

Mapping Postcolonial Diasporas and Intimacy Discourses in the Writings of Opal Palmer Adisa



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A José Luis Gärtner

*por tu amor
por las perrivueltas con
Panchito y Ogúm
por sacarme de la tesis cuando me saturaba
por ayudarme
a sumergirme en ella de nuevo
sacudiendo mis miedos
por las tareas domésticas, por
la paciencia
por la cocina creativa y deliciosa
por las risas
por los infinitos cuidados y atenciones, y por
ofrecerme una habitación propia
en tu casa
donde tengo mi hogar*

RESUMEN

En estudios postcoloniales, la crítica diaspórica ha resultado ser muy útil a la hora de desestabilizar las limitaciones y prescripciones del acercamiento nacionalista propio de los estudios culturales. De igual modo, los discursos de intimidad han surgido para debilitar las relaciones hegemónicas entre lo público/privado y lo personal/político. Definir la producción literaria de escritoras afrocaribeñas implica abordar los procesos de formación de identidad teniendo en cuenta cuestiones raciales, culturales, geográficas y de pertenencia de género. Uno de los objetivos de estudiar los textos de Opal Palmer Adisa es identificar y escudriñar sus intentos de involucrar e invalidar los discursos hegemónicos sobre la relación adecuada entre los espacios públicos y privados, que generalmente se han relacionado con la división del trabajo en función del género. Mi opinión es que al abordar los espacios domésticos e íntimos para recrear la propia cultura—y al introducirlos en los espacios de la imaginación propiciados por los propios desplazamientos geográficos—los escritores en la diáspora como Adisa ponen de manifiesto la importancia de recrear valiosas referencias culturales personales que ayudan a preservar la relación con el país de origen sin caer en esencialismos nacionalistas. En este sentido, los contenidos de los discursos de intimidad resultan ser tan poderosos e influyentes como cualquier otra autoridad externa, ya que, tanto la fenomenología de sentir como el nacimiento de una nación son productos del imaginario cultural compartido.

ABSTRACT

In postcolonial studies, diasporic criticism has proved to be very useful at destabilizing the limitations and prescriptions of a nationalist approach in cultural studies. Similarly, intimacy discourses have emerged to undermine hegemonic notions of public/private and personal/political. Defining the literary production of Afro-Caribbean women writers implies to address processes of identity formation in matters of racial, cultural, geographical and gender belonging. One of the objects of studying Opal Palmer Adisa's texts is to identify and scrutinize her attempts to engage and disable hegemonic discourses on the proper relation between public and private spaces, which have generally been associated with the gendered division of labor. It is my contention that in addressing domestic and intimate spaces for the recreation of one's culture—and in bringing them into the spaces of the imagination that geographical displacement entails—writers in the diaspora like Adisa are bringing forward the importance of recreating personal, valuable cultural references that help to preserve the notion of homeland without falling into nationalist essentialisms. The contents of intimacy discourses, in this sense, prove to be as powerful and influential as any other external authority, inasmuch as both the phenomenology of feeling and the birth of a nation are products of our common cultural imagination.

The cartographer sucks his teeth
and says – every language, even yours,
is a partial map of this world . . .

.....

We speak to navigate ourselves
away from dark corners and we become,
each one of us, cartographers.

—Kei Miller, “xx,” *The Cartographer Tries to
Map A Way to Zion*

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INTRODUCTION



None of the works requiring the use of the intellect is an act of randomness. This research would not have taken place had I not lived in Barbados during the academic year 2008/2009. I settled in the Caribbean island after living by the lake of Geneva for three years. I had certainly moved from a body of water surrounded by earth to a body of earth surrounded by water. This realization mattered to me and I did appreciate new perceptions of reality as both the rainy and dry seasons took over. The fact that the natural and cultural environment of my life had changed dramatically could not be unnoticed in my process of adaptation to the new context. Needless to say, this personal experience would position my critical approach to the Caribbean ethos, not beyond my own culture, but rather “in between” two cultures. What I want to say is that, in my attempt to adapt to the new environment, I deemed necessary to get rid of the question of culture as a dual experience opposing the typical binaries of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘black’ and ‘white.’ This may seem a hard task to accomplish, given the traditional approaches we have in the modern world to solve the questions of cultural identity, but it seemed to me, in fact, the most natural approach, and of course the most suitable for personal survival, from a Darwinian perspective where cooperation is paramount in adapting to change. To put it in Bhabha’s words, I was prompted by what represents an innovation in theoretical practice and political strategy: “the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences” (*Location* 1). This was, certainly, not a choice coming out from nowhere, but rather the outcome of a complex and unhurried process of awakening consciousness. I need to mention here an enlightening passage from Kenyan writer and political activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonising the Mind* (2005), where he maintains that the perspective from which we understand reality depends on “where we stand in relationship to imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages,” and that “we have to coldly and consciously look at what imperialism has been doing to us and to our view of ourselves in the universe” (88). These arguments refer to Africa’s—in particular Kenya’s—cultural consciousness, but they also suit to define my position as an European woman and



critic who, in her “quest for relevance and for a correct perspective” in the formation of Black women’s identity across the diaspora, has been sensitive to the multiple experiences and exchanges with people who are directly concerned about and live “within the context of the general struggle against imperialism” (88).

In addition, my stay in Salvador de Bahia from January to March 2008 also allowed me to broaden my knowledge of Capoeira, which is a very rich bodily and spiritual African-rooted art of resistance that developed in colonial Brazil among groups of runaway slaves, and which I have been practicing and studying from 2003 to date. My exposure to the daily lives of Bahian people, deeply connected to the history of the African diaspora, provided a suitable backdrop for me to perceive the delights and constraints inherent in the active interaction with a different socio-cultural reality. I am conscious of how my Brazilian and Caribbean experiences would provide me with new, valuable tools to explore the grounds of cultural preconceptions and identity formations. Resuming Ngũgĩ’s earlier quotation, I opened my eyes to what imperialism has been doing to the colonized people, but also and just as edifying, I grew conscious of what imperialism has been doing to me and my motherland fellows in Europe. This drifting experience between the Old Europe and the New World embodied what I would dare to call a personalized, much less tragic, Middle Passage, an experience of rootlessness and alienation comparable—at an obviously smaller scale—to the African diaspora. Whatever it may be called, I believe that globalization processes—the aftermath of colonization after all—has enabled me to get a job in Barbados as an expatriate and somehow to perform an active role in the remaking of identities as a result of displacement and intersubjectivity.

As an aesthetic experience, when living in Barbados I could appreciate not only the never-ending warm weather, turquoise waters and Flamboyant trees in bloom characteristic of life in the Caribbean, but also the variety of activities attended by Barbadians, also known as Bajans. Such activities enable individuals to express themselves in a variety of verbal and non-verbal performances as creative, free individuals. At first I was undoubtedly shocked at certain manifestations of Bajan popular culture, like the explicitly sexual bodily expression of dance moves, such as the wine dance, that all men and women carry out without restraint in every corner where dancehall, soca, or calypso music is being played. It is also common among Bajans to attend “Open Mike” sessions. These events are community gatherings where local poets and singers can sign up to come out on stage and share



their voices—hence the term open mike/microphone—together with a sweet disclosure of unselfconscious body language. It was because of my attendance to performance poetry events that my interest in West Indian poetry flourished, and it was after listening to Opal Palmer Adisa’s rhythmical, engaging poem “The Tongue is a Drum”¹ that I became a devotee of her word, which would later give me innumerable pleasures and discoveries.

Drawing upon Ngũgĩ’s observations in his article “Towards a National Culture,” appearing in *Homecoming*, I can assert that, from my European experience, where culture is often considered as an intellectual activity of the individual, what most fascinated me was the public nature of culture in the Caribbean, which is directly related to the African conception of art in its orientation to community service. Thus, the meaningfulness of Caribbean folklore, I could observe, resided in its integrative functionality; in Ngũgĩ’s words “song, dance and music were an integral part of a community’s wrestling with its environment, part and parcel of the needs and aspirations of the ordinary man” (6). Culture, rephrasing this author, is a way of life fashioned after the daily activity of a community adapting to its environment. It was indeed through cultural activities that I could easily adapt to the environment, and in this process, I eventually took apart Western values and beliefs no longer applicable there. In my search for a different culture, I rediscovered myself, and that was my epiphany: if I wanted to know the other, I had to challenge the conception I had of myself, and create a suitable identity with the help of my immediate neighbors.

When I started the MA Program in English Literature and Linguistics at the University of Granada in 2009, I was eager to explore into the literary production of the English-speaking Caribbean, a field of studies which had aroused my curiosity during my travels. I took the MA course “Postcolonial Narrative” delivered by Dr. Celia Wallhead, and it was then that I understood the high importance of postcolonial studies as a suitable approach to study Caribbean literature. This course gave me a better understanding of modernity and the realities of the present globalized world. It was then, at the age of 29, that I received for the first time a formal and comprehensive tuition on the history of colonialism. Needless to say, I was not taught this important part of history during my high school years. Rather, I was simply disciplined into knowing that Christopher Columbus discovered

¹This poem is included in the CD Album *The Tongue is a Drum* (2002), a performance poetry recording featuring Opal Palmer Adisa and devorah major, under the artistic name of ‘Daughters of Yam.’



America and that Spain became a great empire after that. I was told nothing at the time about the massive destruction of indigenous peoples and their cultures, or the trauma of the Middle Passage and the subsequent centuries of slavery for the African people in the New World.

Some years earlier, during my undergraduate years at the English Department of the University of Granada (2001-2005), I could learn about British and American literatures, and I even had some glimpses on Southern literature (that is to say, the literature of the southern states of the US). Indeed, there was at the time an incipient body of undergraduate courses offering a greater understanding of postcolonial or minority literatures, including some literatures from Africa and its diaspora. This means that there were professors doing research on them. Thus, they were starting to expand on these topics within the framework of undergraduate studies. I know that the now deceased Dr. Manuel Villar Raso dedicated most of his life to recover the silenced histories of Africa in the Iberian peninsula. He was also an expert on Chicana Literature, together with Dr. Rosa Morillas. Also Dr. Morillas and Dr. Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde used to teach at the undergraduate level about minority literatures in North America, and they still do, as far as I am concerned. Thanks to professors like these, postcolonial literatures have eventually gained more space within the English Department at the University of Granada. Today, for instance, Dr. Rosa Morillas works conjointly with Dr. Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas to teach the undergraduate courses “Introducción a las literaturas de minorías en lengua inglesa” (Introduction to Minority Literatures in English”) and “Análisis de Textos Literarios Norteamericanos” where they cover the study of important authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Junot Díaz. Also, Dr. Aguilera Linde has most recently been exploring into Indian literatures in English, whereas Dr. Pilar Villar-Argáiz has made significant advances to introduce postcolonial Irish studies within the department. Both professors are now offering courses on their respective subjects. Over the years, as it can be evidenced, the situation of peripheral Commonwealth literatures has improved within this department. Mainly thanks to the hard work of the above-mentioned scholars—from the most senior scholars, such as Dr. Villar Raso and Dr. Wallhead to the emergent ones, such as Dr. Villar-Argáiz and Dr. Rodríguez-Salas—peripheral Commonwealth literatures have turned into a very lively field of studies at the English Department of the University of Granada. Thus by exploring into postcolonial Caribbean literatures, a field that has not yet



been fully explored in my academic environment, I hope to contribute to the growing field of postcolonial studies within my department.

Also, I would like my work to continue and expand on the tradition of postcolonial literary studies that has for long been developing in throughout the English departments of the Spanish universities. I would like to mention here the work of some pioneering scholars from the Spanish academic context, such as Dr. Paloma Fresno Calleja, from the University of the Balearic Islands, whose work focuses mainly on Pacific literatures and multicultural identities; Dr. Marta Sofía López Rodríguez, from the University of Leon, whose expertise in postcolonial theory from the perspective of African literary studies represents a landmark in the national scene; and Dr. Belén Martín Lucas, whose field of study is centered on postcolonial Canadian literatures and theories on cultural globalization.

By the time I was enrolled in the Masters program, I did not fully realize that I was a privileged Spanish citizen who, after a degree in English, a few years of international teaching experience, and some affordable travel, had decided to return to university in her motherland. As I already knew I wanted to probe further into Opal Palmer Adisa's work, and that my focus would be feminist on top of postcolonial—although I was not acquainted with the latter term yet—I tried to narrow down my choice of courses as best as I could. Other than Dr. Wallhead's intense course on postcolonial narratives, where she also introduced me to the work of Caribbean-American writer Paule Marshall, most of the other courses turned to be very suitable: I learned delightfully in Dr. Encarnación Hidalgo Tenorio's classes about critical aspects on gender and language as she knows how to motivate learners to read between the lines. Dr. Mauricio Aguilera Linde was very insightful introducing us to postmodernist thought in America. I especially enjoyed his perceptions about the Marxist approach to culture. It was with Dr. Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas that I learned in depth the relationship between postcolonialism and feminist theories. His vibrant explanation of the concept of 'mimicry' as a subversive literary practice was a key finding. Finally, Dr. Julián Jiménez Heffernan would provide a philosophical and political framework of 17th and 18th century England. Locke's and Hobbes's discussions on the nature of power as well as the reading of *Robinson Crusoe* caught my full attention. Although I had other interesting courses during the Master, I have only mentioned those whose contents would turn very useful for my specific research on postcolonial and gender studies. With regard to my experience on gender, Dr. Adelina Sánchez-Espinosa, who taught



me gender and film studies within the Masters course, gave me the opportunity to work in the coordination of the Master GEMMA, the Erasmus Mundus Masters Degree in Women's and Gender Studies that she coordinates from the University of Granada. During the Spring semester of 2010 and the academic year 2010/2011 that I worked there, I had the opportunity to develop my administrative skills within an academic environment. Also, I attended and organized a number of academic activities. I actively participated, for instance, in the organization of the Forum for Young Researchers "Voices of GEMMA: Exchanging Experiences of Research in Women's and Gender Studies in a Transnational Context," held in Granada on October 18, 2010. These and other gatherings enabled me to encounter highly qualified scholars, and to know and discuss about gender issues, which enlarged my knowledge of this stimulating field of studies.

At that time, I did not take up Dr. Pilar Villar-Argáiz's course entitled "Women and Literature in Ireland," not knowing that Irish literature was also postcolonial—indeed not knowing what postcolonialism really was. But as fate would have it, Dr. Villar-Argáiz, a specialist in postcolonial, Irish, and gender studies, would end up being my supervisor, first for my Masters dissertation, and later for the present PhD thesis. I can say now that I had the best of luck meeting her in my academic path. My MA dissertation entitled *From the Womb to the Word: Postcolonialism and Black Feminism in the Caribbean Poetry of Opal Palmer Adisa*, would pave the way to the present dissertation. I have to confess that the amount of readings I had to do in order to learn more about the postcolonial and more specifically, the Caribbean context, would literally have me speechless for longer than I had expected. The amount of theoretical terminology and the myriad authors to approach the field of Caribbean and feminist studies was overwhelming. A mix of fear and shyness about not knowing enough, about not being able to express thoughts in my own words, but still with an academic tone, and in a foreign language, kept me wondering. I have always been amazed at Dr. Villar-Argáiz capacity to wait for my words to come out. It was thanks to her ability to put my academic research properly on track, and to her constant support and trust in me, that I could finally succeed in what seemed to be a gigantic endeavor.

During the years, I was wondering and wandering about what to do with my MA dissertation. After contacting Opal Palmer Adisa, she came to visit me in Granada during her European summer tour. Adisa, along with the drumming band



where I took part at the time, ‘Bembé Batucada,’² offered a vibrant performance at the cultural center and rural hotel La Casa con Libros in ‘La Zubia,’ Granada. I also translated into Spanish and projected all the poems she had chosen for the event. The following day, Adisa gave a course on erotic writing at the library of La Casa con Libros, where I acted as interpreter. It was then that I interviewed her for the first time. I must confess that, in spite of knowing and loving the culture, and even though I had read most of Adisa’s work at the time, I still felt an alien within the field of Caribbean studies, and with little legitimate knowledge to talk about the topic with such an authority as Adisa. Indeed, thoughts such as “I can’t possibly teach Black women’s writing—their experience is so different from mine,” to borrow Lorde’s words, came to my mind (*Sister* 43). But the truth is that I had not even read Audre Lorde at the time, and neither had I thought of Lorde’s response to such questions, which some time later would help me work through my feelings of difference. In her essay, entitled “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Lorde claims that such “mockeries of separations” had been imposed upon us without our even questioning their legitimacy. Yet, she continues, “how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust?” Lorde claims that what immobilizes us is not difference, but silence, “and there are so many silences to be broken” (*Sister* 43). Thus, in spite of my feelings of difference that made me feel small and unauthorized, Adisa helped me break the silence. Indeed, she is a great conversationalist and listener, and her answers smoothly gave way to other questions; thus, everything I had been wondering seemed to finally make sense. This conversation was later published in *Atlantis*, the prestigious journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies, which I attach in the Annexes section. Meeting Adisa, and witnessing the effect that her work exerts on the Spanish audience, marked a decisive milestone on my path towards the completion of my MA dissertation, as I realized the importance of including Caribbean voices in the cultural context of Spain. I finally defended my MA dissertation in September 2012,

²‘Bembé Batucada’ is a percussion band, part of a community project initiated by a group of university female students living in Granada. The band, supported by the Provincial Council for Equality, was created in January 2010, as a response to the fact that the musical scene in this city is male-dominated and, as such, it does not promote a total female agency in the field. We thought it necessary to create a space for women to develop their creativity and to manage their actions without having to consent to male’s conditions within the group, and thus providing a different experience. For more information, visit the website www.myspace.com/bembebatucada (Last accessed May 27, 2017).



which was very positively received by the members of the examination board, who evaluated it with a high mark.

After this initial encounter, Adisa and I have continued working together. Besides her generous availability to answer by email any questions about her work or any doubt I may have had about Jamaican nation language and culture, she has always shown interest in my project to make her work known in Spain. Eventually, I created a bilingual blog where I regularly share some of my translations of Adisa's work into Spanish, as well as relevant news on her work.³ So far, two unreleased poems of her have appeared in the printed collections *III Espiral Poética* (2013) and *IV Espiral Poética* (2015), within the framework of the shared project *Espirales Poéticas por el Mundo*, where I participate actively since 2012, as a poet myself and translator. Every two years, this event gathers a great number of poets from Spain and abroad with the objective of reading our poetry in different open air spots in Spain.⁴ The 4th edition of the Espiral project took place in November 2015 in Lanzarote. As part of the organizing committee, I was in charge of arranging for Adisa's travel grant. For this event, Adisa—who besides a writer is also a Professor at California College of the Arts and Crafts (CCAC), prepared a plenary talk entitled "Caribbean Women Poets: The Language of Identity," for which I did the introduction, the translation of poems by different Caribbean women poets—like Grace Nichols and Lorna Goodison—whom Adisa was going to discuss, and the simultaneous translation service. For the occasion, Adisa and I prepared a limited, bilingual edition chapbook with a selection of her poems, entitled *Poemas Escogidos / Selected Poems*, which sold off after Adisa's memorable talk. I also took the opportunity to have a second face-to-face interview with Adisa, which was published in the website www.reggae.es.⁵

³See my blog "La Lengua es un Tambor," which I created on January 27, 2015: www.sellingshells.wordpress.com (Last accessed May 27, 2017)

⁴During the year preceding every gathering, every poet receives a word which is the last word of the poem written by someone else before. The poem must start with this word; in turn, the last word of this poem will be the first word for the next one. After that, the poems are published following the same order, and they are read during the event. During the reading, poets are placed one after the other following the word they were given, thus adopting the shape of a spiral. More information about the Espiral project can be found in the blog of Espiral Poética at www.espiralpoetica.blogspot.com.es/search/label/IV%20ESPIRAL%20PO%C3%89TICA%20POR%20EL%20MUNDO (Last accessed May 27, 2017).

⁵Reggae.es is a website created by the 'Asociación Cultural Reggae' (Spain), which specializes in Jamaican music. In this interview, Adisa speaks about gender and decolonization in the Jamaican

During my third year as a PhD candidate at the University of Granada, I was awarded a grant in the framework of the International Mobility Official Call for PhD Students, launched by the University of Granada and CEI BioTic, which allowed me to spend three months at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, in Kingston, Jamaica, from April to June 2015. During this period of intensive research, Dr. Carolyn Cooper kindly accepted to be my supervisor; she warmly received me and made time in her busy schedule to listen to my multiple questions and doubts on my research plan. Additionally, Dr. Michael Bucknor, who was the Head of the English Department at that time, good-heartedly received me on a few valuable occasions, listened to my questions and orientated me towards a methodology and theoretical framework. I am particularly indebted to his advice on looking at the very recent perspectives in the field of ‘postcolonial intimacies,’ a term that was new to me but that would end up determining an important part of my thesis. Dr. Anthea Morrison generously arranged for me to present a seminar at the Staff/Postgraduate Seminar Series that she organized in the English Department. At the occasion, I received invaluable feedback from other professors such as Dr. Elizabeth (Betty) Wilson.

My attendance to other seminars within this same program also allowed me to meet other PhD students, engage in fruitful discussions, and learn about interesting perspectives on postcolonial literary works. Furthermore, I also attended a number of book presentations in the English Department, such as Erna Brodber’s *Nothing’s Mat* on June 9, 2015. Also at UWI, I attended the Confucius Institute Conference 2015, that took place between 17 and 21 June, 2015.⁶ Outside the university, I attended the poetry slams organized by the Poetry Society of Jamaica—held every first Tuesday of the month at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts—where I became familiar with the voices of emergent poets from Jamaica, such as KTP (Kerione The Poet); and more consolidated poets such as Mbala and Cherry Natural. Together with the group of Capoeira I joined there, Cativeiro Capoeira Jamaica, I participated in the 7th Annual International Maroon Conference, on maroonage and indigeneity, held in Charles Town, Portland,

musical context. It was published in Spanish on November 27, 2015. www.reggae.es/2015/11/27/la-poeta-jamaicana-opal-palmer-adisa-nos-habla-de-connotaciones-colonialistas-y-patriarcales-en-el-pais-del-reggae/ (Last accessed May 27, 2017). I have also included this interview in the annexes section.

⁶ See more at: www.mona.uwi.edu/modlang/confucius-institute-conference-2015 (Last accessed on May 29, 2017).

Jamaica, between the 20 and 23 June, 2015,⁷ where I had the opportunity to meet the now deceased Colonel Lumsden, who was the Head of the Charles Town Maroon settlement (see chapter 4.2), as well as the renown Rastafari dub poet Mutabaruka. Needless to say, my stay in Jamaica was full of enriching cultural experiences that would enlarge my knowledge, respect and love for the culture and the people of this island.

The Caribbean Literary Context

In the aftermath of Caribbean national independences, the revival of Afro-Caribbean cultural expressions was paramount in the formation of a people's identification with their society. The Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) celebrated in 1971 at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Jamaica, represents a milestone for postcolonial West Indian literature, in the sense that it formally introduced West Indian writers to their local audience. This event made of writing a social movement, since both writers and audience had an active, engaging role in the shaping of a literature of their own (Breiner, *Introduction* 4-5). With the support of a local audience, as Breiner argues, the writers could feel confident to develop their unique West Indian language and to exploit their popular culture. A highly significant feature of West Indian popular culture is the oral performance, which, in Breiner's view, does not stem from the influence of drama, but rather from the fact that there are very limited resources for publication in the region. As a result, performance poetry becomes an effective way to reach the public among West Indian poets (9). As a matter of fact, one of the claims in the ACLALS Conference was the necessary recognition of the folk culture, as opposed to high culture. This is the beginning of the literary acknowledgement of the African influences present in the oral resources of popular culture such as calypso music.⁸ Consequently, what Kamau Brathwaite calls the "Little Tradition," or folk culture, would eventually achieve the status of the "Great Tradition" or high culture (Breiner

⁷ See contents of the conference at: www.assipj.com.au/southsea/wp-content/uploads/7th-conference-magazine-wide.pdf (Last accessed on May 28, 2017).

⁸ In *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*, Christian Habekost explains calypso as a Caribbean musical form which originated in Trinidad and Tobago and which is characterized by the presence of African rhythms fused with European elements (37-38). Habekost argues that calypso emerged from censorship and social conflict in colonial history and, as such, it has survived as an element of resistance against authority. Calypsonian Mighty Sparrow's song "Dan is the man in the van" (1958) represented, according to Brathwaite, "a major change in consciousness," as it included the typical "call and response" African structure and it provided a link between the poet and the audience ("History" 279-80).



Introduction 10).

With the glorification of the “Little Tradition,” ordinary people can take an active role in the definition of national identity, as they become the subject matter of poems as well as the producers and consumers of poetry. Breiner reminds us how this tendency has been a recurrent component of cultural nationalism among the European Romantics as well as the nationalist writers from the Caribbean (11). In order to canonize certain popular practices, it was necessary to broaden the definition of poetry; therefore, it became common among West Indian poets to appropriate traditional oral forms and musical rhythms of African heritage, thus developing “creole strategies of accommodation” (10-12). As a matter of fact, the ACLALS Conference opened the path to a series of literary societies, journals and anthologies throughout the West Indies, such as the *Breaklight* and *Savacou* (9). With the same purpose, a number of cultural festivals, like the *Carifesta*, would subsequently be promoted to celebrate the creative and performing arts of the Caribbean, thus “generating a pan-Caribbean literary awareness” (Brown and McWatt xxxii).

West Indian writers, in their quest for a distinct cultural ethos that could validate their African heritage, drew their attention to the legitimization of their creolized languages. In his speech “History of the Voice” (1979/1981), transcribed from a talk he gave in 1979, and included in his collection *Roots*, Brathwaite insists that the English language has a role to play in the Caribbean, although he does not refer to the imported, standard English, but to “that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there” and which is “influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people” (266). Brathwaite coins the Caribbean use of English as ‘nation language,’ and chooses to use this term in contrast to ‘dialect,’ as he claims that the word carries pejorative connotations of inferiority. As he puts it:

Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a



wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time. (266)

Nation language is, therefore, the language spoken by the people imported to the Caribbean from the West coast of Africa. Brathwaite reports that, with the arrival of the people from Africa, who were to be slaves, laborers and servants in the New World, there arrived also many African languages with a common semantic and stylistic form (260-261). Brathwaite observes that although these languages resemble English “in terms of [their] lexicon;” they are not English “in terms of [their] syntax.” As he concludes: “English it certainly is not in terms of its rhythm and timbre, its own sound explosion” (“History” 266). Indeed, Brathwaite’s essay reflects his choice to leave traces of ‘nation language’ in the transcription of his talk, thus emphasizing the syntax and the rhythmical aspects of his mother tongue. In chapter 1, I will offer a more detailed examination of the usage and function of the term ‘nation language.’

In her article “‘Woman is a Nation...’ Women in Caribbean Oral Literature” (1994), Carole Boyce Davies examines the representation of women in the Caribbean folk tradition, thus unveiling the mechanisms by which women are denigrated. Boyce Davies maintains that, in the struggle against imperialist supremacy, Black male leaders would dismantle male colonial masters and place themselves in a Black, male position of dominance (186); this can be applied to cultural movements of independence throughout the Caribbean. Hereby, I offer a brief overview of the most prominent male poets in the construction of national literatures in the West Indies. In 1912, Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay published two poetry volumes named *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. McKay was the first West Indian poet who wrote in a Jamaican dialect. In “History of the Voice,” Brathwaite insists it be called dialect rather than nation language, because McKay was still writing within the patterns of the pentameter (275). Nonetheless, it is significant to mention this author because, after immigrating to the United States, he became a leader of what was to be called the Harlem Renaissance, the Black movement of self-discovery which emerged in the period between the wars (Brathwaite “History” 274). The fact that the modern world generation found Harlem exotic allowed Black America to discover its African self and propagate it throughout the world (Breiner *Introduction* 26). Certainly, McKay reached the poets

of the Négritude⁹ in Haiti and Paris, who made his work known in the Caribbean (62).

