken." Even as I write this, it is impossible for me to accurately convey my ideas if I were to suggest that one is to take pride in the fact that the dominant discourse has "denigrated" one's accomplishments. The dominant discourse's attempt to denigrate the accomplishments of Africana people does not "blacken" such accomplishments, rendering them culturally "blacker," it denies their validity. Language is indeed a place of struggle, and the Africana writers I have discussed have chosen to wrangle with it.

As writers, these women vacillate between the orality they cherish, which they acknowledge as the matrix of the knowledge of their community, and the written text they produce that inscribes that orality. As women writers, they enter that text, the dominant discourse, as nonnative speakers. The very language they use, whether French or English, is also removed from them, for

it is the language native to their oppressors that they have nevertheless seized to denounce their oppression. I have tried to demonstrate that as these writers became fluent in the language of their oppression, they also modified it, shaping it to reflect their own experience, which had hitherto remained unrepresented. In other words, they did use the master's tools, but only after reshaping them to suit the function they would use them for. Again, why is it that we can take pride in "mastering" a language, when there are no positive connotations to being a "mistress" of it, only incongruity? By *mastering* a discourse to express a *woman's* experience, these writers are ever ambiguous, ever ambivalent, polyvocal, expressing the duality of contact zone hybrids.

Africana women novelists are mediators, then, functioning liminally. As such, it is not surprising that their stories always feature travel, whether it is the nomadism of the postcolonial subject or the forced uprooting of the enslaved African, or both, in the case of the postcolonial Africana subject. More importantly, however, their stories feature the return trip, which Marshall has called "the reverse Middle Passage," that allows for healing and the restoration of wholeness. In *Fantasia,* Djebar visits the site of her ancestors' massacre before writing of their resistance, and in *A Sister to Sheherazade,* even the "liberated" Isma returns to her native town after an exhilarating sojourn in France: "The town with the ancient harbour where my journey will end is my aunt's birthplace, as well as mine. The place where the child was born, too: I returned there when the time came for my confinement" *(SS* 159). In *No Telephone to Heaven,* Clare returns to Jamaica to join the guerrilla war of independence from neocolonialism. In *Praisesong for the Widow,* Avey resumes her pilgrimage to Ibo Landing, and in *Daughters,* Ursa-Bea finally reaches psychological emancipation in the Caribbean, although she was born and educated in the United States. In *Song of Solomon,* Milkman must retrace his aunt's steps, including a stay in the South, before gaining his wings. The return trip underscores the importance of memory as a healing device—no matter how traumatic the experience one remembers, its unearthing is always beneficial, whereas distancing oneself from it leads to disempowering alienation.

In fact, the commonalities among these authors, in both form and contents, are surprisingly numerous, and perhaps even greater than I have had the opportunity to notice in my deliberately focused study. Stylistically, the four writers I have discussed have evolved from the use of a traditional, if highly complex narrative, to multivoiced storytelling: Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* weaves autobiography with interviews of Algerian women and official reports by colonial administrators, while *A Sister to Scheherazade* features two women's intertwined histories, even though one woman speaks for herself and for the silenced, though not silent, "sister." Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* has a single narrative voice, but is nonlinear, and its two protagonists are complex, multiple, and protean, ever transgressing boundaries

of color and gender, while the novel ends with the remembrance of the mother tongue. *Free Enterprise,* on the other hand, features a number of first-person narratives and incorporates epistolary correspondence between the characters. Marshall's *Praise song for the Widow* examines the silencing of spontaneous utterances, while *Daughters* ends this silence as it features the reempowered voices of a number of women. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* tells of the freedom made possible through the recovery of oral knowledge, while *Paradise,* where each chapter is entitled after a different woman, illustrates the dire consequences of the duplication of the dominant discourse of exclusion, racism, and sexism. Our authors have nevertheless packaged these various messages in the novel, a European genre, written in a European language, thus underscoring the inevitability of their double consciousness as Africana, postcolonial and/or diasporan women writers. It is a duality they seem to negotiate quite successfully, after an initial appraisal of the situation, which each has expressed differently—Djebar and Cliff with a lengthy period of silence as they realized they knew the oppressor's tongue better than their own, Marshall with the continuing investigation of the cost of "upword mobility," and Morrison with the inscription of Black English into the dominant discourse. All four writers remedy the fact that they write novels by foregrounding the oral and alternative knowledge they are in a privileged position to access and transmit as women of color.

Scholars of postcolonial literature have noted that postcolonial and immigrant writers tend to shy away from closure, because they view their identity as still in progress, or in the making. "One of the most striking features of Beur narratives is the frequency with which they end with departures," writes Alec Hargreaves about the novels produced by the Beurs, the French-born children and grandchildren of North African immigrants in France (164). "These open-ended conclusions reflect the unsettled conditions in which the children of immigrants live, and the deeply unsettling effects of this on their sense of identity" (165). Although the label "immigrant" is still frequently, and wrongly, applied to them, the Beurs are simply people of color, not foreigners. Yet they are viewed as "Other" in France—the country of their birth, the only country they know. As such, their plight resonates with that of Afrodiasporan writers in the United States, who also produce a striking number of open-ended novels, always allowing room for change.