Another male poet who has made a significant contribution in West Indian literature is the now deceased Nobel laureated Derek Walcott, from St. Lucia. Walcott was aware of the importance of oral tradition in the Caribbean and made a great contribution to Caribbean cultural formation with his Trinidad Theatre Workshop, which—as Adisa argues in the first interview she granted me (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 215)—made him more popular than his poetry throughout the West Indies. In his epic poem *Omeros* (1990), clearly influenced by classical aesthetics, Walcott succeeds in detaching from the Victorian pentameter.¹⁰ However, his use of metrical forms, argues Pérez Fernández, remains a loose version of Dante’s *terza rima*, where he reduces the number of syllables to twelve, sometimes more, in order to recreate “the idea of recurrence in the rhythm of the sea” (Martínez-Dueñas and Pérez Fernández 53-79). In spite of this personal and creative representation of rhythm, the departure point is set in European conventions which, aesthetically speaking, keeps his poetry closer to the literary models of the Western tradition rather than to the African ones.

Kamau Brathwaite, traditionally presented in terms of a binary relationship with Walcott,¹¹ is distinguishable among his contemporaries because he intentionally envisions Africa as a literary tradition. Another aspect he is well known for is for his theorizations on nation language, which he considers an essential component as well as an unassailable medium for poetry (Breiner *Introduction* 143). Brathwaite’s perceptions of “internationalization/localization”¹²—translates into an intense

⁹ ‘Négritude’ is the term used by Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor to describe the earliest attempt to create a consistent theory of African writing and aesthetics. Many of the premises of the Négritude movement, raised after World War II in Paris, would be later incorporated in Black Power movements in America and the Caribbean (Aschcroft et al., *Empire* 20-3, 47, 123-4).

¹⁰ On this aspect, see the interview with Pérez Fernández in *Approaches to the Poetics of Derek Walcott* (Martínez-Dueñas and Pérez Fernández, 179-180).

¹¹ On the issue of the dichotomy Walcott-Brathwaite, see “Caliban’s New Masters: Creolizing Archetypes in Kamau Brathwaite’s *Arrivants* Trilogy” by John Thieme, in www.eastanglia.academia.edu/JohnThieme/Papers/1003388/Calibans_New_Masters_Creolizing_Archetypes_in_Kamau_Brathwaites_Arrivants_Triology (Last accessed on May 11, 2017).

¹² This idea is at the very basis of Brathwaite’s concept of creolization. It basically means that one should consider the “roots” not only as a place of origin, but also “as claims to belonging” in spite of the rootlessness experienced in processes of dislocation. In line with Brathwaite’s contentions, Sheller contends that creolization must be a process of “uprooting/regrounding” with its subsequent network of “routes” moving in both directions, from home and towards other homes (Sheller *Creolization* 286).



“experience of life” and written production “characterized by a willingness to be moved in different, creative directions” (Brathwaite *Development* ix). He has extensively written on Caribbean issues with a unique style and affirming tone, be it in the form of literary criticism, history research, or poetry. Brathwaite’s penchant for jazz, rhythmic experimentation and his worship of Caribbean vernacular are the most visible features of his poetry. In *The Arrivants* (1973), his first trilogy, he sets forth a unique Caribbean identity, incorporating African elements and the use of nation language. Brathwaite’s second trilogy—composed by *Mother Poem* (1977), *Sun Poem* (1982), and *X/Self* (1987), landmark texts of Caribbean literature—is marked by the use of an ‘english’ which he calls “calibanization,” a creolization process “which comes into conflict with the cultural imperial authority of Prospero” (Brathwaite *Mother Poem* 121 qtd. in Gabbard *Jazz* 83).

According to Breiner, the work of both Brathwaite and Walcott, which enjoyed a reputation by the mid-1960s, “galvanized the younger poets but had the effect of overshadowing their own near-contemporaries” (Breiner *Introduction* 68). The latter would be the case of Mervyn Morris, who, along with Louise Bennett, was one of the most active supporters of the use of nation language in poetry. Morris, Bennett and Brathwaite have had an enormous influence in the work of Opal Palmer Adisa for their decolonizing themes and their use of nation language in literature. In fact, all four writers seem to have a common mission: the necessary proclamation of nation language in the formation of a Caribbean cultural ethos.

Obviously, there are many other poets who have contributed to the upgrading of national literatures in the West Indies, such as the early Jamaican nationalist George Campbell or the more recent Kendel Hyppolite from St. Lucia. Also, on the topic of including rhythmical features of nation language in poetry, one should not forget the invaluable contribution of the Jamaican dub poets of the 1970s Oku Onoura, Michael Smith, and Linton Kwesi Johnson (Brathwaite “History” 290). Nonetheless, as I will disclose in the following section, the indisputable precursors of West Indian orature are two women writers, deeply influential for the postcolonial generation of West Indian performance poets: Louise Bennett and Miss Queenie.

In the above-mentioned article on the presence of women in the Caribbean folk tradition, Boyce Davies explores how Caribbean oral literary forms such as the proverb, the folktale and the calypso song have more often than not portrayed the woman as “an evil, despicable entity” or even a “malleable, unthinking, submerged



personage” (““Woman”” 165). This treatment of women in the oral literary tradition, she concludes, has an economic factor: whenever women try to improve their social and economical status, they represent a threat to male superiority, who on their turn, will try to “put women in their place” by demeaning them through abusive language (185). Indeed, in the struggle for political independence, the Caribbean oral tradition has retained a Black male dominance, as political leaders and literary voices have shifted to Black, but remain male (186). This evidences the fact that women’s voices have remained outside the public stream. In *Out of the Kumbula*, Boyce Davies and Fido understand voicelessness as the historical absence of female perspectives on social and cultural issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization and women’s rights (1). They refer, on the one hand, to Audre Lorde’s observations in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” that female silence has been closely linked to a fear of self assertion. On the other hand, they quote Jamaican born writer Michelle Cliff,¹³ who affirms the difficulties she found in trying to express herself creatively in English (Boyce Davies and Fido 3). For the Caribbean women writers, the marginalization of their voices implies, first, a necessity to find a form, a private language of their own, which entails the rejection of the phallogocentric text. Secondly, it implies the revival of a feminist/womanist consciousness, which enables women’s self expression to go beyond the culturally accepted norm—such as in the act of dancing. Hence, they appropriate and develop the oral forms of storytelling that has for long belonged to them, if only in the private, familial realm (4).

As Breiner asserts, Una Marson was the “first considerable female poet of the region.” She published four books of verse in the 1930s and worked also as a publisher, journalist and playwright in and outside the island (64). Another significant literary figure is Louise Bennett. Bennett attempted dialect in the 1940s. In Breiner’s words, she “has built up an impressive body of poetry *written* in colloquial Jamaican for dramatic *oral* presentation” (69; emphasis in the original). Some of her most representative works are *Jamaica Labrish* (1966), *Anancy and Miss Lou* (1979) and *Aunty Rochoy Seh* (1993). Even though she was not the first poet employing oral features in her literary work, Bennett—strongly influenced by

¹³See Opal Palmer Adisa’s interview with Michelle Cliff where Cliff talks about her first piece, “Notes on Speechlessness” (1977), which helped her to break the silence as a writer: “I was shy and tongued-tied a lot of the time. I didn’t know what to do, so I thought I’d write something and just read it, because that would be easier than speaking. So I wrote this thing about feeling speechless” (“Journey” 274).

the Mento tradition¹⁴—would also use the iambic pentameter in her verses, although she had the ability to “transform it with the sound of her language” and her “riddims,” evidence of which is her poem “Dutty Tough” (Brathwaite “History” 285). Bennett undoubtedly represents a powerful inspiration in the promotion of the oral dimension of poetry in the Caribbean, significantly in Jamaica, where movements such as Rastafarianism or the “dub poets”—the cradle of classic reggae and most of Jamaican popular music—have been legitimized as important cultural forces. Bennet’s performed poetry, which has largely been recorded, embodies an “investment in the oral and performative aspects of poetry,” and it has broken new grounds for alternative publishing ventures among West Indian poets. Interestingly enough, this revolutionary griotte,¹⁵ the “ambassador of Jamaican culture”¹⁶ affectionately called Miss Lou, who was considered just an entertainer in Jamaica, did not receive serious attention “until after Independence” (Breiner 69). It was then when her cultural contribution started to be considered as something else than a “local joke” (Morris “Reading” qtd. in Donnell *Routledge* 194-197).

It is, however another woman poet, Miss Queenie, who would represent the “total expression” that Brathwaite seeks to retrieve in the Caribbean oral tradition, because, as he argues, in order to understand the complexity of the oral tradition, it is mandatory not only to hear the “dynamics of the narrative” and “the blue notes of [Miss Queenie’s] voice” but also to see her whole body performing it (“History” 273 emphasis in the original). The conjunction of voice and body in the poetry of these female writers, as discussed by Brathwaite, seems to complete the meaning and purposes of nation language (Brathwaite “History” 298). Bennett’s and Miss Queenie’s contribution to nationhood, according to DeCaires, suggests “a kind of unruly, natural bodily excess or fecundity” which differs from their male counterparts’ “revolutionary shaping consciousnesses” (DeCaires Narain, *Contemporary* 93).

¹⁴ See the article “Louise Bennet and the Mento Tradition:” “Before the advent of American Rhythm and Blues in the 1950’s, Mento was very popular in Jamaica and was played at country dances (“brams”), weddings and at various other gatherings” (Doumerc 23-24).

¹⁵ The traditional griots/griottes from West Africa are “oral artists known as guardians of the word.” As such, they are the repositories of history, literature and the arts. Thanks to their role in maintaining the culture, we are able to document today many historical passages of the African diaspora. Oral artistic forms of the African diaspora, from calypso to hip hop poetry, are strongly influenced by the griot tradition. See the entry in the *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora, Origins, Experiences and Culture*, Volume 1, edited by Carole Boyce Davies (478).

¹⁶ Adisa calls Bennett like this in “Love Letter to Miss Lou: Memories Intersect History” by Opal Palmer Adisa (1).



Nonetheless, it was not until independence that Caribbean women's voices were brought together and gained proper recognition (Brown and McWatt xxx). A greater interest in Caribbean women's writings would upsurge in the 1970s, when women were published in magazines such as *Savacou* 3/ 4 'New Writing' (1970/1), and in a women poets' anthology, *Guyana Drums* (1972). In the 1980s, another gender-based publication was issued under the title *Jamaica Woman: An Anthology of Poems* (Mordecai and Morris, 1982). In the last two decades Black women writers across the diaspora have developed a consistent body of literature. In the West Indies, a large number of prominent women poets, such as Lorna Goodison and Jean Binta Breeze, both from Jamaica, stand out for their international recognition. Among the most representative women poets, we can also find those who are included in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Poetry* (Brown and McWatt): Velma Pollard, from Jamaica, Marlene Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand, from Trinidad and Tobago, and Merle Collins, from Grenada. Opal Palmer Adisa, also anthologized in this volume (Brown and McWatt 289), plays a significant role in this group of Caribbean women writers, as she often brings forward thought-provoking issues that deserve critical attention. Adisa, as well as most of the poets mentioned above, also writes prose fiction. Among the Caribbean women writers of fiction, some of the most representative are Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Makeda Silvera, Merle Hodge, and Erna Brodber. A common feature which unites these artists is their concern with the African traces in Caribbean literature and their aim to foreground women's contribution in the negotiation of a wide-ranging and legitimate Caribbean identity. Most of these women writers emphasize their concerns with the sexualized female body as an object of abuse. Likewise, they also look into the experiences of motherhood, regarding them as valuable embodied practices for the continuity of the Afro-Caribbean cultural traditions. The importance of the matrilineal tradition of storytelling is thus of core interest among Caribbean women writers. As pointed out by Brown and McWatt, this female presence is indispensable to provide a more comprehensive scope of twentieth-century Caribbean poetry (xxxi).

Opal Palmer Adisa: Life and Works

Adisa was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1954, within a middle-class family, and she grew up in her native island.¹⁷ As a young child, she was exposed to Caribbean

¹⁷See the section "Chronology" included in the annexes.

forms of kinship and spirituality. These early experiences would later bring an awareness of the broad historical meaning of everyday Caribbean life, a perception that informs much of her writing. In 1970, 16-year-old Adisa moved to the US with her mother and two siblings. After graduating in Communications she returned to her native island in 1976, where she worked at the Educational Broadcasting Service as an education officer, TV and radio producer for children's programs. There, she first met Louise Bennett, an encounter which became highly influential for her. During a personal conversation via e-mail, Adisa has given more details about these first casual encounters with Miss Lou: "She did a few guest programs for us, and she was then still active and doing a show for children the title of which I cannot remember, but her catch phrase [was] 'Clap, oonuh clap for them' ('Clap, you all clap for them'). I watched her tape of a few of those programs and we talked."¹⁸ In 1976, Adisa arranged a meeting with historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite, who was then Professor at the University of the West Indies, Mona. She wanted him to mentor her and he liked her work.¹⁹

In 1979, Adisa returned to America, where she pursued her postgraduate studies at San Francisco State University. There, she would eventually get two MA degrees, one on English and Creative Writing (1981), and another one on Theatre and Directing (1986). Meanwhile, in 1984, a priest gave her the spiritual name of Adisa, that in the Yoruba language means 'speak one's mind clearly.' In 1985 Adisa gave birth to her first daughter, Shola Adisa-Farrar; this year she would publish a children's book, *Pina, The Many-Eyed Fruit*, an impelling tale about a discordant mother-daughter relationship. In 1986, she published her first short-story collection *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories*. All four stories appearing in this volume portray different experiences of mothering and kinship structures in the Caribbean. The following year Adisa would receive the Pushcart Prize for the short story "Duppy Get Her," included in this collection. This same year, 1987, Adisa started to lecture within the African American Studies Department at the University of

¹⁸This is part of an e-mail conversation I held with Adisa about Louise Bennett on 3 and 4 February 2017. Adisa has delivered a number of conferences and published articles on Louise Bennett. See for instance, her essays "Female Persona and Feminist Leanings in Louise Bennett's Poetry," and "The Living Word: Louise Bennett."

¹⁹ This is from a telephone conversation with Adisa on February 2, 2017. As a result of this and other meetings, Adisa's early poem "Ethiopia Unda a Jamaican Mango Tree" was first published in Brathwaite's edition of the journal *Savacou* the following year. The poem was later included in Kwame Dawes's edited anthology of Reggae poetry *Wheel and Come Again* (27-28).



California (UC), Berkeley, a post she occupied until 1993.

During the years she lectured at UC Berkeley, Adisa taught African American Drama and Literature, including composition, Black Poetry and African American women's literature. In the course of these six years, Adisa married Tarik Farrar, the father of her first daughter, and had two more children with him, Jawara (1989) and Teju (1991). She also published *Traveling Women* (1989), a collaborative poetry collection with poet laureate devorah major, where they bring forward a Black and feminist consciousness with poems such as "We Bleed" (by Adisa, see chapter 6.1) and "Resistance" (by major). In 1992, she published *Tamarind and Mango Women*, a collection of poems written between 1974 and 1990, where she uses "Jamaican Dialect and Standard English" in order "to reflect the fusion between the two languages that is so common with the Jamaican people" (*Tamarind* epigraph). This collection won the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for poetry. In 1992, Adisa completed her PhD thesis on Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley, specializing in Caribbean women writing. She divorced in 1994, and has single-mothered her children ever since.

Since 1993, Adisa has been a Professor of creative writing at California College of the Arts. She has also been a visiting professor at UC Berkeley (1994-1996). Adisa is also a literary critic and she has published hundreds of articles about parenting, writing and poetry. Furthermore, she has always found time for her creative writing. In 1997, she published her first novel, *It Begins With Tears*. She wrote this novel in the span of three summers, thanks to the support of her sister Leonie, who took care of her children for weeks (*Begins* copyright page). The novel is set in rural Jamaica, and it explores themes on Afro-Caribbean spiritual healing and forgiveness, female sexuality, and family structures, thus suggesting a balanced interconnection between modernity and tradition in the context of the rural Caribbean (see chapter 5.1). This novel is included in Rick Ayers' *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teacher's Guide to Books that can Change Teens Lives* (2004), and accordingly, it is read in hundreds of educational centers at secondary and tertiary level. In 2000, Adisa published *Leaf of Life*, where she explores her relationship with her motherland, integrating the Caribbean environment and its history, and reflecting on relationships of love and pain with clear intentions to heal and reconcile herself with the past. *Caribbean Passion* (2004), her next poetry collection, is perhaps her first sensualist work, where her relationship with the environment becomes more acute and pleasurable. This volume celebrates the



female body and advocates freedom from patriarchal binary opposites. In her collection of poetry and prose, *Eros Muse* (2006) Adisa delves into the experiences of sexuality and motherhood, and explains how they motivate and determine her writing activity. This important collection reinvents the traditional form of the aesthetic treatise, thus adopting a creative stance to expose her principles on creative writing. In this volume, she mixes the genres of poetry and prose, and explores the relationship between eroticism, creativity and knowledge. With a focus on her Caribbean heritage, Adisa brings together motherhood and language, sexuality and history, and poetry and philosophy (see chapter 6).

In 2007, Adisa published her second short story collection *Until Judgement Comes*. It contains seven stories where Adisa explores Jamaican men's relationship with language, religion, history, and women in their immediate environment both in Jamaica and in the US. In 2008, she published her second book for children, *Playing is our Work*, and also her second collection of poetry and prose: *I Name Me Name* (2008). In the latter work Adisa explores into her own life and experiences, and the experiences of other African American and African Caribbean historical figures (known and unknown), in order to build up a Pan-African identity. Bringing up a sensual and spiritual experience, her work crosses the African diasporic geography between Africa, the Caribbean and America, thus touching upon both personal and political spheres. In 2009, she published two chapbooks of poetry, *Conscious Living*, and *Amour Verdinia*, with devorah major.

In 2010, jointly with Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Adisa edited a collection of poetry, prose and essays entitled *Caribbean Erotic*. This work is highly significant because it brings together for the first time Caribbean authors from all linguistic backgrounds on their perceptions on sexuality and eroticism as sites for freedom. This same year, Adisa became a visiting Professor at the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), where she taught for the spring terms of 2010 and 2011. During that time, she also edited two special issues of UVI's literary journal, *The Caribbean Writer*. Her second novel, *Painting Away Regrets*, got published in 2011. In this novel, Adisa explores the theme of divorce with a story told against the backdrop of two apparently opposite fields: Afro-Caribbean ancestral spirituality and North American modernity. Thus she envisages maternity as a love force that recovers the spiritual legacy of the African diaspora and challenges received ideas on the traditional family structure (see chapter 5.1).

In 2013, Adisa published *Incantations and Rites*, another poetry chapbook



with devorah major where the two poets chant with the soul about the inhuman treatment and racist killings that African Americans have to endure in their society. The same year, Adisa also published *Four-Headed Woman* (2013), a poetry collection that explores in depth political connections among the natural environment, the nature of the female body and the politics of power and domination. Adisa covers here some interconnected topics ranging from her childhood innocent days in the Caribbean, to the experience of menstruation, sexual behavior, and abortion. Her latest publication is a collection of short stories, *Love's Promise* (2017) that examines love as experienced and enjoyed in all stages of life. Since 2011, Adisa has been a distinguished Professor at the California College of the Arts and Crafts, where she now teaches in the fall semester. She spends the rest of the year in St Croix, where she works as the editor of *Interviewing the Caribbean*, the journal she has founded; dedicates time to her art, and continues doing community theater. At this moment, she is working on a new play entitled *Old, But Still Dancing*, that deals with seniors, dementia, and other issues related to aging. It will be performed on July 15-16, 2017 in St Croix.

Themes, Influences and Style in Adisa's writings

Adisa is aware of the discriminatory biases based on gender, race and class. Her writing thus, engages with peripheral voices in order to explore their political implications. Dominant themes in Adisa's texts are family life and the search for the sacred in everyday Afro-Caribbean history. She is interested in exploring questions on sexual agency and women's self determination. Her work is inscribed in the literary tradition of Caribbean women writers who explore feminist resistance within the context of slavery and globalization, like Merle Collins, Grace Nichols, Lorna Goodison, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Erna Brodber and Marion Bethel. Other than questions of race and gender, these writers also explore themes of folklore, place and language. In her essay "I Must Write What I Know so I'll Know that I've Known it All Along" Adisa asserts: "I am a Caribbean woman writer and I know that what I write about has been lived, has solicited tears, has punctured dreams. That is why I name things. I inscribe the history" (56). In the face of the imperialist politics that alienate people's bodies and minds, Adisa attempts to restore the role of the narratives of intimacy in the articulation of cultural identity. As a migrant Caribbean woman writer, mother of three, and an accomplished storyteller, Adisa employs her writing to mindfully recreate a Caribbean cultural imaginary that challenges the



established geographical borders and gender limitations. Thus, Adisa defies language resisting all kinds of canonical expectations, thematically and stylistically. Following the tradition of Caribbean female literature, she manages a unique sensual and spiritual boldness, and sheds new light when writing about the Caribbean society and its place in the world.

As Adisa put it in her above mentioned essay, “language is no longer the sole property of elite critics.” In fact, many people/critics in the US who originate from different ethnic groups do speak and write about what they know. For her, knowing is related “to the ownership of language” and she brings awareness to the fact that “not everyone owns their tongues” (55), an affirmation that connects with Spivak’s question “can the subaltern speak?” which is covered in chapter 4.2. In this respect, Adisa questions the importance given to the abstraction of theory. She particularly draws on Barbara Christian’s article “The Race for Theory” (1987), to illustrate how the use of language and the shallow generalizations about culture have silenced the existence of Black people in society, to the point that they cannot even comment on their own literature (Adisa “Must” 55). As an Afro-Caribbean woman writer, Adisa explains how knowledge, language and literature are intimately related, and affirms that, for writers like herself, recreating both individual and collective memories in their work serves to bring their silenced experiences to the center of knowledge and to include their wisdom in theoretical development (55).

With regard to her literary influences, Adisa has declared that, even though there are a number of poets who have inspired her and given her guidance in her writing, her primary influence is her “attention to life’s details.” As she explains in “Who I Read Then, Who I Read Now,” an essay included in *I Name Me Name*, she has nurtured her writing out of people she met in her early years of life. Today, social issues interest her greatly and represent her biggest influence. Adisa declares that the poetry that moves her most occurs in the most common places of everyday life, and that she enjoys listening to those who, when speaking, make poetry without even acknowledging it (165). Since about the age of seven, Adisa listened to Louise Bennet and learned to give value to her own speech: Jamaican patois, a form that was considered inappropriate in school, but which she found “resonant and sure, rendering our speech musical, classic, poetic.” As an adult, Adisa decided to use local rhythms in her writing because, as she claims, this decision “gives colour and flavour and validates our cultural ethos” (*Name* 149). Adisa’s literary style is thus naturally influenced by the use of her local speech. The use of nation language, as



explained earlier, has much to do with the rhythm and the musicality, and it is also characterized by certain lexical and syntactical choices made by a community of speakers whose linguistic and cultural origins are set in Africa. To people accustomed to standard English, the continuum of nation language may sound as broken English, in the sense that it appears fragmented and marked by faulty syntax and a so-called inappropriate diction. Adisa's use of nation language embodies a subversive attitude towards the rationality of language, similar to the notion of *écriture féminine* as developed by French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who tried to delineate stylistic features typical of feminine writing (see chapter 2). My contention would be that Adisa finds pleasure in creative writing by breaking the silence of the female sex, writing herself and also others, and thus representing disparate and heterogeneous female voices, and even masculine voices.

Objectives and Methodology

As I said before, my travels to Brazil, Barbados and Jamaica have determined by fascination for the history, the music, the arts, and the literature of the African diaspora. The dislocations entailed in traveling are of key importance to understand my personal connections with the English-speaking Caribbean. In fact, had I stayed in Switzerland, or returned to my native Spain, I would not have discovered the rich cultures of the African diaspora, at least not at the same level. I am aware that traveling to other countries and being able to interact with their people for a period of time is a privilege, a feature of modernity that most of the world's population dream of doing but only a few can achieve.

Traveling is a means of inhabiting other worlds and a possibility to leave our ordinary lives in order to occupy other spaces, and so is literature. This thought sparked in my mind when I was reflecting on my motivations to write the present PhD dissertation. Just like we are able to travel through books, the physical travels also offer the possibility to 'read' into other realities. We want to read because we want to know, and we want to travel because we want to know. Maybe we want to know that there is someone out there who thinks and feels like we do; or maybe we want to discover other possibilities of being and living in the world. Just like the first explorers/cartographers invested themselves in traveling the world and tracing imaginary lines, mapping the vastness of the world into smaller, manageable



portions; so does the writer with words in order to delimitate and conceive the world in which she/he lives. As deconstructive literary critic Joseph Hillis Miller affirms,

A novel is a figurative mapping. The story traces out diachronically the movement of the characters from house to house and from time to time, as the crisscross of their relationships gradually creates an imaginary space. This space is based in the real landscape, . . . whereby [the] environment may be a figure for what it environs, in this case the agents who move, act, and interact within the scene. . . . The map is what remains after the characters are dead or happily married, . . . like a house with its gardens, fences, and paths, which have been gradually produced by the family living there. (*Topographies* 19-20)

Similarly, Benedict Anderson thought of “the explorers, surveyors and military forces,” not just as those who scientifically produce abstractions of the extant space, but rather as those who, with their maps, were already shaping the real space, anticipating it, thus transforming the maps into excellent political instruments for the exercise of power and domination within imperial practices (*Imagined* 172-173). Interestingly enough, literature, the narratives of empire for that matter, have also worked at politicizing the territory. Indeed, the power of writing, of naming reality in a certain fashion, affects not only the ways in which the imagination works, but also the ways in which the material world works. Just in the same way as the nation is created by drawing imaginary lines across the land, the nation is also the product of a series of imaginary narratives that recreate the experiences of the people inhabiting a given space. The writer, therefore, is a cartographer; both literature and maps are abstract products of the imagination that come to define the spaces we inhabit. In the same way as these mappings have been the exercise of political conquests and cultural colonization, it is also possible for the postcolonial writer to remap the colonized territory.

Remapping, thus, is deconstructing the politicized territory, erasing the imaginary borders, and fashioning spaces. It is my contention that Adisa examines human practices from below in order to destabilize the concept of nation and embrace a larger Caribbean identity that ignores colonial mappings. Decolonizing practices such as recovering indigenous languages in literature and revaluing autobiographical modes of representation are very common in postcolonial writing



(Aschcroft et al.). The two professions of cartographer and writer imply movement and interaction within spaces. Thus, there is no static form in the process of knowing and inhabiting the world. Every travel, every reading, brings with it a unique interpretation. In Boyce Davies's latest work *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes From Twilight Zones*, this critic attempts to move "between the autobiographical and the conceptual, the experiential and the theoretical, in order to disrupt the logic of exclusionary academic discourse that often denies the personal" (6). I think this work is innovative and meaningful for my reading of Adisa's literature in many ways. In its contents, Boyce Davies's latest work approaches the intimate experience as a means to access extant epistemologies in the Caribbean and African-diasporic context. In its form, it is written in an accessible language that enables a wider readership to learn about what is being discussed in the academia. As Boyce Davies declares, "I have developed a deliberate narrative strategy to present this as though I were relaying to them what people talk about in academic communities while also speaking to those same academic audiences" (7). In a similar way, I think this is what Adisa has been trying to do in her writing. Combining prose and poetry—even in her works of literary criticism—Adisa has successfully crossed a wide range of borders that have traditionally separated 'here' (in the diaspora) from 'there' (in the homeland), the individual from the community, the personal from the political, the private from the public, the domestic from the public, and the writer from her writing.

Adisa's writing has caught the attention of a few literary critics, most of whom focus mainly on her perceptions as a Caribbean female poet and mother who lives in the US, as can be perceived in the interviews she has granted over the years (Calderaro, Dawes, Miller). Some considerable work has been done on her fiction, notably her first novel *It Begins With Tears* (Feng, Spencer, Weir-Soley, Valovirta). However, most of her thought-provoking poetry and prose has generally been disregarded, or it has not been given the attention I think it deserves, and which could contribute to the body of criticism made in Caribbean literary studies. Considering this research lacuna, the main objective of this dissertation is to explore a selection of poetry, fictional and non-fictional literary pieces by Adisa as seen against the framework of postcolonial and feminist literary criticism.

Defining the literary production of Adisa, however, is not a simple task, as I need to address processes of identity formation in matters of racial, cultural, geographical and gender belonging. Bearing in mind Adisa's main themes and style,



which are closely connected to her own experience as a Caribbean writing mother living in the US, the present dissertation pretends to broaden the discussion on the connections between the diasporic experience and the intimate practices articulated in postcolonial and feminist literary works. I will particularly focus on a selection of works by Opal Palmer Adisa that I consider suitable to open new debates on the connections between diasporic and intimacy narratives. As a matter of fact, in postcolonial studies, diasporic criticism has proved to be very useful at destabilizing the limitations and prescriptions of a nationalist approach in cultural studies. In particular, I will draw upon theories by Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Kamau Brathwaite. Similarly, intimacy discourses have emerged to undermine hegemonic notions of public/private and personal/political. I will mainly use a number of authors whose work is explicitly related to theories of intimacy. Many of these authors are feminists whose perspectives focus on affect studies and approaches to the politics of emotion, and the sacred, such as Elizabeth Povinelli, Ann Laura Stoler, Sara Ahmed, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Trinh T. Minha. For their endorsement of the intimate experience as a source of knowledge, intimacy studies are closely related to the discourses of resistance that can be found in postcolonial criticism, especially with regard to the importance of memory and autobiographical modes of representation, like postcolonial critics Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, who explicitly address the politicized aspects of the intimate experience. Similarly, there are previous works that are also concerned with the incursion of the sites of intimacy in politics and society. Therefore, I will refer to works that have been discussed by authors of intimacy studies, especially with a focus on pleasure and sexual politics, like Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray (see chapter 3).

One of the objects of studying Opal Palmer Adisa's texts is to identify her attempts to engage and disable hegemonic discourses and practices. Thus, studying her writings will enable me to reflect on how the female intimate spaces she constantly describes are affected by such hegemonic discourses. I also intend to explore the connections between the construction of home/nation—in Caribbean territory and in the diaspora in the US—and the way in which the intimacies are written. Finally, I want to explore the multiple sites of intimacy, because often, the intimate is not limited to the sexual and/or romantic experience, nor it is always a personal matter. Hence, I will try to elucidate implications of terms such as 'private,'



‘intimate’ and ‘domestic,’ and identify similarities and differences among them (see chapter 3). It is my contention that—in addressing domestic and intimate spaces for the recreation of one’s culture, and in bringing them into the spaces of the imagination that geographical displacement entails—Adisa, a Caribbean writer in the diaspora, is bringing forward the importance of recreating the intimate spaces that help to preserve the notion of homeland.

I intend to prove that the contents of intimacy discourses are as powerful and influential as any other external authority, inasmuch as both the phenomenology of feeling and the birth of a nation are products of our common cultural imagination. Adisa delineates the division between the public/private and personal/political through the agency of her female voices and characters. These voices, not only manage to maintain their homes and homelands, but also defy conventional narratives of progress that axiomatically inhibit potential individualistic intimate experiences. In order to assess Adisa’s endorsement of the intimate spaces, I will borrow theories of intimacies that claim the relationship between emotions—mainly pain, pleasure (sexual and not), and shame—and history. Some of the most relevant findings on this matter have been expanded by Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Mimi Sheller, Sara Ahmed, M. Jacqui Alexander, Donnette Francis, and Audre Lorde. I will draw upon their theories in my analysis of Adisa’s perceptions on the relation between knowledge and body.

The present dissertation is arranged in two parts. The first one offers an introductory framework to the theories I aim to apply in my reading of Adisa’s work, namely, postcolonialism, feminism and intimacy studies. In the second part, I offer a reading of a selection of writings by Adisa, putting her works in conversation with the theories introduced in the previous section. Each part is divided into three chapters. The focus of chapter 1 attempts to situate postcolonial literature at the center of postcolonial theory (Mullaney *Texts* 4) with a focus on Black and Caribbean cultural studies. I will hence offer a general overview of the emergence of postcolonial studies within literary criticism. I will also present here some epistemological assumptions of the term ‘diaspora’—that is to say, the way in which diaspora is constructed as an object of knowledge from its original essentialist meanings to how it is interpreted today in the postcolonial field. Special attention is given to the processes of creolization and the African presence in the Caribbean. Chapter 2 on feminism offers an overview of the feminist theoretical postulates that will serve to illuminate the literary texts analyzed hereby, ranging from Western to



Afro-Caribbean authors. In this chapter I draw upon the work of Black feminist writers and literary critics Alice Walker, Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Carole Boyce Davies, and bell hooks. I also address the work of French feminists Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, as well as the work of Trinh T. Minha, and Opal Palmer Adisa herself, who also contributes with her essays to feminist thought. The main contention in this chapter is that the literary text is sufficiently autonomous to interrogate feminist issues and create its own theory. Chapter 3 is concerned with the micropolitics of intimacy. I start by offering an overview of the importance of the intimacies in the narration of nationhood and other constructions of home, arguing that intimacy studies are not exclusively related to the domestic space or the romantic and sexual relations. Then I offer a terminology that clarifies the implications of the terms private, domestic and intimate, especially as studied by Irene Pérez Fernández, Catherine A. MacKinnon and Ruth Gavison. Finally, I examine some of the most relevant ideas on the field of postcolonial intimacies, ranging from Foucault to most recent theorists on citizenship from below with a focus on the Caribbean, such as Donnette Francis, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Mimi Sheller.

In order to establish the relationship between the above-mentioned theories and Adisa's own perspective, chapter 4 will first focus on Adisa's personal perceptions of the decolonizing role of the Caribbean writer, with special regard to her embodied practices of survival and resistance. Theories by Hélène Cixous, Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, and Elaine Scarry about their perceptions on women's writing and pain will be addressed to complete my interpretation. In the first part, chapter 4.1, I draw upon the author's essay "She Scrape She Knee" in order to study embodied literary practices and the affective politics of pain. According to Adisa, scraping one's knee is about recovering the past stories of pain and violence—rather than forgetting them—an act that offers the Afro-Caribbean community the possibility of healing from the symptomatic history of colonialism. Throughout this chapter, I also analyse a number of poems and essays appearing in *Tamarind and Mango Women* (1992), *Leaf of Life* (2000), *Eros Muse: Poems and Essays* (2006) and *I Name Me Name* (2008). I also discuss some relevant passages from her novel *It Begins With Tears* (1997) and her short story collection *Until Judgement Comes* (2007). Next, in chapter 4.2, I focus on Adisa's engagement with Caribbean history. In particular, I explore how she recreates in her work cultural heritage through the acknowledgement of a Caribbean ancestry. For Adisa, understanding the stories of



one's ancestors is key to creating spaces of belonging. There is a connection between the past stories, as they are told within the oral tradition, and the people's expressions in contemporary everyday life. I will draw upon her poem "How to Write the Poem of the Pebble," where Adisa brings to the fore the necessity of rewriting history from below. Adisa is committed to rescuing the voices of her ancestors and aims to also connect them with contemporary voices in the Caribbean society. In this regard, Spivak's notions on subalternity, representation and cultural identity will be largely discussed.

Chapter 5 is dedicated mainly to Adisa's two novels, with a focus on the relationship between spirituality, sexuality and female erotic agency. In chapter 5.1, I offer an analysis of *It Begins With Tears* (1997), by delving into Adisa's recreation of sexuality, African-rooted kinship and healing practices in the rural Caribbean. I will read this text through the theoretical postulates of Mimi Sheller, M. Jacqui Alexander, Audre Lorde, and Sara Ahmed. I will significantly draw upon critics Pinchia Feng, Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Elina Valovirta, and Suzanne Keen, who have discussed Adisa's first novel on the topics of sexuality, shame, spiritual healing, empathy, masculinities and the erotic as power. In chapter 5.1 I also include a detailed reading of Adisa's second novel, *Painting Away Regrets* (2011), thus offering the first comprehensive study about this novel. In this work of fiction Adisa keeps the connections between Afro-Caribbean sacred practices and sexual politics that will lead her character, a Caribbean woman settled in the US, through a path of forgiveness and healing. Chapter 5.2 examines the political implications of sexual violence, and the politics of female reproduction and birth control as historically implemented against the Black Caribbean female body. This section will also address certain passages from *It Begins With Tears* and *Painting Away Regrets*. Adisa's poem "PMS and PMDD Symptoms" will also be analyzed in order to better understand her feminist and decolonizing claims. In this section I will mainly focus on the postulations made by M. Jacqui Alexander, Mimi Sheller, Sara Ahmed, Boyce Davies and Audre Lorde.

Finally, in chapter 6, I will explore Adisa's most intimate poetry and autobiographical narrative, where she covers the themes of writing, sexuality, female menstruation and mothering. For Adisa, all these activities are considered as sites of intimacy. Also, I will explore how intimacy practices are not only related to private issues, but they are firmly rooted in sexual politics and decolonizing endeavors. In chapter 6.1, I will examine how language, literature and knowledge are erotic sites



for decolonizing practices. For this, I will briefly explain the erotic force of creativity as understood by Plato in his early works. Then, I will read Adisa's essays "The Orgasmic Rupture of Writing" and "When the Poem Kisses You," from her collection of poetry and essays *Eros Muse* (2006). To offer an interpretation of these essays, I will borrow perceptions on pleasure and the erotic as seen through different philosophers and psychoanalysts, ranging from Nietzsche and Foucault to Freud, Marcuse and the poststructuralists Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva and Irigaray. In this subsection I will also delve into two of her poems on menstruation, namely "We Bleed" and "Bumbu Clat," where Adisa raises questions on erotic disempowerment and its implications in both the intimate and the public spheres. Section 6.2 deals with her own experience as a daughter and a mother, and how both are intimately connected with the storytelling tradition and her own writing. I focus here on her autobiographical prose, specifically on her essays "The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother: The Waves That Connect Them, The Shore Where They Meet," and "The Swelling of the Womb," from *Eros Muse*, "I Became the Stories My Mother Told About Me," included in *I Name Me Name*, and her poem "Held and Let Go" from her poetry collection *Leaf of Life*.

In the conclusion I will offer a general overview of my main findings. I will particularly highlight a number of questions in connection with the role of the intimate narratives in Adisa's writings. I will also foreground Adisa's ability to create, with her literary works, new spaces of belonging that have their roots in sexual, spiritual, domestic, and private practices. With my study of Adisa's work, my intention is to underline the importance of language and literature in the creation of new territories for the Caribbean cultural imagination. Thus Adisa, as a writer, has the potentiality to remap the colonized territory, given that, like a cartographer, she has the ability to define the geography and endorse it with new political meanings.

PART I

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AFRO-CARIBBEAN FEMINIST WRITING

Chapter 1

Postcolonialism and the Caribbean

Chapter 1

Postcolonialism and the African Diaspora in the Caribbean



Emergence and Definition of Postcolonialism

As already argued by Julie Mullaney in *Texts and Contexts: Postcolonial Literatures in Context*, we must bear in mind that English, the language of the British empire, has eventually become a global language through which a wide range of peripheral stories are told (1). Indeed, the study of postcolonial literatures are at the center of postcolonial theory insomuch as they represent a “site of contest for the colonized,” and “a means of challenging the political and cultural ideologies of Empire” (4). Also, for their singular contribution to the formation of postcolonial thought, I will put Black and Caribbean studies in the spotlight, thus narrowing down the vast array of postcolonial epistemologies. Hereby, I offer a general overview of the emergence of the term postcolonial and the development of its theoretical assumptions, with a focus on literary criticism within postcolonial Caribbean studies.

Semantically speaking, the word ‘postcolonial’ is divided into the prefix ‘post-’ and the word ‘colonial.’ It literally means ‘after colonialism.’ The first use of the term ‘post-colonial,’ as cataloged in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, occurs in 1883 in the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (White 1883 qtd. in “post-colonial”), where it signifies “[o]ccurring or existing after the end of colonial rule,” thus connecting the term with practices of historical periodization (“post-colonial”). At a later stage, following Indian independence in 1947, the term ‘postcolonial’ became common currency to refer to former colonized territories in Asia, Africa and America after they became independent states in the 1950s and 1960s (Walder *Post-Colonial* 3, *Daily Telegraph* qtd. in “post-colonial”). In a later excerpt from the novel *The Golden Cockatrice* that reads “If there's one thing worse than . . . rampant colonialism . . . it's post-colonial dictatorship” (Black 1974 qtd. in “post-colonial”), the term can also have connotations of neocolonial relations by which colonial subjugation persists (“post-colonial”).

As indicated by Boehmer in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, postcolonial writing emerges to “critically and subversively” examine



the colonial connection and “to resist colonial perspectives” (3). According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their edition of *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, postcolonial theory is manifold. It can be regarded as either “an amorphous set of discursive practices,” whose critical accounts are in alignment with postmodernist and poststructuralist theories, or as “a more specific, and historically located set of cultural strategies” as developed in the societies of the postcolonial world during and after colonization (xv). Accordingly, when using the word ‘postcolonial’ one cannot naively presume that colonialism ended after the former colonies’ political self-determination. It is more realistic to recognize that in the new independent nations, colonialism has a latency that cannot easily be swept out.

This latter position is evident in the English language, which was not only “the most potent instrument of cultural control” for the colonizers, but also represents “a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse” (Ashcroft et al. *Post-colonial* 283). What I want to derive from this linguistic fact is that the literature produced throughout the Commonwealth during the so-called postcolonial period does not simply circumscribe itself in a time line as an episode occurring after independences, but rather, it emerges as a non-linear process that depends on the interaction between the culture of the Western colonizer and the cultures of the colonized peoples (1). As a result of this interplay, it could be claimed that postcolonial literature not only questions European literary traditions and epistemologies, but also aims to dismantle the political and cultural mechanisms that sustain a monocentric and ostensibly universal representation of the world (11). In the same line of thought, Mullaney highlights the nonsequential aspect of postcolonial literatures as well as their ubiquitousness. That is to say, postcolonial literatures are not a consequence of the interaction between imperial and indigenous cultures, but the essence of this very interaction, and they develop in different locations at the same time, thus presenting a variety of local features. Mullaney describes them as “that complex and various body of writing produced by individuals, communities and nations with distinct histories of colonialism and which diversely treats its origins, impacts and effects in the past and the present” (3-4).

In the introduction to *Postcolonial Criticism*, Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton and Willy Maley argue that defining postcolonialism is not an easy task, not only because it is an interdisciplinary field of studies, but also because it designates at the same time a “chronological moment,” a “political movement” and an “intellectual



activity.” For them, questions of definition— such as “What is it?”—are not as revealing as “questions of a more specific nature” that aim at signposting “some relevant texts and contexts” by asking “where, when, who, and why” (1-2). These authors attempt to define postcolonial criticism not only by defining positions, but also by displaying oppositions. As a matter of fact, postcolonial thought deals with difference—it features oppositions. Furthermore, when trying to define such divergences, postcolonialism engages “in the politics of identity and exclusion” (1). That is to say, in order to consolidate definitions of identity, it is unavoidable to exclude other unrelated, or even opposite identities. Thus, self-definition in postcolonial practices is not only about what one is and what one is not with regard to others’ generalized assumptions; it is also about where, when, and why one is one way, and not the other.

The geographical place of postcolonial writing is, as we have argued before, multiple. This heterogeneity of places embraces as well a disparity of “multiple cultures and experiences” that happens simultaneously (Burns and Kaiser *Postcolonial* 28). The “problematic temporality” of postcolonialism can be explained bearing in mind that postcolonialism undoes “neat chronologies.” (Moore-Gilbert et al. 2). That is to say, there is not such a strict difference between the past and the present, as the latter is a continuation of the former. In fact, whereas it is true that we cannot frame postcolonialism in a specific period of history, it is also undeniable that postcolonialism needs to represent something, and this something is subject to being inscribed within a historical context. On the other hand, culture as the object of study of postcolonialism is anachronistic, because it is exposed to being fragmented and repeated throughout history. A good example are the African iterations that permeate the Caribbean cultural and folk tradition, or the still latent prejudices based upon skin color gradation that was established in the slavery period. Ultimately, if we are to consider postcolonialism as a period, it should be described as a period “characterized by a suspicion of progress,” because what meant a period of progress for the colonizers, was in truth a period of exploitation, slavery and impoverishment for the rest of the world (Moore-Gilbert et al. 2).

If the discussion on the postcolonial chronological moment is worth being examined for a thorough definition of postcolonialism, the other two approaches to postcolonial theory, as mentioned two paragraphs above (postcolonialism as a political movement or as an intellectual activity), also need to be scrutinized here. As



a matter of fact, there is a certain division between postcolonialism as either political movement or as intellectual activity. On the one hand, there are those who are satisfied with the focus on culture, literature and theory, and believe that reading and writing are autonomous revolutionary activities; and, on the other hand, those who think that “real politics” take place “outside the teaching machine.” The latter is thought to be a gendered approach that reflects at the same time a “masculine” and a “Leftist” discomfort with the potential of education for revolutionary changes (Moore-Gilbert et al. 2). Postcolonial intellectual activity—namely postcolonial (literary) criticism—is similar to cultural studies, with the difference that it boosts a singular perspective on literature and politics that is worth elaborating. In fact, postcolonial critics are interested in the revision of the literature produced by colonial powers as well as the writings produced by the colonized, a revision inhabited by a sharp criticism of European dominance. Meanwhile, postcolonial theory is concerned with issues of politics, power, economics, culture and religion, and how these aspects behave in connection to colonial control and Western hegemony. With a decolonizing perspective in mind, the point in question is not about choosing between one and another, but rather about analyzing the negotiation and transgression that occurs between the two apparently opposing parts.

Given that the plurality of approaches are an inherent aspect of the in-between location of postcolonial theory, then, the discussion should be whether postcolonialism can appease the tensions between the “academic world,” that is ostensibly elitist—but conclusive for the review of colonialist discourses—and a “larger cultural community” that develops within established parameters of culture, politics and history (Moore-Gilbert et al. 2). Postcolonial criticism is hence understood as a sub-field of postcolonial theory that serves to challenge some of the premises raised by postcolonial theorists. In the analysis of Adisa’s work, it is my intention to foreground the connections between political activism and intellectual activity, arguing that postcolonial intellectuals (i.e. writers and artists in general) are necessary to bring to the fore the multiplicity of subaltern voices (see chapter 4.2).

Postcolonial Theory

Other than economic and political control, the British empire’s vocation of knowing other cultures served them to make the colonized people feel as though they were subaltern to Europe. European languages, their literatures, and learning methods were exported to the colonized territories as part of “a civilizing mission” that made



entire indigenous cultures succumb to imperial control. It was not until after two world wars and the spreading of independence movements that imperial power would be decimated. Although imperial cultural influences were not dismantled right away, this political break down was “attended by an unprecedented assertion of creative activity in postcolonial societies.” Against all odds, self-determination discourses appropriated the imperial culture and language for their “projects of counter-colonial resistance,” giving way to “hybrid processes” that would assist to defy and even to replace the power of imperial cultural knowledge (Ashcroft et al. *Post-colonial* 1).

It could be said that postcolonial theory existed even before the term ‘postcolonial’ gained any currency, from the moment when the colonized people grew aware of and articulated the existing tension between the imperial language and the local experience. Thus, what we call ‘appropriation’ in postcolonial writing is in fact “the result of the interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices” (Ashcroft et al. *Post-colonial* 1). However, the possibility that postcolonial societies may be dominated by subtle forms of neocolonialism has not been discarded by early postcolonial critics, such as Nigerian writer and scholar Chinua Achebe, Nigerian Nobel Prize of Literature Wole Soyinka, and Kenyan intellectual Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. In the development of postcolonial theory, these and other critics acknowledged the development of elites within post-independence societies, as well as the internal divisions based on race, religion or linguistic difference that have made of postcolonialism “a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction” (Ashcroft et al. *Post-colonial* 2, *Empire* 127).

In spite of the fact that postcolonial studies are formally said to have begun after World War II, anti-colonial intellectual endeavors had been taking place since the beginning of the 20th century. As a matter of fact, criticism against cultural colonialism in the New World started as early as 1939, when Martinican Aimé Césaire published his *Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*), a hybrid piece of poetry and prose that reflects the concerns of the Négritude movement of the 1930s and 1940s, which would later influence the work of intellectuals such as Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon (Hooper 4). Césaire’s masterpiece has been considered as the work which “laid the foundations for a new literary style in which Caribbean writers came to reject the alienating gaze of the Other in favour of their own Caribbean interpretation of reality” (Thomas n.p.). During the last half of the 20th century, the emergence of a significant body of



literature by writers from the British former colonies attracted a growing interest worldwide. Writers from the “English-speaking diaspora” have hence become influential figures not only within the scope of English literary studies, but also in the fields of world literature and cultural studies (Walder *Post-colonial* ix). In *Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, Walder stresses the importance of theory for a better understanding of post-colonial literatures (56). He takes up Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who in *Decolonising the Mind* (1981) explains that he urged his students at the University of Nairobi to read two works of theory as prerequisite to understand what informs African writings, especially fictional ones. These theoretical milestones are Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) (Ngũgĩ 63). In the latter, Fanon made a point that the only way for decolonizing movements to succeed was to address the remaining power that the ancient colonizers still enjoyed globally. This affirmation seems to be the aftermath of what Lenin called the urge of “industrial capitalism to invest overseas,” thus implementing neocolonial economic structures in recently decolonized countries, where a new elite class would collaborate with the colonizers to follow their steps (Walder 56). In the face of neo-imperialist interests, Ngũgĩ encouraged the necessity of a resistant native people. Drawing upon Fanon’s resolution to place the local culture, and hence the local writers, at the center of liberation practices, Ngũgĩ promoted adult literacy in the Gikuyu language by running drama workshops in the rural areas of Kenya (Walder 56-57).

Frantz Fanon, an Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary born in Martinique in 1925, argues in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that “[c]olonial exploitation, poverty, and endemic famine increasingly force the colonized into open, organized rebellion,” and that gradually a “confrontation imposes itself” to the point when it turns into a generalized tension. These tensions inflame a sense of combativity and of national consciousness among the colonized, leaving a trace in the “cultural front,” especially in literature. Thus, not satisfied with the lame mirroring of the canonical literature imposed by the colonizers, the local literature shows “greater diversity and a will to particularize.” The intellectual population shifts from a consumer status to that of the producer of culture (172). As national consciousness evolves, there is also a shift in genres and themes amongst the writings of the colonized. Their texts go from bitter and “violent outbursts” addressed to their oppressors, to a literature that informs the national consciousness in its historical context—what Fanon calls “combat literature”—and that engages



not the colonizers, but a new audience among the colonized people who are urged “to join in the struggle for the existence of the nation” (173).

Fanon’s ideological struggle to identify and debunk colonialist strategies of racial oppression starts in his earlier work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where he identifies a “manicheism delirium” in the binary oppositions of “Good-Evil, Beauty-Ugliness, White-Black” that the Western imperialist system has brought forward in order to define the colonized by opposition to the colonizer (141). Fanon suggests that such polarizations must be overcome in order to attain decolonization. Thus, he concludes that the notion of *négritude* is a disadvantage rather than an asset in the struggle for individual freedom. He takes up Sartre’s words, for whom *négritude* represents “the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end” (Sartre *Orphée* xl ff qtd. in Fanon *Black* 102). Therefore, Fanon endorses a new political approach that moves across national borders and essentialist claims of race and nation. Likewise, he asserts that the “Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely one Negro, there are Negroes” (*Black* 104). Acknowledging the existence of an African diaspora, Fanon observes that because of the dispersal of black people throughout the world, the black race “can no longer claim unity” (133).

One of his most influential claims is that colonization is a psychological process that developed among the colonized, whose perceptions of self differed from the constructions that the colonizers made of them, thus bringing to the fore individual identity traumas. Fanon’s understanding of the function of language in decolonizing practices can be read in his statement appearing in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* (8-27), dedicated to language: “A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro . . . ; this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation.” Fanon claims that to speak means not only “to exist absolutely for the other” but also “to assume a culture” (8). In this sense, what the Martinican author advocates is the fact that colonized people, in the Antilles or elsewhere, have grown within themselves an inferiority complex due to the imposed negation of their original culture, and consequently they have adopted “the mother country’s cultural standards” becoming whiter by renouncing their blackness (9). Fanon is an important theorist of postcolonial studies, and he has been labeled as “the founding father of modern colonial critique” (Young 161).

Postcolonial cultural critics Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak have been influenced by Fanon’s non-essentialist attempts to disrupt



imperialist and nationalist conceptions on culture and identity. As such, these theorists have been labeled as “syncreticist.” Indeed, they understand decolonizing processes as the integration of both colonial and postcolonial elements, thus emphasizing the plural nature of identity through their own interpretations of the concept of ‘hybridity.’ Hybridity implies cultural syncretism, and the existence of an in-between position that crosses the borders between the apparently fixed locations of colonizer and colonized (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 29). Thus for these three authors, also known as “the Holy Trinity of postcolonial discourse” (Young 154), the most appropriate decolonizing subject is the one who experiences geographical dislocation. Indeed, the diasporic subject has the ability to move beyond the limits established by empires and nations.

Postcolonialism has often been charged with appropriating Western theories (Moore-Gilbert et al. 2, Ahmad 126), because the act of “reading post-colonial works as socially and historically mimetic” could get colonial disruptions reabsorbed into the English tradition, or its radicalism domesticated (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 34, Bhabha “Representation”). Quite in the opposite direction, it is a fact that the growing presence of “Third World intellectuals” in the Western academy has made disparity more apparent. No blind incorporation of Western theories has taken place among these non-European intellectuals. On the contrary, it can be evidenced that the exhaustion of the humanist project in the West has resulted into a new humanism that is mainly led by critics from the Third World. Postcolonialism has hence threatened the end of unanimity in higher education (Moore et al. 3). Thus, critical attempts to challenge the colonial order have certainly made an impact in the production and reception of knowledge, where unification and homogeneity should no longer be the norm. I intently say ‘should’ because embracing patriarchal structures and heteronormativity, as well as racial and national essentialisms, has been a common feature of the early stages of postcolonialism.

In addition to questions on theoretical appropriation and the presence of migrant intellectuals in the West, one more cause for colonial destabilization, hybridity and syncreticity can be found at the intersection between literary and cultural studies, whereby creative writing works to interrupt ostensibly universalizing conceptions of culture as imposed by the dominant culture. Likewise, there are other fluctuations highlighted by postcolonial studies which are concerned with “ambivalence, hybridity and migrancy.” Marked by aspects of in-betweenness, this domain of study can be located not only between cultural and literary studies,



but also at the junction of theory and practice, Marxism and existentialism, localism and universalism, private and public, the individual and the state (Moore-Gilbert et al. 3). Edward Said has been one of the most influential theoreticians in the field of postcolonial criticism. His notions about colonial discourse and cultural colonialism, developed in *Orientalism* (1978) first, then explored further in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), have been highly influential in postcolonial studies. Postcolonial scholars such as Robert Young argue that the publication of *Orientalism* promoted the study of discourse analysis with regard to colonialism (159). Other established postcolonial thinkers have also highlighted Said's contribution to the field, notably Homi Bhabha (Moore-Gilbert 35), Gayatri Spivak (*Outside* 56), and Aijaz Ahmad, who, in spite of being an acute critic of Said's work, considers *Orientalism* "the grandest of all narratives of the connection between Western knowledge and Western power" (*Theory* 13).

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem, Mandatory Palestine, in 1935. Two years later, his family and himself moved to Cairo as refugees (Marrouchi 242). In Egypt, he received a British education, and although he spent his youth visiting Jerusalem, eventually (1950) the Israeli government would deny Said and his family their right to return to their motherland. In 1952, he was sent to boarding school to the US (246-247). His position in-between orient and occident has marked Said's interests as an intellectual, especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for which he has been an active intellectual, advocating for the creation of a Palestinian state (251). Among his greatest influences are Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Michel Foucault. As a cultural and literary critic, Said examines all kinds of written discourses, ranging from works of literature to political, journalistic, religious and philosophical texts. In connection with Foucault, Said realizes the interdependence between imperial ideology and apparently apolitical practices. Thus he coins the term 'Orientalism' to illustrate his interpretation of such interdependence. First, "Orientalism" he explains, relates to "the high-minded . . . attitude of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century European colonialism" whose main academics studied and researched "the Orient". Secondly, Orientalism also makes allusion to "a style of thought" which places "the Orient" and "the Occident" in dual opposition, both epistemologically and metaphysically (*Orientalism* 2). Also, Orientalism is to be understood as a discourse, "an enormously systematic discipline with its own style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices and historical and social circumstances." Said finally refers to



Orientalism as a historical category which, starting in the 18th century, has fed Western discourses of power over the Orient (3). While in his later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said endorses the possibility of authentic representations, he nonetheless seems to acknowledge the impossibility of representing other cultures with accuracy. In *Orientalism*, he affirms: “we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth,’ which is itself a representation (272).