The eight Africana novels we have looked at all end with that inconclusive, "jazzy" ending. An additional factor binding these novels is the cyclicality of the narrative. Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* opens and ends with Isma's reflections on the status of Algerian women as she returns to her hometown, her birthplace as well as that of her aunt and her daughter. Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* opens and ends with the guerrilla fighters on the truck. Marshall's *Daughters* opens with a visit to an abortion clinic and ends with the pain following the abortion. And a flight scene frames Morrison's *Song of*

Solomon, while the attack on the Convent frames *Paradise.* This cyclicality, in fact, can be interpreted as repetition with a difference, for in none of the above examples are the beginning and end identical. Rather, the end recalls the beginning as the present revisits the past, modifying it to better reflect the maturing of the novel's protagonists. The first flight scene in *Song of Solomon,* for example, tells of the death of a black insurance agent (an Afrodiasporan co-opted into Western capitalism, the hegemonic discourse), who had pinned silk wings to his jacket, simultaneous with the labor pains of a black mother. The second flight scene liberates the black man, born as the insurance agent died, who has grown to believe in his ancestral, ethereal wings. The visit to the abortion clinic that opens *Daughters* shows us a frustrated, unemployed, distraught Ursa, incapable of opening up to her sister/friend, while at the end of the novel we find her psychologically at ease, a mature, independent woman reconciled to her mother, her body, her life, and liberated from the crippling influence of her father, despite the physical pain of the cramps that grip her.

Many Africana women writers have also explored the female homosocial environment, in passing or as a central element in their work. One understands the necessary discretion of Arab women about possible lesbian relationships—in a world of female seclusion, lesbian love can flourish in the harem so long as it goes unsuspected by the dominant male. Visibility does not grant lesbians any rights in cultures where women, regardless of their sexuality, cannot work outside the house, drive a car, or run for political office. It is no coincidence that clitoridectomy is most common in polygynous societies that deny women the right to mingle with men while acknowledging the existence of female sexual desire.[1] In this context, Djebar's silencing of women's physical love for each other is fully comprehensible. Her work, free from homophobia, falls within what Adrienne Rich has termed "the lesbian continuum."

> I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support…we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism. (168)

A lesbian continuum, including lesbian relationships, appears in the novels of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Michelle Cliff, (as well as other Africana writers such as Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Ann Allen Shockley, and, more problematically, Maya Angelou and Gayl Jones), although, of the novelists we

have analyzed, only Cliff, identifies herself as lesbian.[2] Obviously, these Africana writers do not question the fact that some women can dispense with the love of men. Whether women's love for other women involves sexual relationships or not, it is generally a powerful friendship bond, establishing a female community that transgresses prohibitions imposed by men, whether they are fathers, husbands, professors, or lovers, and empowering women in the knowledge that they need only depend on themselves to achieve freedom.

Alternative means of empowerment, real or imagined—with the mental freedom or solace they would offer—also are featured in the works of these writers. Moreover, the choice to be alternative is a conscious decision on the part of these women, all of whom have had access to the dominant discourse. A French education liberated Djebar from the harem, yet she chose to conduct interviews with illiterate Algerian women for her novels. Cliff could have claimed whiteness, but preferred the camouflage that made her indistinguishable from the dark underdog, the Jamaican guerrilla fighters. Avey achieved material comfort in North White Plains, but finally broke loose from the straightjacket of suburban acceptability, and decided to chip away at the robot-like armor of the alienated "token few" successful Blacks in New York, by telling them about the Ibo miracle. It is hard to name one or two characters in Morrison's novels that would best illustrate the decision to be alternative when one can join the mainstream; but we can certainly agree that her more positive characters are the ones who steer clear of the dominant discourse as represented by the spiritually-crippled Macon Dead or the Ruby patriarchs. Conceivably, Pilate could have become an idle maiden aunt, living vicariously with her brother's family, and Connie could have admonished the fugitive women to repent their vicious ways and ask the Lord for forgiveness before returning to their abusers.

Yet we must keep in mind, even as we say that these writers and/or protagonists *chose* to be alternative, that they truly have always been so as post-colonial and/or Africana people. The dominant discourse was not meant to represent them, speak for them, or welcome them as its speakers. We need only recall that the U.S. Post Office felt the need to inform the city's black population that Mains Avenue was Not Doctor Street. These writers' achievement, then, lies not in their being silenced by that prohibition and pushed beyond the text, but in their deliberate and successful endeavor to create for themselves a forum for expression.