Fanon’s perceptions on syncretism and plurality have not only influenced the work of Edward Said, but also that of Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial intellectual and migrant subject himself. Bhabha is a well known theorist for his observations on cultural hybridity and mimicry. One of Bhabha’s main concerns has been to examine how the colonized people have succeeded at debunking the binary oppositions of ‘self’ and ‘Other,’ ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized.’ Drawing upon psychoanalytical postulates, Bhabha explores a series of concepts that denote the unstable power structures that support the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. For Bhabha, mimicry, stereotype, and translation can be used as strategies of subversion of colonial dominance inasmuch as they enable discursive ambivalence. The notion of “mimicry” is used to describe the distorted image that the colonized subject shows when trying to imitate the Western manners, which turns to be almost ridiculous and disorienting (*Location* 87). In the view of the Englishmen, for instance, the Indian mimic man is regarded as an unsuitable colonial subject, “almost the same, but not quite” (86). This partial analogy challenges the supremacy of colonial discourses. Indeed, it blurs the division between the colonizer and the colonized, and therefore disrupts hierarchical structures of domination. As Young would put it, “[t]he imitation subverts the identity of that which is being represented and the relation of power . . . certainly begins to vacillate” (147). Bhabha also explores the vulnerability of colonial relations through the concept of “stereotype.” In his view, the construction of stereotypes is based on the necessity to repeat what is already known. Therefore, stereotyping involves “rigidity” as well as “disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (66). He brings forward the image of the native which turns to be “both mysterious and known.” In this sense, Bhabha observes that the stereotype, which is firstly seen as an instrument to exert authority, has the potential to become a subversive and disruptive strategy. (79). A third strategy that Bhabha identifies as representative of the ambivalence of colonial discourse is “translation.” He illustrates this point with the Indian perception of the



Bible. For the Indians, reading this “English book” is like reading a hybrid text. Native Indians, in fact, would resist to accept the English vision of God and His miracles, and would therefore use translation as a way to adapt the English text into Gospel of their own (113).²⁰

This latter reflection on translation is directly linked to Bhabha’s advice to prevent the risks of reading postcolonial works as “socially and historically mimetic,” because the radicalism of the texts would be tamed by the hegemonic perception of the English tradition, which would ignore their colonial disruption (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 34). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin underline that the very alienating and marginalizing processes pushed to the limits by colonialist forces have turned into new sources of creativity in marginality. In other words, the periphery forces have counteracted Eurocentric ambitions in as much as these residual cultures have sought to decenter hegemonic knowledge and pluralize their own experience (*Empire* 12).

Certainly for Bhabha, as he explains in *The Location of Culture* (1994), “the meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent,” because in its negotiation there exists a “Third Space” that destabilizes the “common semiotic account” of enunciation. For Bhabha, this “Third Space” is the “cultural positionality” that occurs in the present time of the utterance and it “cannot be mimetically read off from the content” (36). In terms of the construction of cultural identities, taking into account this Third Space forces the individual to revoke any idea of fixity and purity of meaning. This rejection of fixity gives way to the ambivalence and potentiality of the sign, which “can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (37). Likewise, this ambivalence in identity processes enables a movement beyond the originary subjectivities based on race and gender, and brings awareness of the positions of the subjects in terms of other factors such as generation, institutional location, geopolitical locales, sexual orientation, which represent a wider range of spaces to belong to in the modern world.

Another postcolonial voice who directly embraces hybridity as a source of resistance is that of the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris. Following Bhabha’s line of argument, Harris, in *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and the Guyanas* (8ff), sees in imagination the gateway to escape from the dialectic of history and the only place of refuge for the oppressed. This critic worships the idea of a new

²⁰For a more comprehensive view of postcolonial theory and criticism, see Pilar Villar-Argáiz’s chapter “Re-examining the Postcolonial: Gender and Irish Studies” (9–60), from her monograph *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading*.



language and a new worldview, rejecting polarity and categorization as the bases for perception. Harris' formulation of hybridity suggests replacing "a temporal lineality with a spatial plurality;" in his quest, he observes that the term 'hybridity' is directly concerned with debunking the presence of a 'pure' ancestry as opposed to a 'composite' present (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 36).²¹ Harris' scope thus foregrounds the existence of a present time made of many parts—like heteroglossia²²—against the purity alleged to the past. Similarly, Brathwaite, as it will be discussed further below, emphasizes the syncretic nature of the West Indian worldview, although privileging the African presence to the European (35). In this line of argument, contemporary national identities should be looked at across borderlines. The mobility between different spaces that is characteristic of the narratives of diaspora allows individuals to create imagined communities.

Together with Bhabha's and Said's postcolonial reflections, Gayatri Spivak's theories are considered among the most significant contributions to the field. She is best known for her efforts to implement poststructuralist theories and gender perspectives within postcolonial studies, as can be seen in her early essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." Her perceptions on subalternity are also of central interest in postcolonial studies, notably in her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" where she discusses on the necessity/possibilities for subaltern voices to be heard in the public sphere. In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Spivak discusses the role of "strategic essentialism" by endorsing the necessity for the subaltern to become essentialist, if only during a limited time, and considers that emphasizing a core element of a peripheral group—no matter how simplistic it might appear— and thus disregarding individual differences amongst its members, remains crucial for the sake of giving full definition to the

²¹In her comments on Wilson Harris' volume *The Womb of Space* (1983), Boyce Davies reminds us that "all human endeavors of excellence have been about taking space;" thus, for her it is no surprise that Harris focuses on a Caribbean space that carries "much larger meaning, mythic possibilities and actual geographical locations where the cross-cultural imagination can flourish, emotional space in which we give ourselves the room to be brilliant" (*Caribbean Spaces* 14). Within this framework of thought, Boyce Davies explores further the connections between the necessity of emotional spaces in the background of cultural diasporas.

²²In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1982), Bakhtin explains heteroglossia as "the intense struggle that goes on between languages and within languages" (66), which indeed is the struggle between "a centralizing (unifying) tendency" and "a decentralizing tendency" (that stratifies languages). Bakhtin's thesis is that the modern novel puts forward linguistic dialectical forces, promotes decentralization, and finally enables "shift and renewal of the national language" (67).



group and therefore, bringing the margins to the center (*Other* 281). In this sense, we can consider the early 20th century Afro-centric postulates as examples of “strategic essentialism,” as they proved to be necessary stages in the achievement of cultural and political self-determination.

In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2013), Spivak reaches the conclusion that nationalisms cannot be found in the politics of translation. That is to say, the perception of a given nationalist identity is a private formation, and thus it cannot be understood by people who live outside that given nation. In fact, cultural nationalist projects look for the exaltation of the private into the public. When these private specificities are retold/translated into another language, we need to look for equivalences between languages (275). These linguistic equivalences have the ability to blur the differences between languages, and therefore between different cultures. Nevertheless, Spivak does not believe in linguistic equivalences. Every word has a different meaning in every language. For instance, the word ‘democracy’ denotes different implications for a Swiss citizen than for a Spanish citizen; and the denotations are even more different for a North Korean. Spivak, therefore, believes in cultural difference. Therefore, she encourages a comparative analysis between “historico-civilizational content,” because it accentuates the differences (471).

In her reflections, Spivak does not make claims of cultural relativism. In other words, she does not believe that all cultures are equivalent. In fact, she does not think that language is “isomorphic with cultural formation” (472). This is why she argues, as I said at the beginning of this paragraph, that “nationalism has no place in the politics of translation.” Therefore, because nationalism cannot be translated, the concept of nationalism is an “illicit private/public switch” (275). Therefore, Spivak claims that “[i]maginative de-transcendentalization has to be taught, persistently, because of the private-public thought of nation-think” (276). Basically, what Spivak means by de-transcendentalizing nationalism is that the concept of nation should not be considered as part of the public, political sphere, but rather as an intimate construction that occurs in the individual imagination. This is why she affirms that the object of de-transcendentalizing the nation is to take the idea of “‘nation’ out of nation state.” In her view, when the intimate notion of nation transcends the private sphere and enters the public sphere, there is a generalization of the concept of nation that gets lost in the translation from the private to the public. This is why Spivak endorses the necessity of implementing comparative studies.



That is to say, she encourages the examination of different cultural identities in comparison to other cultures, thus promoting relativism as opposed to the essentialism inherent in national identities (291).

Thus, when referring to Indian and American nationalism, Spivak claims that “neither example is unique, but they are different” (*Aesthetic* 276). I think this affirmation is helpful to claim the necessity to study Caribbean postcolonial and feminist theories, not as unique national identities, but as examples of cultural identities developing against unique backgrounds. Indeed, the Caribbean female and postcolonial experience can be compared to other postcolonial and feminist theories. In this de-transcendentalization of nation, the specificities of the Caribbean experience are accountable in our understanding of their cultural production, but they also add to the postcolonial and feminist theories that we can draw from their particular discourses. In a similar line of thought, critics of the African diaspora, notably Paul Gilroy, advocate for practices of cultural identity that draw upon the specificities of the “modern political and cultural formation.” Gilroy calls this set of specificities “the Black Atlantic.” Indeed, in correlation to Spivak’s attempt to de-transcendentalize the nation, Gilroy defines his notion of “the Black Atlantic” as a “desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (Gilroy *Black Atlantic* 19).

Following the decolonizing perspectives of Fanon, Bhabha, Said, and Spivak, another influential theorist on postcolonial cultural studies is Stuart Hall, a political activist and sociologist born in Jamaica in 1932 who lived in the United Kingdom from 1951 until his death in 2014. His essay “When Was The Post-Colonial? Thinking at the Limit,” published in 1996, remarks that the advantage of the term ‘postcolonial’ resides in its ambiguity, in the way it problematizes the binaries of ‘then’ and ‘now’, ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘home’ and ‘abroad’, without, however, forfeiting their potential to make changes (246-8). For Hall, the ‘post’ in postcolonial means “not only ‘after’ but ‘going beyond’ the colonial . . . colonialism refers to a specific historical moment . . . but it was always also a way of staging or narrating a history” (253). By focusing on the colonial encounter, Hall was not only emphasizing historic periodization, but rather, he was providing the possibility of retelling history anew, thus decentering the official version of colonialism as reflected in the narratives of modernist capitalism.

In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall considers the positions of enunciation, that is, the place from which we speak, as determinant in the practices



of representation. Therefore, the process of identity is never complete; it is always in progress, and constituted by many parts. Hall defines cultural identity in two different ways. One is based on the common stories shared by different people: a sort of collective oneness, which is epitomized in the sense of Caribbeannes that lays at the centre of the poets of Négritude, and which played a central role in the Pan-African movement. Drawing upon Fanon's observation that colonization destroys not only the present of a people, but also the past, Hall suggests other forms of cultural practice that prefer the living production of identity as opposed to the rediscovery of an old and lost identity, thus moving from an archaeological work to a creative work of re-telling the past. This imaginative rediscovery has played a significant role in the most important social movements of our time (feminist, anti-colonial, anti-racist) (Hall 393). This second view of cultural identity is connected to the concept of difference and what African people have finally become after the migration processes. Hall understands that, in spite of histories, cultural identities undergo constant transformation. They do not remain as they used to be. These identities are seen as the way in which we position ourselves regarding the narratives of the past. Cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture" (394). This is the view from which we can understand the traumatic colonial experience. Not only did the cultural power categorize black people as the others, but it also made them believe that they were the others. In this sense, cultural identity is not a fixed point to which we can return and to be relieved. As Hall explains, the past is still there: "[i]t has its histories—and histories have their real material and symbolic effects. . . . our relation to [the past is] like the child's relation to the mother, . . . [i]t is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (395). For the same reason, in the New World, the desire to return to the land of origin can only be fulfilled through representation, in other words, through the narratives that recreate the past, bringing to the foreground memory and myth in order to find alternative meanings to history and new possibilities for identity formation

The African Diaspora

The origin of the word 'diaspora' can be traced back to the first translation of the Hebrew Bible to Greek (3rd to 1st centuries B.C.) known as the Septuagint Bible. This translation included this word as a Greek neologism (Dufoix 4). In effect,



‘diaspora’ is a compound word formed by the prefix *dia*, which means ‘over’ in Greek and *speirein*, meaning ‘sow’ or ‘scatter’ (Procter 151; Oxford English Dictionary). According to Dufoix, diaspora originally did not make reference to the dispersion of the Jews who were taken to Babylon as captives after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B. C.; instead, it referred to the prescribed punishment of dispersion that the Hebrews would face for disobeying God (4). In his entry to “Diaspora” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Robin Cohen explains that the exodus to the capital of the Mesopotamian Empire was for the Jews nothing less than God’s punishment as it had been predicted in Deuteronomy (28: 58-68). ‘Babylon’ thus came to signify for the Jews a place of isolation and alienation where they were kept as captives. The same word, ‘Babylon,’ was later to be used by blacks in the New World (Cohen “diaspora” 3642), notably by Rastafarians, to designate the same reality of estrangement. With time, the meaning of diaspora would change among the Jews “to designate both the scattered people and the locale of their dispersion” (Dufoix 5).

Before geographically-oriented prescriptions became the norm in Jewish identity practices, the Jewish—as an ethnoreligious community—had maintained their integrity in the diaspora ever since biblical times thanks to a religious-oriented identification which is based on a temporal scale, rather than on a land-based kinship (Dufoix 8). Although a return to Jerusalem has been made evident among individuals after the Jewish exodus, an eschatological project—that is to say, a plan to return to the original land as the ultimate destiny of the Jewish community after the end of the world—would not materialize politically until the late 19th century with Zionism. Zionism was a nationalist movement that promoted the potential replacement of the Jewish people back to Mount Zion, in Jerusalem (8), which eventually led to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Cohen foregrounds that, for the last two millennia, a “victim tradition” of the diasporic experience has been adopted by other ethnic groups whose forced dispersion is similar to that of the Jews (“Diaspora” 3642). As we will see along the present chapter, many early struggles of Africans in the diaspora fall largely into that category. Nonetheless, there emerged during that period as well Pan-African leftist theories which were less essentialist. Within a more moderate approach, as I will indicate along this chapter, intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois aspired to the integration of the black people as rightful US citizens. The Jewish and black diasporas are linked because they both emerged after the common knowledge of a shared history—that of the exodus of a people—but



they are opposed in that the modern African diaspora has enjoyed unprecedented chances “to be people of multiple worlds and focalities” (Zezeza “African” n.p.) whose willingness for integration and ability to start anew is not at odds with their skill to bring their own culture forward and adapt it to new locations. In this regard, we can affirm that the reality of Africans in the diaspora does not respond to a monolithic model of cultural representation, but is rather the reflection of a process of exchange and continuous negotiation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, diaspora as a ‘concept’ was used extensively in social sciences to refer not only to victims of the African transatlantic trade, but also among the Muslim slave trade of Africans that occurred in Asia and the Middle East (Dufoix 13). These processes of displacement are ever since known as the “African diaspora” or the “Black diaspora.” The term ‘diaspora’ also started to be used to name the Chinese and the Palestinian migratory experiences (19). In 1982, the historian Joseph Harris wrote in his introduction to *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* that the concept of the African diaspora involves “the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa” (3). This definition is apt for an approach to Opal Palmer Adisa’s work, as the experience of returning to the motherland appears several times in her poetry as well as in her fiction. Her characters reflect the cultural double diaspora as experienced from Africa to the Caribbean, from there to the US, and from the US back to the Caribbean, and even to Africa.

Whether settled in America or in the Caribbean, what Africans in the diaspora had in common was that they had been “uprooted” from their land of origin, placed far away “from their families and communities for centuries, deprived of institutions, and condemned to an existence that the sociologist Orlando Patterson qualifies as ‘social death’” (Dufoix 14). Nobel Prize-winning author from Trinidad and Tobago, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, interpreted this as a lacking in Caribbean history, affirming that “history is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies,” for what he has been often criticized, and allegedly misunderstood (Naipaul *Middle* 29 qtd. in Binder “Finding” 136). In effect, Naipaul’s positioning has been rebuked by many Caribbean decolonizing authors, such as Brathwaite, whose insistence on the legitimacy of the creole cultures—which Naipaul resists (Brathwaite *Roots* 46, Balutansky *Caribbean* 6)—is



paramount to understand Caribbean history. Adisa, on her side, strongly supports and believes in the creativity of the Caribbean people as a socio-political force, including in her writings silenced passages of their personal histories. On these and other related concerns, I will explore further along the present dissertation, notably in chapter 4.2.

During the 18th century, the sprouts of “a black Atlantic imagination” came out in narratives penned by African slaves spotted in the main cities of Europe and the US. The unprecedented figures of Ignatius Sancho (1729-80), Phillis Wheatley (1753-84) and Olaudah Equiano (1745-97) remain the most outstanding examples (Procter 152-3). In effect, these writers were educated under European standards, thus having left a rather colonialist legacy, but yet they were able to transmit their own experiences and throw questions on black identity issues. At the beginning of the 19th century, after the freeing of many slaves, the American Colonization Society planned to transport free blacks back to Africa (Painter 74). In fact, they accomplished the repatriation of many ex-slaves back to Liberia (1877), in west Africa, a radical solution to the problems of a post-slavery society that lasted for nearly a century (Painter 8). Meanwhile, 19th century America witnessed the intellectual awakenings that encouraged the first Civil Rights movements by people of African descent. Early African-American struggles aimed at the abolition of slavery and, significantly after the Civil War (1861-1864), at the integration of freed slaves in America and the struggle against Jim Crow racist laws (Painter 105, 135, 145). In this context, we can observe that the term ‘diaspora’ started to be used in African-American criticism to either look at the past, by claiming a return to the original land—whether physically or metaphorically—or to look at the future, by demanding fully recognized citizenship in the new land.

It would not be until the turn of the 20th century when blacks living in the Caribbean, Europe and America would start to model a new African consciousness behind solid organizations and movements whose international scope would contribute to disseminate the concept and gather Africans in the diaspora together. From the previous century, Africans and Afro-descendants in the diaspora had been making efforts to gain self representation in the political and intellectual sphere. Such iterations gave way to the acknowledgment of a shared quest for black liberation, a mission that would manifest formally behind the concept of ‘Pan-Africanism.’ Such terminology originated and developed in the bosom of the Pan-African Association (PAA), the first international organization run by intellectual



blacks in the diaspora who sought to connect each other's knowledge through conferences they organized in Europe and the US. The PAA was founded by Henry Sylvester Williams, from Trinidad and Tobago, and Robert Love, from, Jamaica, and it motivated a sort of transatlantic dialogue to promote "black African consciousness" (Procter 153-54). The first Pan-African Conference was held in London in 1900. After this, the next Pan-African congregations came to be named Pan-African Congresses. Pan-African Congresses, would settle a solid political organization from where to unite Africans across the globe, therefore establishing connections among communities whose shared objective was that of defining themselves as opposed to white supremacy.

Another classical landmark in African-diasporic history is the cultural explosion that took place in Harlem, giving way to a massive movement that made of black culture a theme celebrated not only in America, but also among both European and Caribbean intellectuals and artists. The Harlem Renaissance, which spanned the 1920s and 1930s, represents the first cultural upheaval—prominently literary—that envisaged the possibility of a black cultural identity, forging a milestone in the history of 20th century America. Its tenets were brought to the fore by African-American literary figures such as Langston Hughes (*The Weary Blues*, 1926), Zora Neal Hurston (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 1934), Jean Toomer (*Cane*, 1923), and Countee Cullen (*One Way to Heaven*, 1932). In this setting, many intellectuals that subscribed to the Pan-African movement would position themselves as either sympathizers of the leftist endeavors of the Civil Rights movement, or else, as supporters of a geographically-oriented, race-bound approach to cultural identity, also known as black cultural nationalism.

At the end of the 19th century, Pan-African intellectuals borrowed the concept of 'diaspora' from the Jewish to justify their back-to-Africa theories. In effect, most of the emerging black nationalisms of the time saw themselves in the aspirations of modern Zionism. It was from that moment on that the word 'diaspora' started to gain its contemporary usage, thus reflecting realities of displacement and alienation (Gilroy *Black* 205). Two aspects that both the Jewish and the Africans in the diaspora had in common was their attachment to a common past of geographical displacement and the belief in a shared future of redemption and union. From the late 19th century to the early decades of the 20th century, before the term 'diaspora' gained any significant conceptual currency in African studies, parallels between the Jewish and the African dispersions were inscribed by Pan-African thinkers such as



Edward Wilmot Blyden, W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey (Dufoix 10). It was the time when “sympathy between Blacks and Jews because of their respective suffering was commonplace” and it was thus “articulated by intellectual leaders” (Bornstein “Colors” 377). This ideological congeniality led to race-bound and land-bound diasporic solutions among certain black activists who, generally, did not limit exclusively to symbolical practices. For some of these activists, their desire to recover their African origins aspired to a physical, literal return, and not to a figurative return that could be experienced in the reproduction of cultural forms, like Stuart Hall would suggest nearly a century later (“Cultural” 393). Indeed, one of the most radical assumptions of Pan-Africanism was the absolute and legitimate return to the original land, which resulted in Garvey’s attempts to implement the back-to-Africa movement, later known as Black Zionism, about which more is to be said along this chapter, specifically in the section entitled “The Sprouts of an African Diaspora Consciousness in the Caribbean.”

As discussed earlier, the term ‘diaspora’ was also used by American Civil Rights activists, such as doctor Charles Victor Roman who, in his book *American Civilization and the Negro* (1916), wrote that “[t]he slave-trade was the diaspora of the African, and the children of this alienation have become a permanent part of the citizenry of the American Republic” (Roman 194-195 qtd. in Dufoix 12). In the same line of thought, W.E.B. Du Bois (Massachusetts, 1868), a prominent scholar-activist who had founded the American Negro Academy as early as 1897, was the leading figure of the National Association for the Improvement of Colored People (1909), and, as one of the most moderate figures of the Pan-African movement, would play an important role in the organization of the Pan-African Congresses of 1919, 1921, 1927 and 1945 (Gomez 13-14). The Pan-African Congresses, swaying between the USA and Europe, “represented a . . . political attempt to exploit the transnational connections first established within eighteenth-century slave writing” (Procter 153). Du Bois, who had traveled widely and studied his PhD at the University of Berlin, used the term “double consciousness” to refer to the “dilemma of being black and American” (Procter 154). He explained this further in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he portrays the African American man as someone who is born with a mask and “a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois 38 qtd. in Procter 154). In his prolific writings, Du Bois reflected connections between “national and transnational perspectives” (Procter 154). This view represents a landmark in the development of the diaspora



concept as a hybrid phenomenon. Indeed, his view of Pan-Africanism was inclined to the legitimate recognition of an indigenous Black America rather than to the back-to-Africa projects. At dissonance with the theoretical underpinnings of most of his comrades, Du Bois believed that his black compatriots could legitimately be called Afro-American without having to reaffirm themselves in their ancestors. For him, resorting to Africa was an instrument to reinforce an identity consciousness among the African-Americans, in the same manner as a person of English origins born in India would turn to England in admiration. Furthermore, he would regard Pan-Africanism as “a basis for wide-scale racial organization within the context of a global pluralism” (Reed 1997: 82).

Contrary to Du Bois’ transnational perspective on what it meant to be African in the New World, black nationalists from America and the Caribbean supported, in the meantime, the back-to-Africa movement. Among these Pan-African supporters of cultural nationalisms the figure of Edward Wilmot Blyden (Dutch West Indies, 1832) transcends as the most notable African intellectual of the 19th century, according to *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Blyden made a direct connection between the Jewish struggle and the Negro causeaffirming that “[t]he Negro leader of the exodus, who will succeed, will be a Negro of Negroes, like Moses was a Hebrew of the Hebrews—even if brought up in Pharaoh’s palace he will be found” (qtd. in Bornstein 2005: 379). Blyden was captivated by the Zionist project of returning to an original land. As might have been expected, he set out on his own travel back to Africa in 1850, as part of a project that had been launched in the 1820s, and which eventually led to the creation of Liberia (Dufoix 10-11), the only African country, together with Ethiopia, that was not under colonial rule during the 19th century European conquests.

Postcolonial diasporas

As it has been discussed in the introduction to the present dissertation, Benedict Anderson observed in *Imagined communities* that the nation is overall a product of our imagination, and that the creation of maps contribute to the construction of “the nationalist imagination” (xiv). Said and Spivak, as it has been discussed earlier in this chapter, have also reflected on the role that the nationalist discourses play in the (imaginary) formation of cultural identities. Their work reflects Anderson’s view inasmuch as these discourses are also product of the cultural imagination. In fact, as a general rule, postcolonialism has considered the nation as the “master trope” of



colonial “resistance” (Chariandy n.p). This might have been so because in the previous colonial tradition the shaping of identities and culture has always involved nation and race. Paul Gilroy explains it very well in his work *Against Race*, where he observes that adherence to a specific geographic spot and to an ethnic group and its history has traditionally been the starting point to create spaces for the construction of self and community (101).

In more recent postcolonial studies, critics have developed the concept of diaspora in an attempt to challenge “the supremacy of national paradigms” (Procter 151). In his landmark book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said celebrates the fact that nationalisms have mobilized the “struggle against Western domination.” Nonetheless, he argues that so-called “anti-imperialist nationalisms” usually end up reproducing the same hierarchical structures they seek to defeat. As a result, such nationalisms end up neglecting social injustices and bringing the new independent state under the control of a “nationalist elite”. In such cases of imperialist entrapment, warns Said, culture may be dangerously put to the service of the new nationalist state, which seeks separatism, chauvinism and authoritarianism rather than the “human liberation” of its community and active “resistance to imperialism” (217-218).

Paul Gilroy already warns us in his paramount volume *The Black Atlantic* that “the fatal junction of the concept of nationalism with the concept of culture” inescapably leads to “the tragic popularity of ideas about the integrity and purity of cultures”. For Gilroy, cultural nationalisms evolve into “ethnic absolutism”, whereas cultural diasporas inspire us to recognize cultural hybridity and endorse social plurality and inclusiveness (2). Gilroy focuses on the deconstruction of essentialist ideas of race and nation. In his landmark work, he seeks to produce a transnational perspective that will help to understand the contribution of black intellectual and cultural individuals to modernism in America and Britain. To do so, he reads modern intellectual history through the lenses of black cultural productions to counteract the absolutist doctrines of knowledge, history and power that have characterized modern perspectives of the world. In Gilroy’s terms, the Atlantic is a metaphor for circulation, movement, passage and journeying. His focus on African migrations serves to bring to the fore the cultural productions of black individuals that contributed to the development of Western modernity in Europe and America. Gilroy, in his quest “to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15), looks for alternative categories to that of nation.



Whereas postcolonial academics share most of Gilroy's contribution to postcolonial studies and diasporic formulations, some have shown certain unease when Gilroy equals fascism with black nationalisms, warning communities of the "global south" not to raise their voices for self-determination, in case they might sound too essentialist. Indeed, prominent scholars such as Said and Spivak believe that land-bound and ethnic-bound discourses need to be applied, if only temporarily, by the oppressed and/or displaced societies for the sake of their own decolonizing and emancipation practices, whereas the dominant groups in society—or those who move to the center—should beware of the same essentialist practices, given that their central position of superiority is privileged enough to pretend any urgency for recognition (Grosfoguel interviewed in Galiza "Entrevista" 2013). Questions about the legitimacy of adhering to theories of land and race in a diasporic, subaltern background, have been largely discussed by professor of English and comparative literature Khachig Tötölyan, who claims:

Diasporists shaped by globalizing discourse describe genuine erosions of the link between a bounded place and a people, diagnose it as irresistible, and quickly affirm its contribution to a pluralistic, multicultural, hybrid world of which they approve. Diasporists like myself, who want to argue that attachment to place was indispensable to diasporic life and thought until very recently, and that despite its erosion it remains important today, must tread carefully in order to avoid the charge that we are either imitating discredited nationalist rhetoric about the link between land, people, and culture, or that we remain naïve about the global spaces that have opened up in the past several decades. (Tötölyan 138–139 qtd. in Cohen "Creolization" 17)

In his quest to find adequate alternative terms to nation-bound interpretations of identity, David Chariandy explains in "Postcolonial Diasporas" that socio-cultural dislocations as reflected in the histories of transatlantic slavery, post-slavery indenture and the expulsion of indigenous peoples also represent cultural and political resistance (n.p.). In this line of thought that aims at demystifying the victimized status of displaced communities, he suggests that postcolonial studies should appreciate the tactics by which these massively relocated populations too, have transformed their experiences into revolutionary forms of political and cultural



life. Bhabha also unmasks this act of victimization and affirms that hybridity and in-betweenness can be embraced without anxiety or nostalgia (*Location ix*).

In spite of all the intellectual endeavors that postcolonial thinkers of the diaspora have embarked on—particularly attempting to detach the concepts of land and race from that of cultural identity—connections between the notions of national identity and ethno-geographical features are still fundamental to comprehend Caribbean postcolonial literature and subsequent transnational interpretations of cultural diasporas. In Adisa's writings, for instance, as explained in the analysis section, although hybridity and dislocation are celebrated, references to Africa and the Caribbean remain fundamental to understand the cultural background of her diasporic characters and voices. One of the common sensitivities amongst the members of any given diaspora is the uneasiness they go through when it comes to identify with new cultural identities in the host land. In his article "Creolization and Diaspora the Cultural Politics of Divergence and Some Convergence," Robert Cohen approaches the concepts of 'diaspora' and 'creolization' by emphasizing that what separates a diasporic consciousness from the notion of creolization is the fact that diaspora looks at the historical common past in search of a reconstruction of the lost homeland; in his view, "[h]omeland' or a looser notion of 'home' is reconstructed and revalorized through fabulation, recovered historical memory and social organization (1). The past provides a continuing pole of attraction and identification" whereas creolization seems to be a process that occurs in the present moment. In Cohen's own words:

When creolization occurs, participants select particular elements from incoming or inherited cultures, endow these with meanings different from those they possessed in the original culture and then creatively merge these to create totally new varieties that supersede the prior forms. Creolization is thus a 'here and now' sensibility that erodes old roots and stresses fresh growth in a novel place of identification. (1)

Although at first sight these two approaches to cultural politics may seem divergent, Cohen maintains that diaspora and creolization have more things in common than it seems. The cited article allows to understand the implications of massive migration in the construction of cultural identities by centering "on the cross-fertilization between different cultures as they interact," thus debunking the ancient prospect of



one unique cultural group to belong to within the margins of the state (1). For Cohen, “[c]reolization is one form of fugitive power” inasmuch as it “stresses the hidden, subtle, sub-rosa, elusive . . . forms of power found in collective shifts of attitudes and social behavior” (4).

The Sprouts of an African Diaspora Consciousness in the Caribbean

Geographically, the Caribbean Basin comprises the Caribbean Sea, the eastern part of the Atlantic Ocean, a set of over seven hundred islands, and the bordering coasts of Central and South America, with the exception of the Gulf of Mexico (See Figure 1 in the Annexes). Due to its historical conditions, the Caribbean region receives different names depending on the context. The term ‘West Indies’ is used to name the English-speaking islands,²³ including Guyana and Belize on the mainland but excluding the US Virgin Islands and the Bahamas. On the other hand, the term ‘Antilles’ is often used in reference to the French-speaking islands (Breiner xv). Also for historical reasons, a number of European languages—namely English, Spanish, French and Dutch—are the official languages in the Caribbean. In contact with indigenous languages and other languages spoken by the colonized people brought to the region, mainly from Africa, the imposed European languages gave way to Caribbean creole languages or ‘patois’ (Appel and Muysken 175-184). As I have explained in the part of the introduction dedicated to the Caribbean literary context, ‘nation language’ is the term coined by Barbadian historian Kamau Brathwaite to refer to the creole languages in the English-speaking Caribbean. In a subsection I include further below entitled ‘Brathwaite and nation language,’ I will provide more details about nation language.

The contemporary Caribbean space is the result of two historical processes which are closely related. One is the Middle Passage, that is to say, the stage of the triangular trade route in which millions of native Africans were shipped out to the Americas as slaves during colonialism. The other determining process is cultural colonialism, understood as the political, economic and cultural control of a population by a group of settlers, which gave way to creolization, the process of syncretism between Western, indigenous and African cultures in the New World.

²³The Caribbean islands where English is the official language are: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, Puerto Rico, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Maarten, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. See map of the Caribbean region in the Annexes (Figure 1).



The process of creolization emerged in slave societies, which were organized to benefit a reduced group of European settlers, and to oppress the indigenous people and the African community. These asymmetric interactions in creole societies inevitably brought forward an emergent aesthetics of survival and resistance among Afro-Caribbean people (Brathwaite *Development* xxix-xxxii). This resistant response to external domination can also be observed in many cases across the African diaspora.

As a means of survival in questions of identity formation and cultural belonging, black communities in the diaspora explored primarily their connection to Africa. Whether it is based on continuity or rupture from the original culture, or on the absence of an origin, thus developing a new hybrid culture or a creole society, the concept of 'diaspora' embraces all these possibilities. Accordingly, there are two major representations of diaspora: that which involves cultural continuity and embraces the purity of race and cultural origins (i.e., the essentialist approach); and that which establishes the term as a process where divergent perspectives are continuously being negotiated (namely the hybrid), a theoretical praise of mixture, which in the Caribbean has developed around the term and processes of creolization, which I will explain further below. As a means of historical background, it needs to be said that, after Columbus' arrival to the region and the succeeding adversities caused by exploitation and disease, the native Amerindian population of the Caribbean region—mainly Taino—eventually disappeared under the rule of the Spanish *conquistadores*. With them, a whole indigenous culture died too, thus transforming the region into an "ethnic and cultural *tabula rasa* by the 1600" (Murdoch 19). Not surprisingly, these fecund, cultivable islands, invaded by European profit-seekers and plantation owners, were to be repopulated by uprooted African slaves in the first place and African, Asian and European indentured laborers after emancipation. In as much as the present dissertation deals with cultural representations within the Afro-Caribbean histories of displacement, the other sections of the region's multiracial population—i.e. the European, East Indian and the Chinese experience—though marked whenever necessary, will remain in the background.

The Caribbean experience entails a "double diaspora;" one being of multiple migrations to the Caribbean region, and another one, which is derived from the latter, that involves Caribbean people's migrations throughout the globe (Otto 96). As a matter of fact, the Caribbean region was host to the migratory movements of



European settlers who voluntarily established themselves in the colonial territories. Therefore, we can affirm that diaspora during European conquests was a phenomenon first experienced by citizens from the metropolis who lived scattered across the length and breadth of the New World. Moreover, if one wants to understand Caribbean history, it is necessary to differentiate between the voluntary diasporas of the European settlers and the forced diasporas that were behind the slave trade and other economic conditions after the abolition of slavery. Indeed, one of the key interests of this study is to look upon the representations of both colonial and postcolonial diasporas of black people as an asymmetrical effect of global markets.²⁴ In analyzing Adisa's socially engaged writing, it is essential to be aware of how processes of conceptualizing and conveying specific products, services, and therefore theories—conceived in the national centers of the economic elites—end up sweeping away peripheral world views. This centralization of knowledge—which was the trend during colonialism and continues to be so in the era of globalization—entails an unbalanced distribution of power within society.

Not disregarding earlier Western interests in exploring “primitive” art, the European rush for African culture and arts between the 1880s and 1890s—a period known as the “Scramble for Africa”—is central to the study of the origins of a black aesthetics. During that period, the European forces were “violently suppressing the ‘savage’” at the same time as they were plundering African artifacts, which would be imported and “stored away in the basements of the new museums of ethnology and anthropology” (Aschcroft et al. *Empire* 156). It was this African material—exhibited during the early decades of the 20th century—which would consolidate the universalist beliefs that the European moral was the only one worth being respected and followed (156-7). This metropolitan attraction towards the arts and culture of the colonies seemed to be a “sublimation,” affirms Breiner (25-26), of the ancient empire’s rapacity, in other words, the enhancement of the exotic was not but a gentle kind of imperialism, a theoretical appropriation of an alternative view of the world which did nothing but to perpetuate the colonial status quo. Breiner later explicitly sustains that “Negritude appears in the Caribbean as an alternative

²⁴This imbalanced phenomenon is reflected in Adisa’s work, as studied in chapter 4.2 with the poem “Three Finger Jack” (*Leaf* 4). Also in chapter 5.2, I scrutinize an episode from her novel *It Begins With Tears* to uncover the impact that global tourist economies have on black female bodies, which are reduced to sexual objects. Finally, in Adisa’s poem “PMS and PMDD symptoms” (*4-Headed* 52-53), I delve into her denunciation of the use of Puerto Rican and Haitian women as guinea pigs in the 1950s for pills later marketed in the US.



colonizer, motivated by a ‘civilizing mission’ of its own.” Indeed, one of the missions of the Négritude movement was to repress the colonial past, which is rejected as a “traumatic episode.” Overall, Négritude ignored both “the survival of a fragmented African heritage” and the extant “indigenous creole culture” (51). Nonetheless, the cultural nationalisms that sprouted among the communities of the African diaspora are doubtless milestones for the subsequent studies on cultural criticism, and they performed a key role in the process of what Spivak (*Other* 281) would call “strategic use of positivist essentialism,” which is a necessary step for the emancipation of the subaltern communities. The next paragraphs disclose the different nationalist programs and cultural trends that aroused in the Caribbean region during the decades foregoing national independences.

As I hinted two paragraphs above, the history of the massive and multifarious migrations that took place on Caribbean soil during colonization gave way to a migratory phenomenon; that of the Caribbean settler communities substantially moving abroad to North America and Europe. Such histories of geographical dislocation reveal that the Caribbean migratory experience has brought out a keen awareness of transnationality in the development of the region’s languages and literatures. A historical event that would consolidate the Caribbean as an inherently diasporic region occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, when thousands of Caribbean people, summoned by the construction of the Canal (1904-1914), migrated to Panama in search of economic opportunities. It was thanks to the “Panama money” that a great amount of Afro-Caribbean workers would later be able to move to the US (Hathaway 14) and establish connections with African-American people, which would strength their common quest. In effect, from 1919 onwards, thousands of Afro-Caribbean workers migrated to America, where the industry was expanding in order to meet the needs of World War I (Cronon 39-40).

The sense of Africanness—namely the pride of being an African or of African ancestry—that was sought by cultural activists and intellectuals from the Caribbean along the early decades of the 20th century, would take up different forms, depending on the underlying objectives and the socio-political background. In his *Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (1998), Laurence A. Breiner gives account of the “cultural awakenings” that occurred throughout the Caribbean in that period. Such self-awareness imprinted amongst the scattered islands a common inclination towards the recovery of Africa. These processes of recuperation did not take place simultaneously, as it was not straight communication between the islands—even



though some spoke the same language—but rather shared external factors which triggered similar “patterns of cultural development” (Breiner 25). The first attempts to define a black aesthetics played out against the backdrop of the between-wars years, commonly known as the Modernist period. It was at this time when the two cultural capitals, Paris and New York “developed a taste for the exotic” (Breiner 26, Adeleke 9). While the previous section entitled “African Diaspora” has explored what turned to be the first serious attempts to unite Africans in the diaspora, the present section focuses on the development of the most salient Afro-cultural arousals in the Caribbean.

The awakening into the African history of the Caribbean was sometimes triggered by such South-North connections between the Caribbean and the US or between the Caribbean and Europe, and other times as a result of random local factors. In fact, a good number of black cultural and political movements, like Négritudinism, arose during the same period in the Caribbean region too, bringing out race consciousness and, eventually, cultural nationalisms, as will be studied along this chapter. Such cultural and political movements had different motives depending on the island and, although coincidentally happening at the same time, were not necessary in direct communication with the rest of the Caribbean realities, but rather to either Harlem or Europe. Frantz Fanon, a supporter of Pan-Africanism and deeply influenced by the Négritudinists, briefly explained the African cultural dislocation in his landmark book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), as “the black diaspora, i.e., the dozens of millions of blacks throughout the Americas” (153). It needs to be noted, however, that Négritude was not by any means as extended in the Anglophone Caribbean as it was in the Francophone Caribbean region. When in the 1960s West Indian writers learned of the Négritudinists, they would criticize their thought for being “dependent on the categories and features of the colonizing culture” instead of asserting their “difference(s)” (Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin *Empire* 124).

As further explained in the above section “African Diaspora,” against the backdrop of the African-American Civil Rights movement, New York became the locale par excellence of the first American aesthetic revolution, the Harlem Renaissance, which was originally called the New Negro Movement. In turn-of-the-century New York, a wave of Caribbean migration settled in Harlem, upper Manhattan, where there was already a burgeoning ghetto of native blacks. The relationship between Afro-Americans and the Afro-Caribbean new comers was not



always straightforward. However, the imperatives for self-affirmation against white standards, which emerged among Harlem artists and intellectuals, contributed to the progress of the common cause regardless of their unavoidable, and, dare I say, healthy ideological differences. As a matter of fact, many Caribbean writers and intellectuals, who migrated to New York at that time, willingly subscribed to the premises of what professor Alain Locke—animator of the movement—called “the Negro renaissance” (McKay and Jarrett 239). Such is the case of Jamaican-American writer Claude McKay (*Home to Harlem*, 1928), whose poem “If We Must Die,” published by the magazine *The Liberation* in July 1919, condemned violence against black people and made of him a highly recognized poet among the Harlem intelligentsia; or else, Pan-African Marcus Garvey and Edward Wilmot Blyden, from Jamaica and the Dutch West Indies respectively, who as explained above contributed to the Pan-African cause with radical arguments based on land and race, very much along the lines of those by the American Colonization Society (Painter 74, 195). In the context of Harlem, a vivid cultural and intellectual life was to galvanize racial consciousness among black native Americans and Afro-Caribbean immigrants alike.

A notably essentialist approach to the African diaspora can be evidenced in the undertakings of Pan-African leader Marcus Mosiah Garvey (Jamaica, 1887), the most popular black nationalist leader of his time. Garvey descended from the Jamaican Maroons, a community of fugitive slaves that have historically resisted bondage and achieved freedom from the plantation system of the island (Alexander “Garvey” 781). After working as a printer in Jamaica, he traveled many south-American countries and visited Panama during the construction of the Canal, where he witnessed the grim treatment of black workers as second-class citizens by white rulers, and determined to give an end to it (Haugen 30-31). For this doing, he settled in Harlem, a crowded black ghetto in New York where he was to find a large number of followers. He was responsible together with Amy Ashwood—later Garvey—for the creation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 (Reddock “Feminism” 75), which rejected any kind of assimilation into white America and promoted the establishment of a black nation in African soil (Dufoix 11). The UNIA headquarters were set in Harlem in 1919, with an agenda based on Zionism and other nationalist programs of the period. Soon after the foundation of the UNIA, Garvey wrote: “It is as serious a movement as the movement of the Irish today to have a free Ireland, as the determination of the Jew to recover Palestine”



(Garvey qtd. in Bornstein “Colors” 381). Not surprisingly, one of the best known biographies of Marcus Garvey was entitled *Black Moses*, which overtly documents Garvey’s gravitation towards Jewish tropes (Bornstein “Colors” 381).

Garvey designed the green, red and black flag of the African Nation and was behind an ambitious project supported by the Black Star Line, a shipping company whose ownership was held by blacks only (Lee and Davis 29) and was expected to repatriate all Africans of the New World back to Africa, but which turned out to be Garvey’s boisterous failure (Dufoix 11). It has been argued that probably Garvey was not too enthusiastic about the actual return of black people to Africa, and that his ‘Back to Africa’ message was mostly rhetoric (Lee and Davis 29). Whatever the intentions might have been, what is certain is that despite the apparent downfall of this and other projects, the controversial figure of Marcus Garvey was nonetheless decisive to promote black pride in the US and the Caribbean during the early decades of the 20th century as well as during the 1960s, notably with the black power movements that emerged at that time. Living in New York at the time of the Garveyite fervor, Jamaican writer Claude McKay, a supporter of African-American Civil Rights struggles who “was not uplifted with . . . enthusiasm for the Garvey Movement” (McKay and Jarret 2007: 30), would nonetheless admit his success by stating that “Garvey may be a charlatan with ‘antiquated social notions,’ but the extent to which this charlatan had, in less than a decade, awoken the consciousness of the dark-skinned masses, proved him the most influential black leader to that point in history” (Lee and Davis 30).

After Garvey’s followers’ demand to establish a religion for the movement so as to complete their politics of self-determination, in 1921 Garvey arranged to set up what was to be known as the African Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the undertaking did not succeed. What the Garveyites needed was a new messiah, not a white Christ who would die in a cross among thieves; in other words, a Jesus of their own, someone rather black and majestic (Lee and Davis 38). It would be Leonard Howell, a Jamaican man deeply influenced by Garveyism and Marxism (30) who, after spending some years traveling around the world, including Harlem, returned to his homeland preaching the Ras Tafari’s tenets (19) and displaying a portrait of Haile Selassie I, formerly King Ras Tafari of Ethiopia, who was to become the new messiah among many Pan-Africanists. It can be said that at this point in history the Rastafari movement technically started (37, 58). In an attempt to reverse Western ethnocentrism, Rastafarians worshiped Haile Selassie, who was emperor of Ethiopia



from 1930 to 1974, as their black God. The Rastafari movement in Jamaica, drawing upon Garveyite premises, embraced the idea of a return to the motherland. However, on its turn, such journey back to the roots was to be undertaken in the spaces of the imagination, as “a way of keeping alive and reinventing an Africa whose territory is the memory of dispersion itself” (Dufoix 15). Both Garveyism and Rastafarianism have been seen as iterations of the same quest for the recovery of Africa in the New World, especially in Jamaica and the English-speaking Caribbean. They are regarded, together with the Harlem Renaissance and Pan-Africanism, as the most influential black movements of the 20th century.

Meanwhile, Paris was host to a great number of migrants from Russia, the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa. The identity crisis that emerged in Europe after World War I motivated a common quest for self-discovery, which mainly rejected inherited patterns of European cut and surrendered in awe to alternative cultural models. A turn to Africa was a common trend in Europe during that time of Western weariness with its own past (Breiner 26). Indigenism in Haiti, Negrismo in Cuba and Négritude between Paris and Martinique—all of which had been marked to different degrees by either the Harlem Renaissance or European exoticism—paved the way for successful political independent activism across the Caribbean, which was also strongly influenced by Pan-Africanism in its two most salient Afrocentric strands: Garveyism and the Rastafari movement (explained above).

Within the French tradition of the Caribbean, five young migrant men from Haiti initiated the Indigenist movement on their return from Paris in 1927. Their names were Émile Roumer, Normil Sylvain, Carl Brouard, Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, and Jacques Roumain. Their motivation was not postcolonial (Breiner 29), because they were reproducing a spread sentiment that ran throughout Europe in the aftermath of World War I: that of rejecting all European values and in particular “any acquiescence to French cultural leadership” while at the same time embracing the idealization of rural folklore and its African aspects, as previously defended by Haitian writers Hannibal Price and Price-Mars (Breiner 33). Indigenism was more local than international; in reality, intellectual Haitians and politicians had a high esteem of their own culture and considered that their cultural features were coherent enough to surmount those of the perishing European culture. The group had its own journal *La Revue indigène* and in 1928 published an anthology that would collect the new voices (29-30). Furthermore, Haiti, which had won independence in 1804, has



historically been regarded as a threatening influence to the Caribbean region. This “nation of rebellious black slaves” remained an isolated island throughout the 19th century, in the same way as Castro’s Cuba was outcast after 1960 (26-27). Whereas Indigenists did not have a necessity to imitate the Harlem Renaissance and their African claims—many Haitian writers claimed that the origin of their culture was Haiti, not Africa (54)—they had no objections to interact with Harlem, mainly because they shared similar cultural nationalistic struggles. As a matter of fact, the friendship between Harlem leader Langston Hughes, who visited Haiti in 1931, and Jacques Roumain illustrates the connection that existed between both movements on equal terms. Only after the Great Depression of the 1930s would Haitians open up to urban settings and shift from metropolitan literary forms to social realism (33).

Parallel to Haitian Indigenism, a similar awareness sprang in Cuba in the late 1920s and early 1930s: the Negrismo (Breiner 38). This was, nonetheless, a literary style rather than an organized movement, as “it was never embodied in any particular group or journal” (38). In Cuba, whose independence from Spain was won in 1898 and whose white population was larger than in most of the Caribbean islands, Afrocubanism, also known as “Negrista movement” (36) was fostered mainly by European Cubans, such as Alejo Carpentier, who explored black and Amerindian features as integrating elements in Cuban identity. Whereas in Haiti a recovery of Africa was needed to express the individual’s black identity, in Cuba the polarity between black and white was blurred by means of an integrated national identity. As Breiner underlines, it was about “the ‘African heart’ not of the individual but of the new nation” (36). The most representative writer of this Negrista style was Nicolás Guillén, who foregrounded the theme of *mulatez* to promote the hybrid nature of the Cubans (52).

A slightly different story, and far more significant, is that of the Négritude movement, which originated in Paris during the 1930s and 1940s (Breiner 26). The founders of the Négritude movement were the Martinican Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas from the French Guyana and Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor. Négritude started with “a few dozen Negroes of diverse origins” as Césaire put it, who happened to be in Paris at that time and united their energies to bring the movement forward (Césaire *Discourse* 72 qtd. in Breiner 44). Interestingly enough, although Antillean students residing in Paris followed the anthropological direction in vogue—rejecting anything European and embracing everything African—they did not look at the Caribbean as a source of African heritage. Strictly speaking, they were



looking at Africa just because the French were looking at Africa. As such, their African kick derived not from Haitians or Afro-Cubanists, but from the Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, who were considered heroes in Europe at that time (Breiner 45). Therefore, the Négritude movement—as opposed to Indigenism and Negrismo—may be considered an international phenomenon, which was able to move across the borders of the Francophone world and unite blacks in the diaspora. One of the most representative works of this movement is Césaire’s *Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal*, first published in 1989.

In spite of being a movement with a strong influence on Caribbean and African writers, Négritude is considered a phenomenon shaped after colonial epistemology (Breiner 42). In effect, Négritude grabbed Africa as an antithetical response, “a kind of universal alternative” to the failures of Western civilization (49). Nigerian Nobel Literature Laureate Wole Soyinka also discards the “binary nature of the western philosophical tradition” adopted by the Négritudinists as a means of challenging European values (Aschcroft et al. *Empire* 21). In the same line of thought, Soyinka alerts us of the dangers of polarizing tendencies in postcolonial criticism. Such European maniqueist patterns, he affirms, were—not surprisingly—reproduced by the Négritude intellectuals influenced by European thinkers like Sartre, who, on his turn, categorized Négritude as a colonial movement inasmuch as it was conditioned by European standards and “founded on an antithesis which responded to the Cartesian ‘I think, therefore I am’ with ‘I feel, therefore I am’” (Soyinka 135-6 qtd. in Aschcroft et al. *Empire* 21-22). This inheritable “dialectical determinism,” instead of providing a cross-cultural approach, inescapably leads to another monolithical cultural model, “a new international Universalism” (Aschcroft et al. *Empire* 218). In effect, Négritude tended to reject and even defy anything that was European, while at the same time embraced everything African “turning erstwhile ‘negative’ terms applied to people of African descent (such as ‘Negro’ and ‘savage’) into signifiers of black pride” (Otto 98). As a consequence of this absolute exaltation of Africa, no rigorous self-criticism was applied among its subscribers. Négritude, furthermore, has been regarded among Caribbean writers as a “foreign monolith” which must be avoided because it “ignores . . . colonial history,” and denies the diversity of races and cultures that their long history of colonization made evident (Otto 51). With regard to the Négritude mission, it has been pointed out that one of the main reasons that triggered this movement was that its pioneers shared the same feeling of lacking history (Breiner 51). Therefore, when they looked



backwards it was to creatively “invent the past” of a group of estranged people in an empty land (Dathorne 308 qtd. in Breiner 51). This incapability to acknowledge an indigenous culture was part of the desperate reaction of *Négritude*; a myopia which was soon to be corrected by Pan-African authors such as Kamau Brathwaite, whose contributions will be specified later in this chapter.

There remains one Achilles’ heel clearly identified in the *Négritude* movement: it was marked by a rejection of mixture, thus claiming pure racial belonging (Breiner 51). As a token of this polarity serve the words of Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon who, influenced by *Négritude*, embraced that “fear of rejection” which caused the West Indian to suffer “despair. Haunted by impurity, overwhelmed by sin, riddled by guilt, he was prey to the tragedy of being neither white nor Negro” (Fanon *African* 35-6 qtd. in Cohen “Creolization and Diaspora” 11). This self-hatred symptom, explains Cohen, was common amongst many black pride groups at the beginning of the 20th century (10). An alternative to this fear of rejection resulted, indeed, in attacks to the *Négritude* principles. The cultural and political movement of *Creolité*—as we will see in the next section—was developed in the Caribbean as a response to *Négritude* (Cohen 11). The *Négritude* movement—in spite of its defense of racial essentialism—is considered as one of the earliest attempts to study modern African writing (Aschcroft et al. *Empire* 123) as well as one of the most influential concepts that fostered the acknowledgement of a Black aesthetics.

Hybridity in the Caribbean: Creolization

The Caribbean population, with its colonial and postcolonial migratory experiences, epitomizes the hybridity of contemporary culture. Whether migrations are forced or not, what is of interest for this dissertation is the ability of postcolonial Caribbean migrant subjects to survive in a new environment. This survival is understood as the necessity of individuals from any given community to carry forward their own traditions for the sake of cultural wealth and its subsequent psychological hale. One common denominator for survival among subaltern groups in diasporic situations is that—no matter the rates of exploitation and plundering—they carry with them an immaterial cultural continuum, something that nobody can take away from them i.e., language, experiences, skills, beliefs and knowledge. On the other hand, the fact that



migrant subjects are placed in the periphery, among people whose hegemonic culture and morals are at odds with their own, evidences the emergence of a border-like space of in-betweenness where self-inquiry and identity references are continuously being negotiated and reshaped. This self-criticism is at the basis of intellectuals and writers who, like Adisa, do not settle for writing an epic text that enhances and glorifies their homelands and people, but who take risks and go so far as to denounce whatever actions and circumstances need be addressed in order to guide her/his community into paths of self-respect and cultural integrity. I will hence explore how a Caribbean diasporic approach to literary criticism embraces not only the geographical phenomenon of migration in its multiple forms, but also a theoretical move into cultural identity criticism.

Black pride movements have certainly motivated political empowerment, but, as will be discussed in this chapter, they might be criticized for having “functioned to simplify complex political allegiances within Caribbean society and without” (Edmondson *Making* 114). The early Afro-Caribbean nationalist movements which led to independences across the Caribbean were based on national belonging and racial supremacy. This Afro-centrality—a reversal of white ethnocentrism—was the result of a majority of black population in the Caribbean and it proved effective as a form of what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism.” In effect, Spivak endorses the necessity for the subaltern to become essentialist, if only during a limited time, and considers that emphasizing a core element of a peripheral group—no matter how simplistic it might appear—and thus disregarding individual differences amongst its members, remains crucial for the sake of giving full definition to the group and therefore, bringing the margins to the center (Spivak *Worlds* 281). In this sense, we can consider the early 20th century Afro-centric postulates as examples of “strategic essentialism,” as they proved to be necessary stages in the achievement of cultural and political self-determination. In effect, hadn’t it been for the existence of the racially essentialist theories that Négritudinists promoted in the field of African cultural studies—like those of Frantz Fanon—nobody would have encountered the multiple and challenging nuances of their premises. One of the most significant responses that arose from this intellectual dissonance was the concept of creolization, which successfully covered many of the previous theoretical lacunae on Afro-centrality. Indeed, creolization created a space for a more realistic understanding of the African diaspora as it developed in the Caribbean.



In the 1960s and early 1970s, when national independence movements across the Caribbean were completing their political agendas, the concept of creolization emerged among the subalterns to defy colonialist and imperialist assumptions on identity formation (Sheller “Creolization” 279). As a matter of fact, there was a growing consciousness that racial essentialism was not the solution to shape the multiracial Caribbean society. This new perspective was triggered by a long history of uprooting and regrounding of peoples from different parts of the Old World, be it Europe, Africa or Asia. The new project was to understand the present of the new independent nations by looking at the historical past.