What they have expressed is truly radical, a rewriting of their history that allowed them to finally see themselves as they are, not as they have been perceived. The task is immense, for the "denigrating" myths have gone on for centuries, and centuries have to be rewritten. We have a good start: all four authors have produced novels that span generations, bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Fantasia* covers Algerian history from the country's invasion to the war of liberation. *Free Enterprise* follows four women between

the years 1850 to 1920. *Praise song for the Widow* hinges on the undated miracle of the Ibos, who foresaw "slavery time, the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after right on up to the hard times today" (*PW* 38). *Paradise* follows a community of ex-slaves through Reconstruction and into the 1970s. Even when these authors have written novels with a shorter, more contemporary timespan, their novels have nevertheless featured polyvocal narratives, offering the reader not the classic mirror to the world, but a prism or multifaceted crystal. Above all, Djebar, Cliff, Marshall, and Morrison juxtapose official and unofficial histories, "with nomad memory and intermittent voice" (*F* 226), thus significantly undermining the hegemonic discourse's claim to truth. And they realize the importance of successfully negotiating between the semiotic, which preserves alternative memory and history, and the dominant discourse, which would squelch it instead, acknowledging only the achievements of its own native speakers.

Speaking in a multitude of tongues, inscribing a multitude of voices, Africana women are narrating their agency, their resistance, and their persistence.[3] Djebar completely reverses the history of her country's conquest as she presents us with Algerian women, safe behind their fortress walls, gazing unsuspected upon the French colonizer. Cliff debunks the legend that Mary Ellen Pleasant "was a friend of John Brown," as she writes the rich life story of a woman fulfilled in her own right, not as a posthumous appendage to a failed if well-meaning leader. Marshall denounces the rigidity and conservatism of academic history as she presents us with Ursa's difficulty in convincing her most progressive professor of the validity of a thesis analyzing the positive nature of slave relationships. Morrison comments, through Reverend Misner, a Civil Rights veteran, on the silencing of the important contributions of average people, in one of literature's most eloquent commentaries on the partial blindness of History. *Paradise* displays Morrison's concern for how the entry into dominant discourse distorts reality, as it presents only part of the truth. Here again, this awareness is expressed by Reverend Misner, an outsider within:

> Twenty, thirty years from now, all sorts of people will claim pivotal, controlling, defining positions in the rights movements. A few would be justified. Most would be frauds. What could not be gainsaid, but would remain invisible in the newspapers and the books he bought for his students, were the ordinary folk. The janitor who turned off the switch so the police couldn't see; the grandmother who kept all the babies so the mothers could march; the backwoods women with fresh towels in one hand and a shotgun in the other…parents who wiped the spit and tears from their children's faces and said, "Never you mind, honey. Never you mind. You are not and never will be a nigger, a coon, a jig, a jungle bunny nor any other thing white folks teach their children to say. What you are

> is God's." Yes, twenty, thirty years from now, those people will be dead or forgotten, their small stories part of no grand record or even its footnotes, although they were the ones who formed the spine on which the televised ones stood. (*P* 212)

Not so, Reverend. Thanks to Djebar, Cliff, Marshall, and Morrison, who have made an indelible mark on the dominant discourse, we now know about the pivotal contributions of the ordinary folk, the janitors, grandmothers and backwoods women. "Look where your hands are. Now." is the final sentence in Morrison's novel, *Jazz,* directing the reader to the work of the black woman who was soon to receive the Nobel Prize, the world's most prestigious literary award. Look where your hands are now, as you finish one more study of the works of Africana women writers, one among many that are already in print, and yet more that are to come. These Africana women have found their wings, their voices, and the pens with which to record the history of their flights.

NOTES

1. My statement must in no way be misconstrued to suggest that women engage in lesbian relationships because no man is available to satisfy their desire. Such a homophobic belief is nevertheless prevalent, and has transpired, for example, in Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh,* which depicts women having sex with each other (in Saudi Arabia) because their husbands are uncaring or frequently absent.

2. In her 1979 essay, "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview," Shockley discusses various black lesbian writers, showing poetry to be their favorite genre. Indeed, the better-known black lesbian writers—Audre Lorde, Jewelle Gomez, doris davenport—are poets.

3. A similar desire to remedy the invisibility of women is apparent in Angela Davis's essay, "Remembering Carole, Cynthia, Addie Mae and Denise," where she notes: "What bothers me most is that their names have been virtually erased: They are inevitably referred to as 'the four black girls killed in the Birmingham church bombing.' Another traumatic moment occurred in 1964 when James Chaney, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman were killed in Mississippi. A decade earlier, Emmett Till was found at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River. These boys, whose lives were also consumed by racist fury, still have names in our historical memory. Carole, Denise, Addie Mae and Cynthia do not" (123).

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