Recent approaches in postcolonial and globalization studies have observed how the processes of creolization play a significant role inasmuch as they challenge essentialist standards of identity and cultural belonging. The term creolization has been explained in the above section titled “The Sprouts of an African Diaspora Consciousness in the Caribbean.” Kamau Brathwaite’s historically documented text *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* (1971) sets forth the example of Jamaica to develop a model of creolization. He introduced for the first time the concept of ‘creole’ as applied to the field of Caribbean history. Brathwaite articulated his concept of the creole society challenging that of the slave society, a phrase which had so far been proposed by historians Elsa Goveia and Patterson (xiv). The reasons why he might have wanted to set aside the term ‘slave’ to describe Jamaican society in particular may be found in the fact that such description limits the study of society to the black population, neglecting the existent interaction between blacks and whites. In order to understand the Caribbean society of his time, Brathwaite looked into the Caribbean past of slavery and suggested that identity formations were not completely African nor completely European, but they were part of a more complex process of creolization (xiv).

In the frame of the African diaspora, Brathwaite realized that the social structures that had been developing in the Caribbean ever since colonization were not a set of parallel finished products that came either from Europe or Africa, opposing each other. He evidenced existing relationships between members of both communities and observed the tension inherent to a colonial situation where the masters held power and knowledge and the subaltern adapted to such standards. The situation when this tension and conflict occurred, Brathwaite affirms, served as a space for negotiation and recreation of both sides’ original cultural forms, thus giving way to a new hybrid culture, the creole. Creolization is therefore the very



process of affirming and negating, embracing and leaving behind, destroying and recreating cultural forms and social structures. For Brathwaite, creolization was “a dual process” of ac/culturation and inter/culturation, the former being the forced acceptance of aspects of a foreign culture, a merging or “yoking [...] of one culture to another” and the latter “an unplanned, unstructured, but osmotic relationship” derived from the process of ac/culturation, but which, on the contrary, was born out of the willingness of its participants. (*Contradictory* 6, qtd. in Sheller “Creolization” 280-281).

In order to explain the processes of creolization, Brathwaite highlights that the most influential factor in the development of Jamaican society resides in the “cultural action—material, psychological and spiritual—based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and—as white/black culturally discreet groups—to each other.” The composition of Jamaican society was made up of newcomers to a setting where both, the dominant masters and the subordinate slaves, were culturally strangers to each other (296). For the newly arrived whites, it was hard to escape the colonial system and most of them rapidly became trapped in the stereotypes prefixed about the “inferior” group, regarded as thieves or even soulless by those in a “superior” position within their hermetic, British-like, stratified society. Resistance to the colonial establishment became a traumatic experience even for some of the European settlers, as it is known out of the literature of the period (297). Under such state of affairs, African slaves also had their lot. After being uprooted from their homeland in the West African coast, having traversed the Middle Passage and being sold in Jamaica, they were “branded, given a new name and put under apprenticeship to creolized slaves” (298). The agenda awaiting them was systematic: identification with and pride of their (unpaid) work routine was compulsory, soothed afterwards by a process of group identification and socialization with the clan—their distinctive socio-cultural *modus operandi*—by “communal recreational activities” such as drumming and dancing (298). By and large, the commonest tools of persuasion used by the master were the whip and nemesis, the gift and bribery and the possibility to access the master’s culture, so that they could imitate it and gain a certain kind of status (298-99).

This latter process of mimicry, nevertheless, occurred in both directions. A constant intercourse with the Negro servants and field workers in white households, especially in the countryside, was unavoidable. This represented a threat to the



British established culture and the social status of their individuals. The Master was constantly concerned and preventive of the Negro traits in their creole offspring, which influenced both their clothing and speaking fashions. This was especially watched out in female children and, as a result, it was common to have governesses sent from the metropolis so as to keep these ladies away from the Negro influence (Brathwaite *Development* 302). Finally, sexual relationships between white Masters and black mistresses were crucial in the dismantling of the white apartheid policy, because “white men in petty authority were frequently influenced in their decisions by black women,” who all together turned to be suitable spies and “managers of Negro affairs” (303). This erotic connection was the vital space where intercultural creolization took place. Interestingly enough, the continuous confrontation between these two cultural traditions, although cruel, was also creative, institutionally and culturally speaking; yet, it failed normalizing a shared cultural autonomy, certainly because of the dehumanizing slavery system which kept the society split in two (307). Consequently, as Brathwaite concludes, this disability of the Euro-creole elite to establish a creole cultural norm facilitated dependency on the distant metropolis, from where cultural values and references were borrowed. In this context, the colonial and the metropolitan as well as the mass of the population and the elite grew apart, delaying any possibility of creole autonomy (309).

These processes of creolization are specially relevant to Opal Palmer Adisa’s poetry: on the one hand, when the poetic voice shifts to nation language,²⁵ the hybrid nature of Caribbean society becomes palpable; on the other hand, the systems of representation perpetuated by a—more or less conscious—mimesis of the inherited interactions between the colonizer and the colonized, are constantly raised—when not being rewritten—in Adisa’s verses. What seems fascinating in the poetry of Adisa is the sensitive, yet critical, picture of the creole society that she is able to disclose and its specific effects on the epistemological reconstruction of Caribbean womanhood.

Sometime after Kamau Brathwaite’s theorizations on the creole society, the concept of *Créolité* was also developed by a number of French Caribbean intellectuals as an option to the unconvincing aspects of *Négritude* (Cohen “Creolization” xxx). In the manifesto *Éloge de la Créolité (In Praise of Creoleness)*, first published in 1989, the founders of the *Créole* movement, Jean Bernabé, Patrick

²⁵In the introduction to the present dissertation I offer an introduction to Brathwaite’s concept of ‘nation language.’ The next section is also dedicated to this term.



Chamoiseu and Raphaël Confiant, claimed that intellectuals should abandon raciological distinctions and embrace the term Créole to refer to the multiracialized Caribbean people. For them Créolité was about putting an end to “the false universality,” “monolingualism” and “purity” of Caribbean culture (Bernabé et al. “Praise” 892). One of their claims indeed was the decentralization of French as the language of culture in the French Caribbean, resulting in many of them writing their works both in French and in the Créole language. In the 1980s, creolization became “a tool capable of challenging nationalist projects, forging a more supple theory of non-essentialist identity formation and transnational belonging” (Sheller “Creolization” 279)

In this sense, in the context of a multicultural and dislocated Caribbean, one needs to be aware that claiming an African origin as a precondition for Caribbean status may sound exclusive and essentialist, because it attaches notions of cultural nationalism (Edmonson *Making* 111) or, what is the same, an idea of ethno-geographical belonging. Nonetheless, one cannot be satisfied by limiting the Caribbean region to the Caribbean basin and therefore we need to take into account the larger number of Caribbean people living abroad. The realities of a Caribbean diaspora acknowledge the existence of “Caribbean spaces” which, as coined by Carole Boyce Davies (2013: 1), is a term that serves to describe “plural island geographies, the surrounding continental locations as well as Caribbean sociocultural and geopolitical locations in countries in North, South, and Central America”. It is important to understand the implications of challenging racial and spatial factors in cultural formation. Such transgression of borders, indeed, serves to explain Adisa’s context as a Caribbean woman writer who lives beyond her native island, but not outside of it—and yet recreates it from a temporal and geographical distance. It is important to bear these racial and spatial factors in mind, especially when exploring Adisa’s specific context and themes (chapters 4.2, 5.1 and 6.1).

Whereas it is indisputable that Brathwaite limits his scope of study to the African roots of Caribbean culture, his own “definition of creolization is much more inclusive than that of the Négritude writers.” While Brathwaite himself would endorse many of the premises of the Négritudinists, as when promoting the concept of “nation language” along his oeuvre, he is also able to provide a wider vision of the Caribbean society (Otto 98). Brathwaite envisages the African diaspora as a cultural hybridization which extends its scope beyond geographical limits; his theorizations may be applied to understand plurality and the complex power systems



of globalization. In this sense, creolization can be seen as a form of hybridity which conforms a distinctive part of the Caribbean ethos. Foreign (mis)appropriations of creolization theories addressing the question of home will also be discussed in the section on postcolonial diasporas below.

Brathwaite and nation language

In educational practice throughout the West Indies, dialects are considered “broken” English (Breiner 164); from this perspective, they appear fragmented and marked by faulty syntax and inappropriate diction. It is significant to note that the use of creole in the Caribbean is a precise determiner of social status, along with color, social class and economic status (Breiner 164, Fanon *Black* 8-27). This is why Brathwaite argues that in the Caribbean, as in other places marked by cultural imperialism, these languages were not properly recognized, and thus they abruptly became residual. As a consequence, these languages had to submerge themselves, because obviously the colonizers had no interest in having these people speaking their mother tongues, carrying within a culture of their own. They were slaves, inferior, and as such, their languages were just as lower. They had to speak the imposed imperial English, but this English was influenced by the underground languages that Africans had brought with them. As Brathwaite puts it, “it was moving from a purely African form to a form that was African, but which was adapting to the new environment and to the cultural imperatives of the European languages” (“History” 262). Brathwaite observes that a formal British heritage was brought to the fore in the West Indies, even though it did not have much to do with the reality of the Caribbean. To illustrate that fact, he claims that the Caribbean people “are more excited by English literary models, by the concept of, say, Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood, than [they] are by Nanny of the Maroons” (263), whom we shall read about later on this study in the analysis of Adisa’s poetry.

In “History of the Voice”, Brathwaite exposes the case of Dante Alighieri as the precursor of the nation language movement with his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1304), where he defends the use of his Tuscan vernacular instead of Latin as “the most natural, complete and accessible means of verbal expression.” Brathwaite argues that “our oral literature is our oldest form of ‘auriture’²⁶ and that it continues

²⁶Although I quote from the original transcription, the term is frequently used as ‘orature’, i.e. oral literature. This spelling suggestion is used by Kenyan critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo in his book *Decolonising the Mind* (15-16).

richly throughout the world today” (267). Brathwaite is concerned with some cultural contradictions in the formation of the West Indian language, which can easily be grasped in Anne Walmsley’s example “The snow was falling on the cane fields” (264).²⁷ This sentence illustrates the process of creole adaptation and it foregrounds what happens when two different cultures are put together at the same time. Following Ngũgĩ’s observations in *Decolonising the Mind*, my view is that the production of this hybrid sentence gives evidence of colonial alienation, because, as he argues, it provokes a disassociation between the language of formal education from the language of daily interaction, a split between mind and body (28). Semiotically speaking (Hall *Representation* 21), this sentence is hybrid because the sign ‘snow’ is the conceptual referent of a natural phenomenon from the metropolis that does not exist among speakers in the colonies; thus certain conceptual codes inherent to the culture are not shared. The necessity to restore a literature in the mother tongue of its people, he affirms, translates into the necessity to establish a harmony between the individual’s mental development and its environment, so that people can understand their reality and be able to change it.

Ngũgĩ’s advocacy of a literature in people’s mother tongues that can reflect both “the rhythms of a child’s spoken expression” and “his struggle with nature and his social nature” (*Decolonising* 28) can also be reflected in Brathwaite’s affirmation that “rhythm and the syllables, the very body work, in a way, of the language” are indeed relevant from the moment we approach a Caribbean cultural ethos (“History” 264). As a matter of fact, Brathwaite continues, the English literary tradition has given the pentameter as a model for poetry and even though there have been attempts to break it among West Indian poets such as Derek Walcott, the pentameter has been present in West Indian literature, “and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane” (265). The author’s quest for a rhythm that approximates the environmental experience and distances from the pentameter is center to utterly validate the function of nation language in literature. Nation language, therefore, needs to be understood in relation to native musical structures and native language itself; and since nation language deepens its roots in the oral tradition, Brathwaite insists that one cannot expect to find a great body of this oral literature, or ‘orature,’ in the written form. Nonetheless, the author is able to give evidence of the existent West Indian ‘orature’ in his investigations. Indeed,

²⁷ Anne Walmsley is the editor of the anthology *The Sun’s Eye: West Indian Writing for Young Readers* (Walmsley, 1989)



Brathwaite tape-records his speech “History of the Voice” where he also reproduces poetry recordings manifestly to endorse his argument that part of the meaning of nation language lays in its noise (270-271).

In his search of alternative, genuine patterns of language sounds, Brathwaite finds in calypso music an effective model to break the pentameter. He also draws upon other religious and ritual forms coming from the African tradition, such as kumina and shango. The author remarks the significance of what he calls a “total expression” in the oral tradition, as opposed to the act of reading as an individualistic expression. The meaning resides in the interaction between an active poet and his/her active audience. Nation language is part of this community affair, because, as he argues, “people come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their own breath patterns . . . , the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves” (273).

In sum, the development of the creole languages plays an important role in the processes of Caribbean identity formation in as much as speakers detach themselves from colonial normativity, accept their own organic rules, and give importance to their unique use of language (Otto 97). Furthermore, the Creole concept “goes far beyond issues of language,” encroaching linguistic barriers across the Caribbean and turning creolization into a cultural matter. Many Caribbean thinkers have chosen to focus their work on the “cultural processes of creolization” given that early Afro-centric 20th century movements, such as Négritude, which rejected everything European and blindly embraced everything African, turned out to be “too simplistic and restrictive” and certainly little emblematic in a multicultural and multiracial Caribbean setting (Otto 98).

Chapter 2

Feminism and the Caribbean

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As a response to the general rejection of feminism that had spread in the Caribbean region during the 1960s and 1970s, mainly due to its alleged Western origins, in 1988, during the first International Conference of Caribbean Women Writers, historian Rhoda Reddock presented a thorough research entitled “Feminism, Nationalism and the Early Women’s Movement in the English-Speaking Caribbean (with Special Reference to Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago).” Here, Reddock proved that feminism was not an alien, recently imported theoretical phenomenon in the English-speaking Caribbean, and reclaimed women’s struggles for emancipation as rooted in the sociopolitical and historical context of the region. Caribbean feminism emerged within the nationalist struggles for racial equality and human dignity. Furthermore, just like feminism was coined in the English-speaking world fifty years after the emergence of what we know now as the first wave of feminism, in the Caribbean too, theoretical terminology for a legitimate feminist movement was to come after feminist consciousness and action had taken place (61-62).

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the fact that former colonials write in English, the language of the colonizers, remains a contradiction that Caribbean writers need to overcome in their search of cultural self-determination (Reddock 61). Similarly, whereas feminist deconstructive and postcolonial theories have first been spread in France and America, they are not, however, exclusively confined to the Western intellectual tradition. Certainly, Caribbean literature engages a “radical questioning of the need to totalize, systematize and control,” which at the bottom is nothing else than a “deconstructionist” methodology (Dash 26 qtd. in O’Callaghan *Woman* 107). Thus, when defining a female or national pure language/identity, the very need for theory calls for a recognition of “*uniquely* distinguishing characteristics” pertaining to one single group (Ashcroft, D. W. 25 in O’Callaghan 104). In order to avoid such essentialist premises, it is as much important for Caribbean feminist writers to validate their own methodologies developed at home, as it is to appropriate the language and the theories developed in the metropolitan centers. The combination of apparently conflicting theoretical approaches—some from within, some from without— epitomize very well the syncretic nature of the Caribbean ethos. Furthermore, thanks to this intellectual alloy of external and internal methodologies that unavoidably occurs in Caribbean studies, the ability to decenter totalizing epistemologies without being entangled in antagonistic absolutisms becomes more apparent. It is indeed the recognition of a



creole society, and hence, a creole discourse and a creole language, that serves to evade close definitions of such things as an exclusively female writing or an authentic national discourse.

In order to acknowledge a Caribbean feminist criticism, one must bear in mind that, if Caribbean creative texts “are products of postcolonial hybridity,” so are Caribbean critical texts, and that in such contexts of postcolonial crossings, it is not uncommon to have indigenous theoretical practices interact with other models (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 180). Hence, this chapter offers an overview of the feminist theories developed in the Western tradition, in the Black American/diaspora, and in the Caribbean context. These three postulations are not antagonistic, rather, they are welcome to interact for a more fluid and comprehensive interpretation of Caribbean texts by Black women writers. Foreign theory is therefore subject to being adapted, modified and transformed into counter-discursive roles by Caribbean critics (O’Callaghan *Woman* 105). This is particularly the case when borrowing deconstructive theory—however universalizing postcolonial critics label it to be—because, as O’Callaghan inquires “can theoretical orientations like deconstruction—which holds central the tenet that *all* discourses, including theoretical ones, contain the seeds of their own destabilization—be fairly accused as inherently monolithic and universalizing?” (104). These and other factors that will be mentioned along this chapter support the affirmation that postmodernist, deconstructive critics (French feminists specifically), Black feminism theorists and Caribbean female writers have more things in common than what an uncomplicated binary model is able to suggest.

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned premises, I hereby offer the main bodies of feminist criticism that will be either illustrated or questioned in my analysis of Adisa’s texts. This chapter starts with an introduction on the formation of feminist theories through feminist aesthetics from the Western and US tradition, followed by an examination of how the differential category of race has served to challenge ostensibly universal feminist theories. In this part, however, my focus is on postcolonial Black feminism in America because it was the most influential body of feminist criticism in the Black diaspora. It challenged not only the universalizing Western and US feminist criticism, but also the male-centered assumptions at work in the African diaspora. Secondly, I will explore the implications of the long time equation that has been established between Black diaspora feminist criticism, which I briefly introduce, and Caribbean feminist criticism, thus adding some valuable socio-historical differences to the common similarities that have often absorbed a female Caribbean distinctiveness. In this part, I will also provide a localized historical approach to examine the tradition of Caribbean women’s resistance and freedom fighting, with a focus on these factors’ contribution to the creation of a distinctively Caribbean feminist aesthetics as expressed mainly in the works of Black female writers from the region.



Origins of Western Feminism and Black Feminism

In “The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory,” Hilde Hein establishes that the demand of a feminist aesthetics emerges not as a distinctive feminine style in artistic production, but as an answer to the traditional aesthetic attitude (Hein283). An aesthetic attitude, in sum, attempts to prescribe specific aesthetic concepts as drawn from the evaluation of experiences associated with artistic objects and events. Thus, for example, a given dominant aesthetics assumes the existence of presumably universal responses to specific (male) experiences with a number of objects or events (Budd n. p.). (Western) feminist aesthetics attempts to interrogate the universal epistemologies, metaphysics and logic inherent to Western philosophy, examining the interests it serves and the patriarchal tradition that canonized them. In the face of such gender-biased assumptions, feminist aesthetics holds the political conviction that the female experience has been excluded in the formation of knowledge, and that it should be envisaged. This claiming problematizes the approach to the aesthetic experience, and deflates the “presumption that theory must be singular, totalizing and comprehensive” (Hein 283).

Although the word ‘feminism’ started to be used in the English language in the 1890s, feminist thought and activism had existed long time before they were conceptualized (Knellwolf 193). The same happened with the chronological arrangement of feminist movements. It was in *The New York Times Magazine*, in March 1968, where the following statement could be read: “Proponents call it the Second Feminist Wave, the first having ebbed after the glorious victory of suffrage and disappeared, finally, into the great sandbar of Togetherness” (Lear 24 qtd. in Henry 58). In fact, whereas the second wave of feminism was engaged with questions of difference, the goal of the first wave was equality. Western women’s demand for equal legal and political status can be traced as early as the 17th century, by the hand of women ahead of their time who would provocatively and daringly contribute with their writings and activism to the advancement of women’s lives. Considered today as the forerunners of feminism, figures such as Mary Astell—a British self-taught political thinker with a fervent commitment to women’s formal education, who in 1693 published “*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest*” (Knellwolf 194, Astell and Springborg xiii)—or Olympe de Gouges—a French playwright, political activist, abolitionist and feminist who, during the French Revolution, published her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* (1791)—dared to write in defense of women’s rights in the Western world. For challenging the practice of male authority, de Gouges was accused as a traitor and guillotined in 1793 for her political writings (Palmer n.p.). Meanwhile in Britain, moral and political philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In the tumultuous context of Britain’s response to the



feminist writings, as explained below, are considered as genuine, creative, experiential pieces of knowledge that aim to subvert the male dominant status quo that has for long invalidated women's contribution to their respective communities.

Western second wave feminism, concerned with issues of equality, prompted a general appraisal of women's historical contributions in America. A number of academic sub-disciplines developed between the 1960s and 1980s in response to the fact that women's production and experiences had been neglected as areas of scholarly interest. Earlier feminist essays such as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928) gained popularity among feminists from the 1970s onwards. This essay represents a landmark work from a materialist perspective, as it analyzes women's oppressive status with regard to writing: for a woman to be able to write, space and money are required. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) influenced the movement's landmark book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan, who inquired why American women were unhappy despite the fact that they lived in material comfort and had accomplished their prescribed roles as wives and mothers. In spite of the fact that a number of patriarchal structures were roughly questioned by Western mainstream feminists, and that women admirably strove to overcome sexism, second wave feminists have been criticized by a third wave of feminists, as we will see further below, because they failed to acknowledge crucial women's differences such as sexual orientation, class oppression and racism. As a matter of fact, second wave feminist struggles, only against sexism, offered no resistance to the homophobic, classist and racist side of the patriarchal system. In sum, second wave feminisms were preoccupied mainly about issues on the similarities and differences between men and women.

Within second wave feminisms, following May 1968 in Europe, and in line with poststructuralist thought, French feminism was prominent at appropriating and dismantling patriarchal interpretations of women's sexuality and writing as labeled by earlier psychoanalytic, linguistic, and materialist male theorists. The intellectual work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray was decisive in the development of a new feminist aesthetics that considered the role of language and sexuality in the formation of cultural identity. Their work was influenced by the Lacanian model, which they also criticized (Joy et al. 7). Jacques Lacan, on his turn, drew his criteria out of the work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and structural linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (Rabaté 56). Such combination of theorists, together with Karl Marx's materialism (159), was revealing for French feminists inasmuch as they connected language, psyche and sexuality. French feminists used these theoretical paradigms to support their ideas, but they also criticized them.

In Lacan's theory, for instance, the male's ego evolves from a pre-oedipal (non-linguistic) imaginary state to a symbolic (linguistic) one. This development is made possible through the



castration complex—which translates into a fear of lack, of being deprived of one’s sexual organ—and as such, it is a sexual as well as a linguistic model. The imaginary is connected to the body, the mother and the breast, so it is a feminine territory; whereas the symbolic is phallogentric, it relates to the “law of the father”, and it is circumscribed to the acquisition of language and sexual difference (Evans et al. 152, Kaplan *Motherhood* 30). For Kristeva, the semiotic realm (the maternal imaginary) is marked by its inarticulacy, but it can only exist through linguistic signs, the symbolic, that attributes meaning to things (“Stabat” 235, “Revolution” 103). Cixous, on the contrary, locates the feminine writing in the imaginary phase, implying therefore that the feminine imaginary or pre-oedipal phase is indeed signifying and occurs within language (Cixous and Clément 93). Furthermore, this imaginary phase is able to threaten the “logocentrism and phallogentrism” inherent to the law of the father, because it is a phase when the oppositional binaries do not yet exist, and therefore there are no imposed categorizations such as male/female (63-65).

In her essay “Revolution in Poetic Language” (1973), Kristeva criticizes Saussurian structuralism and Generative grammar because, not only do they dismiss socio-economic and historical references, but they also fail to consider bodily drives, unconscious desires and sexual difference as elements that take part in the formation of the subject and language (Kristeva qtd. in Schippers *Kristeva* 24). To illustrate the formation of feminist theory, Kristeva questions in “Revolution in Poetic Language” the traditional epistemological subject as well as the patriarchal language. She considers that poetic language works as a signifying practice, or what is the same, as a semiotic system generated by a speaking subject within a social historical and corporeal context. In “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” Kristeva argues that the word works as a mediator, that it is “spatialized: through the very notion of status, it functions in three dimensions (subject-addressee-context) as a set of dialogical, semic elements or as a set of ambivalent elements” where history is inserted in the text and the text into history (37).

The second name traditionally associated with French feminism is Hélène Cixous. One of Cixous’ main preoccupations in her landmark text *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) turns around her idea of “women’s writing” (“*écriture féminine*” in the original), by which she argues that women have been violently driven away from writing and from their bodies, and that, for women to be back in history and into the world, they must write themselves, about themselves. Her motto is to destroy what already exists and to project new female epistemologies from the bodily experience (875-77). Cixous opposes the “self-effacing, merger-type bisexuality” that “conjures away castration,” to the “*other bisexuality*” where every individual, not subjected to phallogentric structures, “has founded his/her erotic universe.” This means that individuals are bisexual if they are conscious that both sexes exist



within them. Her principle of nonexclusion by which a bisexual subject does not exclude difference, nor the other sex, enables individuals to embrace both sides. Bisexual subjects then, find a greater range of objects to be desired, including part of their own bodies and the other's body. Cixous realizes that it is women who benefit of such bisexuality of nonexclusion, and that this fact enables them to observe differences and make them grow (884).

Another key author in French feminism is Luce Irigaray. In *This Sex Which is not One* (1982), Irigaray rejects the Freudian psychoanalytical conception that considers the male body and sexuality as normal and the female body as abnormal, as Freud himself expressed in his text "Femininity" (Freud 353). In the same phallogentric line of thought, the fact that women do not possess a penis comes to imply that they are marked by a lack or absence, and therefore desire this which they do not possess. Irigaray inverts this necessity and places the female sex at the center, catalogizing it as double and autonomous for matters of self-pleasure and complete realization. Although considered a post-structural thinker, there has been some controversial debate about Irigaray's essentialist perception of sexual difference, her strong repudiation of men's thought, and her connection of women's biology with their destiny. Authors such as Christine Delphy, H. Fielding and Jennifer Rich claim that the links she draws between the rationality of thought and the irrationality of women's bodies end up reinforcing classical and misogynistic conceptions of the female body. On the other hand, it has also been argued that Irigaray's insistence on sexual difference is not interested in the affirmation of the feminine characteristics traditionally ascribed to women, because for her these are the traits of "sexual indifference" which are "defined only with reference to men" (Zakin n.p.). Her aim is thus to bring into light a new model of sexual difference.

With regard to the categorization of women's writing, others have argued that the stipulation of a writing style exclusive to women is irrelevant for feminist criticism because biological determinism can be equally appropriated by feminists and anti-feminists, and therefore, the claim of a pure feminine writing would not be a specifically feminist position (Hein 289). To illustrate this fact, let us consider self-proclaimed non-feminist women writers whose work become the object of feminist studies; or male writers whose work is written and/or read to endorse feminist discourses. Although this fact might seem simple, it is worth a reminder, especially because it is a very common flaw in feminist criticism to confuse feminist with feminine writing (Edmondson *Making* 89). Therefore, the question that activates the present discussion on Afro-Caribbean women's aesthetics is not about the existence of a pure Afro-Caribbean feminine writing, but rather, about how the intersections of race and gender in such writings reveal a multiplicity of aesthetic attitudes that counteract the politics of difference and binary oppositions. This perspective is in close connection to Paul Gilroy's suggestion of a Black



Atlantic identity that accounts for movements, flaws and routes in the construction of hybrid identities (*Black* 15).

In fact, the works of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray entertain the existence of a genuinely feminine textual production that is able to subvert masculine discourse and language. This postulation has been subject to criticism for taking the risk of drawing on biological determinism or essentialist discourses that reinforce the antagonism between male and female aesthetic and theoretical productions. Others have argued that the French feminists' symbolization of the female body and identity is largely allegorical and ironic and that they do "not necessarily denote [their] belief in the existence of a fundamental female identity" (225).

In 1851, in front of the members of the first American women's rights movement, African-American abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth gave a speech entitled "Ain't I a Woman?" that demanded equal human rights for all women and for all Blacks. This speech, delivered in the context of women's suffrage movement worldwide—later known as first wave feminism—motivated a long tradition of feminism as contemplated by other racialized women. A century later—prompted by the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the historical debacle of colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, some Latin American countries and Southeast Asia—, women in former European colonies and the third world proposed postcolonial and third-world feminisms as a response to the racism implied in the discourses of Western feminism, or second wave feminism (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva), as it was coined at the time. Although Black women had been fighting against suppression from Black male-dominated movements such as the Civil Rights Movement from the 19th century and Garveyism from the early 20th century, it was not until the 1970s that Black feminist organizations emerged, given the difficulties they had encountered within both the white feminist and Black nationalist political organizations; and largely as a response to the second wave women's movement, which was dominated by white women.

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, third-world, radical and **Black** feminists started to claim that there were a number of factors other than sex that conditioned women's identity and struggle for equality. Briefly, they were critical of Western feminism, specifically US feminism, for being ethnocentric, bourgeois and heteronormative. Black feminists argued that the mainstream feminist movement was led by white middle-class women who ignored oppression based on racism and classism. The critique of the methodology and objectives of white Western feminists presupposes a theoretical subjugation of **Black** women as 'the other' within the discourse of mainstream feminism. In response to this otherness, a racialized feminist perspective includes the issue of 'double consciousness' as coined by W.E.B. Du Bois (1961), which lies in the contradiction between what one



is, from a unique personal perspective, and the social image imposed by other people's racism. In the case of **Black** women, therefore, this contradiction prevents them from reconciling their identity as Black people, on the one hand, and as female subjects, on the other, leaving them in the position of having to choose between the two subjectivities (Carby "Threshold," "White;" Beal "Double;" Sandoval "US;" Hull et al. *Women*; Moraga and Anzaldúa *Bridge*).

A number of pioneering collections of writings by women of color emerged to cover the lack of non-white voices in feminist publications. In America, the publication of *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) edited by Robin Morgan, gave way to Black feminist voices such as Francis Beal, who called for a recognition of difference (136). Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith edited *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), which was followed by Cherri Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983), and *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (1985), edited by Beverly Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe. In Barbara Smith's edition *Black Feminist Writing, Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), there appears the manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, founded in 1974, that argued that the liberation of Black women entails freedom for all people, given that it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. Furthermore, Chela Sandoval argues in "US Third-World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World" that the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, inasmuch as it is an oppositional practice, is in debt with the Black Civil Rights Movement (76). Also, contrary to radical white feminists whose aspirations were to reject men and split from them, Black British and African-American feminists were committed to struggle against racism along with their male counterparts (Lewis and Mills 4-5; Alexander *Pedagogies* 257). Other landmark works such as bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) addressed the necessity for Western feminist theory to challenge its racist implications and racial categorizations. In these writings, the theoretical focus rests upon Black women's activism for the redistribution of power as opposed to white middle-class feminists' arrogance in their struggle to gain access to the existing power hierarchy.

Angela Davis was one of the first activists who articulated an argument centered around the intersection of race, gender, and class in her book, *Women, Race, and Class* (1981). In her essay "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex" (1989), feminist law theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw gave the name of 'intersectionality' to the multiplicity and simultaneity of discriminating factors implied in systematic social inequality. Chela Sandoval observes in "US Third-World Feminism" that white feminists have ignored the contextual difference (like ethnicity or class) of third-world feminists



in the US, and that the latter, due to Western feminists' ignorance of difference, refused to be assimilated within theories of hegemonic feminism. In response, Sandoval offers a new definition of third-world feminism as oppositional practice that enables differing oppositional ideologies to meet and considers that the oppositional consciousness should learn how to break with hegemonic ideology from within the dominant ideology (76-77).

In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis observes that early 19th century feminists used the metaphor of slavery to express the oppressive nature of marriage (33), and observes that, whereas it is true that white women had certain affinity with Black people's struggles, Black women could interpret this comparison of women as slaves as double oppression. Similarly, Cixous has been criticized among Black feminists for her hazy approach to feminist liberation; first because by straightforwardly affirming that women are "the repressed of culture", she is putting all women in the same bag, regardless of their differences such as race and class; and secondly because when adopting from the Black movement of the 1960s the slogan "we are black and we are beautiful", she is linking sexual oppression of women to blackness, but she is not showing alliance with this group's interests. Cixous, indeed, is appropriating Africa to legitimate her feminist struggle ("Laugh" 877), and consciously or not, she is perpetuating the imperialistic, patriarchal view of the racialized subject as marginalized. The implication of appropriating the experience of otherness is that Cixous is taking for granted her own privilege as a white middle-class woman, and therefore, she is not considering Black women's prospective confusion if they tried to legitimate their struggles with her theories, which obviate the underclass and the Black people (Glass 225-239).

During the 1970s in America, there was a proliferation of novels written by Black women. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were some of the most widely recognized among American literary critics. Also, poets such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Lucille Clifton had a double role as writers and political activists in their Afro-American communities. Indeed, writers such as Lorde and Walker, who were not working within the academia, were producing works of "black feminist criticism." In fact, "even academicians could not deny the effect this body of literature was having on various communities in American life" (Christian "Think" 12).

In the face of the racist and classist implications of Western feminism in the US, Alice Walker's term 'womanism', coined by the author in her influential book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), emerged to highlight the fact that Black women experienced a different kind of oppression than white women did. In their mission of recovery, Black women writers such as Walker search to revive and legitimate the figure of the mother during and after colonization by rewriting

motherhood and exploring the *herstories* of their forebearers.²⁹ Encouraged by this shared longing, the term ‘womanism’ works as a response to white feminist implications of female separatism and resentment with society. For Walker, the term ‘womanism’ is universal, a belief illustrated when she claims, for instance, that Black women in history are capable and “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi).

Walker, like mainstream feminists, also demands that the production of women be accounted for. However, she does not limit her objects of study to the written production of women. In Walker’s view, there are many ways, other than writing, for women to express their artistic creativity. By affirming this, Walker asserts that a private room and enough money are not the only conditions for women to be politically acknowledgeable. Walker—contrary to Woolf in this respect—is not only transcending the class divide lines, but also, she is exploring the domestic realm to uncover women’s valuable, yet undervalued contribution to society. On the question of mothering and motherhood, works by literary critic Gloria Wade-Gayles and American, radical feminist Adrienne Rich are also discussed in the present dissertation, notably in chapter 6.1 on mothering and writing.

Another Black feminist author who did not work within the academia but who wrote creatively and insightfully about Black women’s condition in America was Audre Lorde. This Afro-American Black lesbian feminist and Civil Rights activist defended vehemently Black women’s *herstories*, as they were not fairly represented in the white feminist movement. In “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” Lorde’s response to radical lesbian feminist Mary Daly, a white American theologian and feminist philosopher, was motivated by the fact that “what [she] excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed [her] heritage and the heritage of all other noneuropean women, and denied the real connections that exist between [them]” (*Sister* 54). Lorde also added in this respect: “[w]hen patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise,” an affirmation that evidences and stimulates women’s need to unite in their struggles against the sexist and racist patriarchy (*Sister* 69).

Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978) emerged as a fundamental reference in feminist and postcolonial theories. In this essay, Lorde assumes that the mechanisms of

²⁹The term *herstory* refers to history written from a feminist perspective. This neologism arose in the 1960s as a reaction to the word ‘history.’ It was used in second wave feminist writings, such as Robin Morgan’s anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970). Although the etymological implications do not correspond, because the prefix “his” does not refer to the masculine possessive pronoun, but rather to the Greek word “histor,” which means “knowing” or “learned,” the word still represents a creative, meaningful response in the English-speaking world to the fact that the feminine tradition has been generally excluded from the mainstream representations of human race. See Merriam-Webster Dictionary at www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/history. Last accessed May 12 2015.



oppression search to corrupt and distort all sources of power among the oppressed, in as much as these would give them energy for change. She contends that “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (*Sister* 53). For Lorde, the erotic is “an internal sense of satisfaction” and once someone has experienced the fullness of self satisfaction, she or he will not conform to the mediocrity of achieving less, and would eventually “give in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity” (54). For the established power, empowerment of the oppressed translates into danger. In consequence, the system robs the work of people of its erotic value, rendering disaffection in much of what individuals do. Lorde separates the erotic from the pornographic, arguing that while the erotic emphasizes feeling, the pornographic enhances sensation without feeling. For the erotic to succeed as spiritual force, she maintains, it is necessary that the individuals reach consciousness of their erotic feelings, and just as important, that they share them and look for recognition in others (59). Lorde finally opposes the “use of feeling” to the “abuse of feeling”, the latter occurring when people look away from themselves in satisfying their erotic needs, using each other as objects of satisfaction. In this process, people tend to look away; they do not accept the fact that they are able to feel, the fact that they neither dare to acknowledge nor name their similarities and differences, thus denying a large part of the experience (59). Feminist approaches on the erotic are closely connected to intimacy studies, as will be examined in the next chapter.

Together with Lorde, scholar and social activist Barbara Christian, born in the US Virgin Islands, is considered one of “the founding mothers of contemporary African American and black feminist criticism.” In 1980, Christian published *Black Women Novelists*, thus starting a career that would influence generations of literary critics and would help establish an “unprecedented interest in African American literature and culture” (Bowles et al. ix). In her landmark essay “The Race for Theory,” Christian criticizes French feminism for being monolithic, and concentrating “on the female body as the means to creating a female language,” thus ignoring the fact that “gender is a social rather than a biological construct” (60). In Christian’s view, it is important to notice historical and cultural differences among women as found among their “many races and ethnic backgrounds” (59). Another reason why this author explains the emergence of Afro-American women’s writing is the latent sexism in the Black community, which as a general rule spoke about the male experience only, excluding the female perspective. Christian hence believes that she and her “sisters . . . have not rushed to create abstract theories” because they are being cautious about definite solutions. However, she claims, this does not mean that they are not theorizing. Christian affirms that Black women writers’ literary productions inherently convey theoretical approaches about identity, politics and human relations.



Thus, she affirms that their “literature is an indication of the ways in which [their] theorizing, of necessity, is based on [their] multiplicity of experiences” (60).

Opal Palmer Adisa also reflects on the use of creative language in literary criticism, as can be seen in her essay “I Must Write What I Know so I’ll Know that I’ve Known it All Along.” Here, Adisa addresses Christian’s essay “The Race for Theory” in order to expand on the idea that many extant theories tend to obscure meaning instead of making it clearer, thus rendering her students speechless. Adisa observes how the language of the academic elite has attempted to silence peripheral voices such as hers (56). Thus, she insists that her work as an educator is to encourage her students to trust in their memories and acknowledge what they know. Her essay includes some verses in nation language that read as follows:

we know who we be
we know wha we want
we know weh we a go
we know
*all a we know*³⁰

(57)

With verses like these, Adisa reclaims her people’s right to self-determination. As is typical with her style, the use of nation language is an effective writing technique to disrupt the established academic canon, which silences the history of the ancient colonies, and by extension, keeps its people subjugated. The voice and the experience of the Caribbean people, in sum, can be heard without bias when conveyed in their mothertongue.

Like Christian and Adisa, Afro-American scholar, critic and activist bell hooks endorses the vernacular language as a response to the elitism of the language from the academia. In her compelling essay “‘this is the oppressor’s language / yet i need it to talk to you’: Language, a place of struggle” (1995), hooks addresses intimacy and the necessity to speaking in tongues other than standard English to express different experiences and perspectives:

To recognize that we touch one another in language seems particularly difficult in a society that would have us believe that there is not dignity in the experience of passion, that to feel deeply is to be inferior, for within Western metaphysical dualistic thought, ideas are always more

³⁰ “*we know who we are / we know what we want / we know where we are going / we know / all of us know*”



important than language. To heal the splitting of mind and body, marginalised and oppressed people attempt to recover ourselves and our experiences in language. We seek to make a place for intimacy.³¹ Unable to find such a place in standard English, we create the ruptured, broken, unruly speech of the vernacular. When I need to say words that do more than simply mirror and/or address the dominant reality, I speak black vernacular. (301)

hooks says of the oppressed groups that when they are unable to find a place of intimacy in standard English, they proceed to create their own messy and broken vernacular. It is, accordingly, in the intimate space of writing where individuals can heal from the imposed separation of body and mind. hooks observes how, when feminists started to demand and include a multiplicity of backgrounds in their theories, the question of language was not being addressed. Standard English seemed to be the assumed instrument for communication. Nevertheless, she thinks that, taking into account the diversity of the audience of feminist writing and thinking, we should also implement different voices, such as broken or vernacular voices. hooks celebrates the possibility that, at a conference, we may hear words that do not belong to the expected use of English, and this should be fine, because, as she argues “[s]hifting how we think about language and how we use it necessarily alters how we know what we know.” She also believes that being exposed to a variety of uses of language is a disrupting tool against cultural capitalism, which suggests that all desires and expectations must be met immediately or that “one is worthy of being heard only if one speaks in standard English” (hooks “oppressor’s” 300-301).

Similarly to hooks’s decolonizing reflections on language, Adisa also theorizes about the use of language and theory, notably in her essay “De Language Reflect Dem Ethos: Some Issues With Nation Language,” where the Jamaican writer explores nation language as a necessary instrument to convey the characteristics of her the Jamaican culture. As she affirms, “For the Caribbean man, woman, and child, the right not to be slaves or servants to others also means the right to define, determine, and tell their own stories in their own words” (19).

One of the major contributions to Black feminist thought is hooks’s first serious volume *Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), which made allusion to Sojourner Truth’s former speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”—discussed above—where hooks examines historical moments from slavery to abolitionist and Civil Rights movements and the development of the first wave of feminism. Drawing upon these historical events, she reflects on how racist and sexist stereotypes rooted in slavery still continue to affect Black women’s lives. In her later study *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

³¹hooks’s reflections on intimacy as a site of common experience among the Black American people, and therefore, as a site for identity formation, can also be studied in the framework of my extended explanation of the term ‘intimacy’ in chapter 3.



(1984), hooks comments on how to tackle the racist bias of Western feminism alleging: “we resist hegemonic dominance of feminist thought by insisting that it is a theory in the making, that we must necessarily criticize, question, re-examine, and explore new possibilities” (10). In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), hooks points out, regarding the appropriation of Black otherness by postmodern theorists, that whereas it is necessary for the oppressed to unite their struggles, activists must beware of the damage they might cause to others when addressing their experiences of otherness, because they might be cannibalizing them (26). Nonetheless, hooks thinks that radical postmodernist practices should incorporate the voice of the marginalized and exploited Black people in their politics of difference, because it is from their aesthetic practice and theories that the dominant white supremacy must be challenged (25).

Caribbean Feminism

As indicated in the introduction to the present chapter, the theoretical possibilities of an Afro-Caribbean women’s writing seems to lie in the conflation of Black aesthetics with feminist aesthetics. This section is interested in asking how Black women writers from the Caribbean construct their raced and gender subjectivities. In particular, I focus on the intersectionality between gender and race. Also, throughout my analysis, it is my aim to consider the contribution of Black feminist aesthetics to the formation of a Black feminist theory in the English speaking Caribbean. Similarly, I also emphasize the ways in which Black Caribbean feminism influences Black feminist theory at large. Furthermore, Black women writers from the Caribbean specifically are mainly concerned with transnational feminist issues, due to the inherent diasporic features of their culture.

In *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women’s Writing in Caribbean Narrative*, Belinda Edmondson suggests a model of analysis for the female Caribbean literary tradition that integrates both Black and feminist aesthetics without falling into essentialist practices (84). To do so, she underlines that not all Caribbean authors are black, and that not all Black writers throughout the African diaspora fit into a unique African aesthetic (88). In the same line of thought, Edmondson is aware that the articulation of female subjectivity also varies according to national agendas and cultural and/or racial differences. Yet she observes that Black aesthetics and feminist aesthetics are key to comprehend the Caribbean cultural complexities from a postcolonial point of view. Thus, this section explains that for the analysis of Afro-Caribbean feminist writings, both hegemonic feminist criticism and Black aesthetics postulates need to be taken into consideration.

Black identity discourses of the African American tradition have been successfully applied to articulate West Indian identity, mainly because the vast majority of West Indian population is of African



descent. In consequence, Afro-Caribbeans share similar colonial stories with the African diasporic subjects in America.³² Nonetheless, Caribbean theory should not confine itself to being defined by African-rooted theories alone. In fact, whereas Black diasporic theories could be more than suitable for a comparative approach among different literary traditions within the African diaspora, it has been argued that such homogenizing approach should not be central in the reading of writings from a particular community (Donnell *Twentieth-Century* 130). On the other hand, as discussed in chapter 1, the substantial migration of Afro-Caribbean citizens from the early 20th century on has actively contributed to the history of Black America. Therefore, a common history of resistance behind African American and African Caribbean cultural identity is made more evident. Due to the historical fact that many Black Caribbean authors have settled in North America, and thus are often assimilated within the African-American tradition, national definitions of Caribbean identity are left open to question. However, grounding critical knowledge on purely racial belonging does not seem less essentialist. In this regard, Edmondson warns of the dangers of creating literary canons on an exclusively racial basis—like Gilroy suggests with his notion of ‘Black Atlantic’—and seems to suggest that other attachments such as gender and place should also be taken into consideration as a formal property of literary criticism (*Making* 84). Edmondson does not dismiss the incorporation of the racial factor in the definition of Caribbean literary categories; however, she suggests to look upon Black Caribbean women’s writing separately from Black women’s writing in order to recognize national differences. References to cultural identity formation within a given community seem necessary. It is therefore complicated to leave the notion of nation completely out of the equation. Indeed, transnational feminism tends to erase the specificities of feminist concerns as advanced within a given cultural and political context. As a response, it seems that a Caribbean feminist theory should examine the specific historical events of Caribbean women, as well the aesthetics of resistance as built by women in cultural production and artistic representation.

Alison Donnell brings the question forward in *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (2006), and argues that, in alignment with the Black Atlantic tradition that took the history of slavery in the African diaspora as a common site from where to challenge national borders (Gilroy *Black*), a number of studies on Caribbean women’s writing systematically followed this trend (Donnell 131). Such is the case of Boyce Davies’ *Black Women Writing and Identity* (1994), whose methodology is to develop a Caribbean feminist literary theory

³² Brathwaite had suggested that African Americans and African Caribbeans have had similar experiences, so, it is not coincidental that they produce similar texts. See also Cudjoe’s *Caribbean Women Writers* (169).



through Black diasporic criticism. Although Boyce Davies addresses issues on the need to “reconstruct destroyed historical consciousness” and highlights the importance of re-membering as a process of boundary crossing, she shifts away “from the most historical critical perspective towards a diasporic critical intervention” (Boyce Davies *Black* 16-17).

Donnell also mentions Renu Juneja’s *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in Literature* (1996)—where the author reconstructs a female Caribbean intellectual tradition with the figure of a Black Atlantic ancestor. Juneja questions the general trend to use the history and narratives of African American feminists to study the African Caribbean female authors, as if there were no critical narratives concerned with the Caribbean past, or else, as if Caribbean women writers and activists did not exist. In effect, it could be claimed that reading the writings and subjectivity of Black women—independently of their nationality— as transnational and migratory, would be the correct procedure. However, the examples provided by Donnell foreground that the obliteration of critical narratives concerned with the Caribbean past could imply that such a thing as a tradition of Caribbean women writers does not exist (Donnell *Twentieth-Century* 132).

Another relevant publication from the 1990s that Donnell examines is Myram J.A. Chancy’s *Searching for Safe Spaces* (1997). For Chancy, “Black feminism . . . has become a critical method serving the needs of Black women scholars cross-culturally and cross-nationally” (Chancy 17 qtd. in Donnell *Twentieth-Century* 133). Chancy seems to argue that American slavery can provide a context for reading Black British works like those of Beryl Gilroy or Joan Riley, but Donnell claims that Chancy’s Black feminism is not quite a transversal model, but a “nuclear model with African-American theory at the centre and only peripheral interest in other black feminisms” (*Twentieth-Century* 134). As suggested by Donnell, when framing a theoretical approach that serves to analyze the work of Caribbean women writers, one must not overlook the radical shift of perspective that occurs when the diasporic model of looking across imposes itself to replace the traditional (and patriarchal) historical perspective of looking back (132). Due to the fact that feminist criticism and Black diaspora criticism are both oppositional practices (struggling against the hegemonic assumptions of the white, male ruling class), it might be tempting to dismiss the methodologies provided by the patriarchal, imperialist tradition. Nonetheless, in Caribbean female studies one must be cognizant of the pernicious outcome of favoring the diasporic model against a historical perspective. That is to say, if only a cross-cultural/-national spatial movement is taken into account, and the movement across the geographically-located historical periods is neglected, the aftermath will be an amnesia of Afro-Caribbean women’s history, both in the literary as well as in the intellectual arenas.



As exhaustively explained by Sylvia Wynter in her afterword to Elaine Savory Fido and Carole Boyce Davies' *Out of the Kumbia*, every scholarly attempt that has aimed to provide epistemological modes of representation for all human beings, or for a specific group of the population, has always turned into an incomplete task, which is not only objectifying, but also homogenizing and repressive. The paradoxical effect of such incomplete objectification is that their original motivation is lost and needs to be retrieved (Wynter 366). Nevertheless, the question that activates the present discussion on Afro-Caribbean women's aesthetics is not about the existence of a pure Afro-Caribbean feminine writing, but rather, about how the intersections of race and gender in such writings reveal a multiplicity of attitudes towards the political and social interventions of Black women from the Caribbean. This perspective is in close connection to Gilroy's suggestion of a Black Atlantic identity that accounts for movements, flaws and routes in the construction of hybrid identities (Gilroy *Black* 15).

Women writers of the African diaspora, whether they are born in America or the Caribbean, or elsewhere, have the ability to move across a variety of identity belongings, such as race, gender, class, or nationality. This mobility remains an asset inasmuch as it creates a space where self-criticism enables new paths for change, an implication that is in close connection with postcolonial theories of hybridity. As further examined in Susan Stanford Friedman's *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, transnational feminism appears to focus on feminism crossculturally; far from searching an essentialized view of women, transnational feminism aims at considering women's differences and the plurality of women's activism across the globe (Friedman *Mappings* "Introduction"). In chapter 9 of the same volume, Friedman observes that writers whose cultural traditions are rooted in the oral modes of discourse consider the narrative mode as a source of knowledge, and not as a tyrannical force to be resisted. Thus we could affirm that the narrative mode (as mimesis) is an effective way to transgress the symbolic order because in oral traditions such as the African, storytelling is an essential part of the culture of resistance, specially because it allows stories to survive in spite of centuries of cultural colonialism.

It is one of the aims of this dissertation to confirm that if the point is raised only on African geographical displacement, we might fail to include the specific local experiences that reside in the collective as well as in the individual psyche of the Caribbean people, which certainly speaks of the Caribbean ethos. In an attempt to define Caribbean women's writing as a differential group within the Caribbean aesthetics, it is thus mandatory to include the individual and collective stories of this population-group. These stories should be seen, not only as the narratives of racialized migrant female



subjects, but also as the experiences of the citizens of a multicultural Caribbean country and/or region whose history of slavery and independence has its own singularities. What I am leading up to is that, if we look back to the local history (Donnell), instead of across similar Black diasporic histories (Boyce Davies, Chancy, Juneja, Edmondson), Caribbean feminist aesthetics will raise as a self-sufficient field of studies. Therefore, it will be able, not only to add to the current analyses of postcolonial Caribbean studies, but also to contribute to the larger formation of a Black diasporic criticism. The spaces of the imagination thus play an important role in the act of crossing borders. I plan to discuss that in addressing domestic and intimate spaces, writers in the diaspora are bringing forward in the reader's imagination a set of personal and unique cultural references that will certainly help to preserve the notion of homeland when the diasporic subject is away from her/his homeland.

Another outstanding name within Caribbean feminist criticism, who will be largely used the present analysis for her specific work on Adisa, is Donna Aza Weir-Soley. In *Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women's Writings* (2009), Weir-Soley expands on the assumptions already started by Lorde on the concept of the erotic. In particular, this critic explores the physical and verbal portrayal of Black women's subjectivities across the African diaspora from the 19th century to our date. The author examines the multilateral formation of a Black female theory of subjectivity drawing upon four novels by Black women writers in the New World, namely *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937), *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1987), *It Begins with Tears* by Opal Palmer Adisa (1997) and *The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat (1998). Weir-Soley's chapter on Adisa's novel is the most comprehensive study of Adisa's fiction to date. Accordingly, Weir-Soley's contribution will be fully explored in chapter 5, where I offer a comprehensive reading of the said novel.

Vietnamese feminist, filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha is also in close connection to the sensual and erotic notions of language that I have mentioned earlier when discussing Christian's, hook's and Adisa's approaches to theory, and which I explore further in the present analysis. Trinh endorses the act of writing through the body as a creative and intimate endeavor women need to perform in order to transform female sensibilities and experiences into common theory and knowledge. In her attempt to rewrite women's relation to theory, Trinh explains in *Woman Native Other* (1989) that theory is the apparatus that empowers knowledge, and that the term 'theoretical,' as seen by women, "refers to inaccessible texts that are addressed to a privileged, predominantly male, social group" which is analogous to "impersonal", "purely mental", "unfeeling" and "abstract" (41). This critic perceives theory as a double-edged instrument: on the one hand, it can threaten the established canon, and by doing so it also foregrounds the authoritative tradition on "aesthetics" and "scholarship"; on the other hand, theory can also be oppressive, when it serves to perpetuate "existing power



relations” and it is used to “exert authority”. Trinh observes that the “Voice of Knowledge” can render theory suspicious, and that, as long as it stops raising conjectures, theory is no longer theoretical (42). She also claims that “difference needs *not* be suppressed in the name of Theory” (emphasis added); this implies that the dominant discourse has not questioned sexual differences in its phallogentric tradition.

This approach to theorizing is closely connected with Carole Boyce Davies’ criticism (*Black* 87) of decolonizing theorists such as Fanon and Gandhi, who failed to represent women in their anti-colonial struggle. Her own thought is in agreement with Katrak’s articulations in “Decolonizing Culture. Toward a Theory of Postcolonial Women’s Texts.” Accordingly, Boyce Davies affirms that theorists have moved too rapidly from the difficulties of decolonizing theories and anti-imperialist discourses (87). As she observes, Katrak claims that if one is to incorporate such theoretical contributions, then it will be necessary to “simultaneously interrogate their positions on gender.” Boyce Davies notes in this article a crossing from “the boundaries of Western-style formulations of theory, to theorizing as it exists in multiple ways,” and observes that for these absent women in the confines of postcoloniality, there is a less precise location that exists “in the realm of the ‘elsewhere’ of diasporic imaginings” (88). In close connection with a more sensual and experiential approach to theorizing, more recent feminist scholars have examined the implications of affect, spirituality and sexual politics in the construction of cultural identities. The work of Sara Ahmed, M. Jacqui Alexander and Mimi Sheller will be discussed in depth in the next chapter on postcolonial intimacies.

Chapter 3

Postcolonial Intimacies and the Caribbean

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In order to understand the origins and development of intimacy studies, this chapter starts by offering a definition of the term ‘intimacy’ and reviewing the multiple sites of the intimate as expressed by different theorists. In this respect, I offer an overview of the connections between knowledge, power and the multiple sites of the intimacies—such as sexuality (sexual behavior, childbearing), spirituality, domesticity (home, parenting, kinship structures, gender division of labor), and literature (memory)—as developed by poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist theorists such as Michel Foucault, Svetlana Boym, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Ann Laura Stoler, Sara Ahmed, Mimi Sheller, MacDonald-Smythe, Donnette Francis and M. Jacqui Alexander.

In the essay “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” included in the journal *Critical Inquiry* (1998), affect theorist Lauren Berlant states the following:

To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. (281)



As expressed above, the narratives of intimacy generally occur within the frame of familiar and loving relationships. Yet, Berlant observes that the private experience of the intimate “is met by a corresponding publicness.”³³ On the other hand, people rely on the “institutions of intimacy” as the place where their desires can be ideally fulfilled and enjoyed for a long duration. Nonetheless, both (the institutions of) romance and friendship turn out in unexpected ways, generating “moral dramas of estrangement and betrayal, . . . neglect and violence” that take place even in cases of enduring desire (281). This disenchantment with unmet expectations and desires related to romance and friendship entails a psychological trauma among those who blindly believe in the promises of happiness stated in the discourses of the institutions of intimacy.³⁴ Such simultaneous and contradictory attitudes taking place at the intimate level have occupied a central place in many therapeutic practices since the early 20th century (282). Even jurisprudence has adopted a therapeutic approach when dealing with “cases of marital and child abuse,” thus acknowledging the difficulties of applying “the norms of a public world when it is also an intimate one.” In this sense, the laws on sexual harassment have enabled to consider unwanted sex within the institution of marriage; which means a recognition of the existence of personal desire within the public construction of intimacy (282). Thus, for Berlant, the connections between desire and therapy, which have been normalized within the “modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy,” is revealing something of great significance: that intimacy creates worlds and occupies spaces

³³Berlant argues that there is not a division between the “public-instrumental” space, and the “private-affective,” space (283). For her both the political sphere and the public institutions can be read as “institutions of intimacy.” In this line of thought, she claims the existence of an “intimate public sphere.” She observes that it is through our “modes of attachment that [we] make . . . collective scenes intimate spaces” (288). Therefore, it could be said that intimate attachments “make people public, producing personal identities and subjectivities” through such public institutions (283).

³⁴In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed examines the affective and moral implications of the “happiness duty,” which creates expectations of happiness among those who behave in the prescribed “good” manners (158, 238, 280)



that are being constantly negotiated. This constant search for the right kind of intimate relation is prompted by our own failure to make intimate relationships last forever. The fact is, Berlant resumes, that

virtually no one knows how to do intimacy; that everyone feels expert about it (at least about other people's disasters); and that mass fascination with the aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence at the scene of desire somehow escalates the demand for the traditional promise of intimate happiness to be fulfilled in everyone's everyday life. (282)

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term 'intimacy' is defined as "[i]ntimate friendship or acquaintance; close familiarity," and it is also an euphemism for "[s]exual intercourse." Intimacy may also refer to "an inward quality or feature," or to a "close connection or union." It can also evoke "[c]loseness of observation or knowledge" (1402). In a conversation that Phaniel Antwi, Sarah Brophy, Helene Strauss and Y-Dang Troeung entertain with feminist theorist Sarah Ahmed, which is included in the special issue on 'postcolonial intimacies' of the journal *Interventions* (2013), Ahmed comments on Berlant's quotation from the above essay, where she claims that "to intimate is to communicate . . . about something shared, . . . a story about both oneself and others" (Berlant "Intimacy" 281). Ahmed draws attention to this observation in order to highlight the importance of the "idea of impression" that is implied in this act of sharing. For her, thinking of emotion in terms of having an impression and making an impression is interesting, because it enables "to think of emotion in terms of the press or the coming into contact of one surface by another. And then also an impression is a trace of

contact.”³⁵ Ahmed then comments on the deep influence Said’s landmark study *Orientalism* (1995) has exerted on her work:

I’m always very struck by his definition of ‘orientalism’ as domestication—to make the strange familiar, to bring the strange home. And it’s a relationship between making familiar and homing, bringing home, that is quite suggestive when we think about it in terms of intimate publics. (Ahmed interviewed by Antwin et al. “Ambivalence” 112)

According to Ahmed, Said’s suggestion of the stranger as someone who is brought/appropriated into one’s home, makes of the stranger a very intimate and familiar figure in its own strangeness. This means that, against the odds, there is an impression of the stranger upon those who are at home, and therefore, there is also a connection between them, which finally suggests that the so-called strangeness attributed to those we bring home might not be so strange in the end (112). Stuart Hall has also reflected on the impression that the Caribbean immigrant makes in the metropolitan space, even before migration takes place. In his enlightening essay entitled “Old and new identities, old and new ethnicities” (2000), Hall, who as we saw in chapter 1 emigrated from Jamaica to England in the 1950s, observes that, symbolically, migrant subjects like him had been in England for many centuries before they had actually arrived there. What Hall means is that migrants had been in England before through the language, the education, the history and the literature that they had received from the colonial establishment. Thus, they felt part of this Western continuum, which, nonetheless, they had appropriated and adapted to their own creole context. Therefore, in a way, when Hall went to England for the first

³⁵In Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, there are further interesting discussions on emotion as impression. I have used some of these ideas to interpret Adisa’s writings, notably in chapters 4.1, 5.1, 5.2, and 6.1.



time, he “was coming home.” In this text, Hall uses a beautiful metaphor to convey an unpleasant truth: “I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea” (48). Thus, he points out at the ways in which Caribbean and Indian histories have been hidden from the history of the British Empire, and how the latter has benefited from, and is still taking advantage of, the oppressive erasure of Caribbean and Indian identities. Hall calls this realization “the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history,” he concludes (49).

Both Said’s and Hall’s interpretations of home explore how the imperial public sphere domesticates (i.e. appropriates) the culture of the colonized. What is of interest here is that, as Said would put it, the domestication of the migrant subject from the colony—which in fact started to develop in the colonized territory before migration— makes of the colonized a very intimate and familiar element in the history of England. Ahmed insists that, although “the stranger is often seen as the figure outside the bond of a connection,” for her, Said is “suggesting that the stranger is one who we wait to bring home. He comes into being as stranger only in relationship to the project of appropriation” (Ahmed interviewed by Antwi et al. “Ambivalence” 112). The problem is, as Hall would put it, that this intimate connection, the presence of the colonized subject in the history of England, is not being recognized. Rather, there is an act of appropriation, of bringing home, in other words, of domestication, as though all the English education and history received in the colony were not enough to validate the migrant subject’s Englishness, nor her/his role within the history of England. In connection with intimacy studies, it could be said that if such shared knowledge (which is indeed a site



of intimacy) had been recognized, binary oppositions such as metropolis and colony, homelands and diasporas, or high and low cultures would not need to be addressed.

In the aforementioned interview, Ahmed comments on “Berlant’s idea of intimating with ‘the sparest of signs’” (“Intimacy” 281). She observes that intimate spaces are determined by “not needing to have to communicate some things because there’s [such a] . . . sense of sharedness . . . that words become unnecessary” (112). It is therefore not surprising that the word ‘*intimare*’ can be regarded in close connection with the word ‘conversation’, as stated by Helene Strauss in this same interview. Strauss observes that the verb ‘intimate’ has its origins in the Latin word ‘*intimare*,’ which means “make known, announce, impress,” and that, on the other hand, ‘conversation’ is “[t]he action of consorting or having dealings with others; living together; commerce; intercourse; society; intimacy.” (OED qtd. in Antwi et al. “Ambivalence” 112). Therefore, it could be said that a site of intimacy is that where individuals are in contact with each other, make impressions on and have impressions of each other without needing certain words, because they share the same knowledge and/or experience. As Ahmed concludes, this “kind of intimacy . . . isn’t necessarily about the words that get sent out but the words that don’t have to be sent out” (113).

In agreement with Berlant’s and Ahmed’s observations on intimacy as a place of shared knowledge, Homi Bhabha confesses, in an essay entitled “The World and the Home” (1992), having found in V.S. Naipaul’s novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, his “small corner in the world of letters—a postcolonial place.” Bhabha seems to affirm that the “unhomely” postcolonial subject—who feels alienated by the “familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres”—finds a homely place in the spaces of the imagination offered by literature. It could then be asserted that the novel is “a house for [unhomely] people to live in” (142). Indeed, Bhabha finds Naipaul’s novel a homely place, i.e. an intimate site, in the sense that both the writer (Naipaul) and the reader (Bhabha himself) share a similar experience. This shared knowledge of unhomeliness involves the experiences of dislocation and alienation, so common among postcolonial subjects. The relieving assurance that there is no need for words to explain certain things is what brings them together, creating a site of intimacy. What is not told does not need to be told, because there is a common ground of experience. In sum, the novel could be considered an intimate public; the place where the intimate and the public spheres coexist. In this sense, Bhabha contributes to the debate on postcolonial intimacies by defining the spaces created in literature as places of intimacy, where one can feel comfortably at home. Literature, therefore, is that intimate place where both the private and the public spaces, individual and collective memory,



reconcile with each other. In postcolonial literary criticism, the processes by which the ‘conversation’ between the work of literature and the reader become a site of intimacy are significant. Inasmuch as literature implies the use of language, many postcolonial writers have realized that English is “the language of their formal, but not of their intimate emotions” (Pollard “Flowers” 165). Therefore, using creole languages, or the official English, but with the different meanings acquired in the creolization process, are some of the features that turn postcolonial literature into a homely place.

Nevertheless, language is not the only site of intimacy where one can feel at home, or entertain a sense of belonging. The affective orientations present in our daily lives, far from being detached from historical coordinates, can be examined to understand our “bodily subjectivity” and to “reimagine interpersonal interactions” and their connection to “macro-histories of belonging, displacement and dispossession” (Antwi et al. “Postcolonial” 1). The notion of intimacy is appealing because it accommodates the possibility “to ‘liberate’ the intimate relationships from their ‘domestication’ within the heterosexual nuclear family.” Likewise, it broadens the possibilities to carry out different kinds of affective bonds and sexual practices (Tyler and Gill 79-80). Indeed, for the last two decades, discussions on ‘intimacy’ have triggered a great concern among LGBT, feminist, and queer activists and scholars (Butler, Eng, Plummer).

Probably as a response to the little attention that governments have paid to questions such as “violence against women and racism,” the sites of the intimate have been on the agenda of feminist and postcolonial studies as never before (Tyler and Gill 80). Nonetheless, Antwi et al. underline that intimacy studies are not exclusively related to the domestic space, or the romantic and/or sexual relations, but they also consider other practices as intimate, and therefore question the criteria by which some practices belong to the sites of intimacy and others do not (“Postcolonial” 1). Thus, drawing upon the postcolonial premises mentioned above and Ahmed’s notion of “intimate publics,” it could be said that when one finds home—i.e. a place of comfort and intimate connections—in the diaspora and/or in literature, the narrow notion that we often have of the sites of intimacy as purely private spaces is debunked (Said *Orientalism*, Hall “Old,” Bhabha “World”). In this sense, it is necessary to consider the different locations where feelings of homeliness take place. In the present dissertation, I argue that language, literature, diaspora, spirituality, domesticity, mothering and sexual practices are each a site of intimacy.

As we have seen, intimacy discourses enable identity connections between people, who may find common places of belonging in the sites of (private and public) experience shared with others. On



the other hand, narratives of intimacy can also be explored to liberate the notion of identity from its domestication. In other words, these narratives can motivate the search for a specific kind of identity/behavior that may differ from the established patterns. This domestication (i.e. bringing home), or appropriation is done mainly in two ways. In the first place, there is language, whose discourses—including literature, but also other public discourses—reproduce, but also affect, realities; and secondly, there are the sexual practices, which are in turn induced (i.e. shaped and controlled) from above; that is to say, prompted by the discourses of the public institutions (school, Church, College, law courts, mass-media, etc). To borrow Hall's metaphor, the domestication of identity means that the public institutions know of the existence of sugar in their cup of tea, but they do not acknowledge the heterogeneity of the cup of tea. Hence, the different qualities of sugar are not being recognized in the public discourses. In the same way, the state makes sure that all kinds of private and public behavior are dissolved into the cup of tea of the dominant discourse. This resulting homogeneity enables the state to organize and control the population in a simpler manner.

Likewise, transnational feminist Lisa Lowe explains how in diasporic lives in the New World, intimacy was “a biopolitics through which the colonial powers administered the enslaved and colonized and sought to indoctrinate the newly freed into forms of Christian marriage and family” (“Intimacies of four continents” 195 qtd. in Antwi et al. “Postcolonial” 3). Aware of the ways in which the colonial governance sought to control and dominate people's lives, postcolonial intimacy critics such as Lowe bring to the fore Foucault's notion of biopolitics, namely the mechanisms by which “power . . . has taken control of both the body and life, . . . with the body as one pole and the population as the other” (Foucault “Lecture 11” 253).³⁶ Intimacy, therefore, is not an exclusive site for private practices, but it also involves the (intimate) public sphere, which is in charge of the social construction of gender, monogamous heteronormativity, the institution of motherhood, and so on.

Some Premises on the Private/Public Distinction

³⁶ The present chapter explores further Foucault's important contribution to the field of intimacy studies, specifically in the section entitled “The Origins of Intimacy Studies.”



Traditionally, women's intimacy has been regarded as a site of oppression. In this regard, it is not surprising that feminism has examined closely the private realm, considering the personal as political. In Catherine A. MacKinnon's words, "[t]o confront the fact that women have no privacy is to confront the intimate degradation of women" in the public sphere. A case in point can be found in the context of abortion, whereby abortion laws are imposed upon women's private choice (MacKinnon *Feminist* 191 qtd. in Gavison "Feminism" 2). In "Feminism and the Public/Private Distinction," Ruth Gavison challenges the distinctions that have traditionally been made between the public and the private spaces. She observes that "the claim that women are responsible for most of the child-rearing in society is a description which can and should be assessed independently of the choice of whether to label the women's realm as 'private'"(4).

—In "La codificación del espacio en clave de género" ("Encoding the space in terms of gender"), Irene Pérez Fernández claims that it is preferable to use the term 'domestic' instead of the term 'private.' As this critic observes, the private realm has been traditionally defined as opposed to the public, but this is clearly a male perspective, because the private space is where men go "to rest" after a day of "'productive' work in the public sphere." Thus, men use the private space to take time for themselves and to "develop their personal interests." However, she argues, women do not perceive the private space as a site of rest where they can have some time for themselves and develop their own personality. For women, the private space "has become a workplace; it has become a domestic space." This is why Pérez Fernández contends that the space that imprisons women is not the private space of the male experience, but the domestic space; the latter understood not only as a "physical space" but also as a "mental or psychological space, given that it involves the denial of self, compulsory domestic labor and carework" (568-569, translations mine). Therefore, Pérez Fernández defines the domestic not only as a space, but also as "an attitude" that is learned through a series of practices internalized socially. This learned attitude is located in the domestic space, an intimate institution that conditions women to repeat "a certain pattern of social behavior" (569). As Pérez Fernández indicates, the 'domestic' emerges as a better term for feminist struggles, because in terms of public recognition, the domestic labor is still less valued than the public labor.

—For the present dissertation, I rely on Pérez Fernández's definition of 'domestic,' as an ambivalent location of labor that is both a private and a public issue. On the other hand, I use the term 'private' as the place from where "private judgment" can be made, not only within the domestic space, but also with regard to politics and religious beliefs (Heywood *Cupid's* 97, 23 qtd. in Rabban "Free" 62). Thus, by crossing the socially constructed boundaries between the private and the public, Caribbean women demonstrate that the private is not in opposition to the public. In this regard, women can make private



choices that have an impact in the public sphere, like taking the pill, not taking the prescribed pill to prevent PMS symptoms, or having an abortion. These apparently private decisions are closely linked to public institutions. This intimate public relationship can be read, for instance, in the politics of medical sales, birth rates and maternity leave within a given state. Thus, like MacKinnon stresses, feminism has made of the private and personal action a political issue (Feminist 191 qtd. in Gavison "Feminism" 2).

The Origins of Intimacy Studies

In 1976, French philosopher and poststructuralist social theorist Michel Foucault published *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, the first part of what would be a three-volume study that explores the genealogy and function of sexuality from Ancient Greece to the 20th century. It is important to note that Foucault drew upon Nietzsche's approach to genealogy to develop his own critique. In *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject*, Michael Mahon reminds us that Foucault, like Nietzsche, was deeply interested in seeking "a multiplicity of relations of forces at the origin of our taken-for-granted values and concepts and even the things we experience." Thus, Foucault engages in genealogical critique, in his attempt to reveal "the contingent, practical, and historical conditions of our existence" (Mahon 2). In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault reflects on Nietzsche's perceptions of genealogy, and thus claims that

[a] genealogy of values, morality, asceticism, and knowledge will never confuse itself with a quest for their 'origins,' will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary, . . . it will not be reticent—in 'excavating the depths,' in allowing time for these elements to escape from a labyrinth where no truth had ever detained them. . . . The genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin. (80)

These reflections would influence Foucault's notions on the genealogies of self, which, far from searching an essentialist origin of the subject, attempt to problematize and deconstruct the received perceptions about identity and history. In line with this adopted vision of genealogy, Foucault wanted to counteract the extended belief among his contemporaries that the emergence of capitalism and bourgeois society had led to a repression of sexuality in the public sphere (Habermas; Ashenden and Owen 147). In order to counteract this dominant observation, Foucault exposed the close relationship existing between sexuality, knowledge and power. He wanted to study sexuality in order to identify the highest political interests behind human sexual behavior. With his concept of 'biopower,' which brought forward the idea that modern forms of governance regulated the individuals' bodies through



“an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations,” Foucault openly attributed to governments, scientific institutions and the Church the role of controlling the physical and political bodies of the citizenry (*History Vol. 1* 140).

Furthermore, Foucault observed in “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” that governance is not exercised through force, in the sense that people obey after some form of government coercion. As he rather suggested, there is a balanced relationship between the coercive techniques implemented by the state and the intimate practices that individuals naturally accommodate, and which lead them to transform and construct themselves. His point was that in order “to analyze the genealogy of the subject,” that is to say, to know the individual’s identity by tracing her/his lineage and history, one has to consider the interaction between “techniques of domination” and “techniques of the self.” It is at this “contact point” where Foucault contends that government is created. His contention was that power should not be understood “as pure violence or strict coercion” (204). Thus, Foucault observed how the nation states determine the ways in which sexuality and kinship are experienced among individuals, and how gender norms are reproduced in both the public and private spheres. His point, in sum, was that sexuality was being shoved into the public space.

Foucault’s contribution to biopolitics has been of pivotal influence to emergent fields in the humanities and the social sciences, such as gender studies and queer studies. His reflections on the nature of power and governance are also of key importance for postcolonial studies. In fact, they address critical attention towards taken-for-granted human practices, such as gender roles, kinship structures, and religious beliefs, which are at the center of colonial and neocolonial domination. Drawing upon Foucault’s theories, subsequent critics of feminism and/or postcolonial intimacies—such as Mimi Sheller, Sarah Ahmed, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Donnette Francis—have examined sexuality and other intimate practices as sites of resistance within the Caribbean context. The contributions of these theorists, who focus on forms of embodied political resistance and on the construction of citizenship from below, are of great importance for the study of contemporary Caribbean women writers. In the following section, I will provide further details about their main achievements in relation to the field of intimacy studies.

Postcolonial Intimacy Studies

For my present dissertation on Adisa’s decolonizing literary strategies, I deem necessary to draw upon a series of studies that take into account the connections between power, knowledge, language and sexuality as inaugurated by Foucault in the field of the humanities and social sciences, and further developed by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and literary and cultural critics. In 1998, the



above-mentioned journal *Critical Inquiry* released a special issue under the title ‘Intimacy’ that opened up new debates in the humanities and social sciences “about the modes of attachment that make persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces” (Berlant “Intimacy” 288), already indicating the artificial lines that often separate the intimate from the public spaces. Within this journal, Svetlana Boym—a former Harvard Professor and novelist born in USSR, who emigrated to the US as a young woman—wrote an essay entitled “On Diasporic Intimacy” where she exposes that “a diasporic intimacy” does not need to be in opposition to “uprootedness and defamiliarization,” but that it is rather constituted by such dislocations and alienating processes (499). Furthermore, as Boym claims, a “[d]iasporic intimacy” is only possible “when one masters a certain imperfect aesthetics of survival and learns to inhabit exile” (524). Therefore, she contains that it is only possible to approach diasporic intimacy “through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets,” and that the “foreign language” in which these stories and secrets are conveyed are not but an evidence of the impossibility of translation (499). Just like Spivak affirms that the concept of nationhood cannot be translated because it is an incursion of the private into the public (see chapter 1), Boym observes that the diasporic intimacies are also difficult to translate into the language of the host country, and therefore they can only be expressed surreptitiously, embedded as they are in the context of survival.

I would like to borrow Stuart Hall’s reflections on the nature of identity formation in order to shed some light on the debate about the untranslatability of diasporic intimacies. Hall claims that thinking of identity as an essentialist sense of belonging by which everybody has to “look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense.” Hall underlines that discourses of identity, insomuch as they are narratives and processes, are “always told from the position of the Other.” Nonetheless, as he argues, identity should be created from within every subject. In order to highlight the importance of the plurality of personal experiences in the construction of identity, he underlines, “identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one’s own self” (“Old” 49). Once again, as argued by Boym and Spivak in the previous paragraph, identity, whether it is diasporic or national, is something that cannot be translated. Rather, identities should be conveyed and studied in comparison to each other. This observation is extremely relevant in the new context of postcolonial intimacies, because it addresses the individual experience which has been hidden and silenced from the official history, but which is of core importance in the history of the British Empire.

Another critic who has contributed significantly to the so-called field of postcolonial intimacies is Ann Laura Stoler. In *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in*



Colonial Rule, this author highlights that the reason why she makes connections “between the broad-scale dynamics of colonial rule and the intimate sites of their implementation” is not because they are able to represent colonial power at a smaller scale,³⁷ but because she can identify in them “what Foucault might have called the microphysics of colonial rule.” It is in this microphysics of colonial rule where Stoler locates what she calls “the affective grid of colonial power” (7).³⁸ In her view, what made of intimacy a central concern among the imperial administrators is that they knew that “sexual relations” and “familiarity” would enable an “innermost” communication between the rulers and the ruled that could debunk the very foundations of the colonial system.

To illustrate the political relevance of innermost interactions between the colonized and the colonizers, Stoler examines in another study how colonial governance has been exercised in both the public and the private spaces with the objective of controlling the population. She claims, for instance, that the practice of concubinage in the Asian colonies was regarded as a form of “political subversion” which colonial authorities tried to avoid, as they feared “political disaffections among subordinate whites” (“Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen” 3). Stoler insists that it was among the colonial authorities “that matters of the intimate were squarely identified as matters of state.” With this elucidation in mind, this critic seems to foreground the necessity to scrutinize the sexual politics that lie behind the colonial structures of dominance (3-4). Thus, Stoler clearly endorses the postcolonial belief that there is not a real division between the private and the public spheres. The problem why still today postcolonial subjects seem to be “haunted by empire,” to borrow Stoler’s phrase, is because they are still “frequented” and “possessed” by ambiguous forces of domination that often have not been properly recognized under colonial rule (1). On the other hand, Stoler approaches the intimate aspects of history in an attempt to extend the “historical imagination” based on binary oppositions that have been present in narratives of empire across the world. Her approach, therefore,

³⁷ Stoler describes this colonial power as “writ large” (*Carnal* 7), thus seemingly making allusions to Plato’s conception of the state as a large-scale reflection of the citizen, which suggests that by examining the city-state, one can learn about its citizens more easily (*Republic* Book II).

³⁸ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault suggests a new ontology of power that seems to be located in between Social Darwinism, when he claims: “there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning,” and Marxism, when he affirms that the “mastery of [the body’s] forces [i.e. economic productivity] . . . is more than the ability to conquer them.” For Foucault, both the knowledge and the mastery of the body constitute what he calls “the political technology of the body.” This positionality of power in-between makes of power a transient concept that can be used strategically, and not as a concept that is possessed by the state or the body. This means that his concept of power as a technology “cannot be localized in a particular type of institution or state apparatus.” Indeed, for Foucault, the subjugation of the body is not only achieved through violence or ideology, and yet it can be physical and it can be carefully thought and organized (26).



attempts “to envision the interior landscape of ordinary women and men” who endured some kind of dislocation or alienation. Stoler’s contribution to the field of postcolonial intimacies enables a reading of the intimate not only within the domestic, but also beyond its borders, as well as within and beyond the management of sexual arrangements (4).

In addition to Svetlana Boym, Stuart Hall and Ann Laura Stoler, British-Australian postcolonial and feminist theorist Sarah Ahmed has made a valuable contribution to the field of postcolonial intimacies by scrutinizing the affects in her volume *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, where she locates what she calls the “affective turn” at the center of the production of knowledge within society (205). Ahmed observes that for Foucault, genealogy could be understood as an attempt to record what “we tend to feel [that] is without history” (Foucault *Politics of Truth* 39 qtd. in Ahmed *Cultural* 214). Thus, Ahmed observes that Foucault’s premise embraces what she calls “a history of the felt” (*Cultural* 214). Ahmed’s insightful perceptions on the emotions of pain, pleasure, wonder, love, hate, and shame are of great interest for my discussions on how apparently private emotions affect and are affected by the public spaces, thus debunking the idea that emotions are private. I will develop Ahmed’s discussions on the emotions further in my reading of Adisa’s writings, especially on chapters 4.1, 5.1, 5.2, and 6.1.

One of the most prominent studies on Caribbean historiography that probes into the silenced archives of the intimate histories can be read in Mimi Sheller’s *Citizenship from Below* (2012). This sociologist explores into Caribbean subalternity in order to find alternative ways of giving voice to the disavowed embodied experiences of the region which have been silenced and erased by the colonial system. Sheller raises important questions about which forms of knowledge are regulated by whom and why. Focusing on examples from Jamaica and Haiti, this critic discusses the politics of resistance in the Caribbean at the intersection between race, gender, class and sexuality. She is mainly concerned with the ways in which people whose rights to citizenship have been denied are still able to show “traces of subaltern agency” through embodied knowledge, local practices and the oral tradition (6). For Sheller, agency is to be found in both material and spiritual practices. Attending to the connections between the sites of intimacy, violence and citizenship, she envisages the possibility that embodied freedom be achieved by means of erotic agency. Sheller’s work maintains that erotic agency is a suitable site of resistance in the Caribbean society, where sexual abuse and other forms of sexual control have determined further asymmetrical relationships (16-17). As Sheller concludes, citizenship should be understood beyond the conventional political interpretations, thus considering “the full sexual, sensual, and erotic agency of an embodied freedom” (17). Her examination of histories of embodied freedom and sexual citizenship in the Caribbean serve to assess unusual archival sources in historiographic



research. Furthermore, Sheller's exploration of specific histories of Caribbean struggles for freedom, such as slave women's embodied responses to their double exploitation as "productive" and "reproductive" bodies (57), or the implications of embodied encounters in the tourist space (210), are of significant relevance for the emergent field of intimacy studies. This critic's creative perspective on history, along the lines of Rhoda Reddock and M. Jacqui Alexander, foregrounds and expands on the Caribbean histories of gender relations, embodied interactions, and sexual and erotic resistance. Up to then, these embodied experiences had mainly been reflected in literature and literary criticism, as is the case of Adisa's work. Thus, Sheller's discussions are put in conversation with Adisa's two novels in chapter 5.

Other meaningful reflections on postcolonial intimacy practices in the Caribbean can be found in *Making Homes in the West/Indies* by Antonia MacDonald-Smythe. MacDonald-Smythe makes intimate connections between the notion of exile and the construction of home in Caribbean literary productions. She observes how, since the displacement from Africa to the Caribbean during slavery, it has been common to mourn for the lost home, and that this situation repeats today in the voluntary migrations to the metropolitan centers (54). Therefore, she notes that it is common in Caribbean literature to constantly look back in search of the lost homes, while at the same time one looks forward in search of new homes. Home is to be understood as a site of intimacy where communication and connection among its members can be easily achieved. In the case of the postcolonial subject, who has endured "cultural alienation," there is a sense of homelessness, and hence a "yearning for connection." The intimate spaces of the home, therefore, become, for her, like "a talisman against the influences of the metropolis." However, as MacDonald-Smythe claims when addressing her own diasporic experience, home is also related to the new life that she was creating with her children in the domestic space of her home (55). Thus, this critic's perception of home as something that is rooted in the past and oriented into the future, and as something that is political and private at the same time, evidences the multiplicity of sites that the intimate space of the home can occupy. This bridging between apparently opposing dimensions, such as past and present, here and there, serves to perceive intimacy discourses as sites of negotiation between different spatial and temporal dimensions.

Another approach that is significant in the development of postcolonial intimacy studies can be found in the work of transnational feminist M. Jacqui Alexander. In her volume *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander attempts to destabilize traditional sites of knowing within Caribbean feminist studies. Thus, she focuses on the sacred, the sexual, and the acts of remembering as places where "psychic, analytic and organizational methodologies" can be applied in order to know what has for long been suspected to exist, but which has not yet been formulated (7). Alexander approaches a pedagogy



which is rooted in the personal experience and that transcends into the public sphere, as well as into the spiritual realm. With her pedagogies of crossing, she shows interest in empowering the disembodied people of the African diaspora. Her study of the aesthetic expressions and epistemological notions of the Middle Passage enables us to understand the structures of colonial power and domination within a contemporary context. Alexander transgresses borders that have traditionally been established between the sacred, the sexual, the private and the public spheres. In Alexander's view, the sacred is not a private act based only on the intangible faith; it is rather a public act that mirrors and impacts the society in which it is performed (295). Therefore, her vision of the sacred as something that is practiced intimately but that impacts the whole community is quite revealing for our understanding of postcolonial intimacy studies. I have included Alexander's discussions in my analysis of Adisa's novels, in chapter 5.

Another recent study on postcolonial intimacy studies can be found in Donnette Francis's latest work *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, where her insights on female sexuality reveal the mechanisms of power implemented in the imperialist and nationalist enterprise of the Caribbean. In this volume, Francis offers a reading of five novels by Caribbean female writers—namely Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*, Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*, Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus*, and Angie Cruz's *Soledad*—in order to scrutinize how the unacknowledged existence of violent episodes serve as “sites of subjection and subjectivation” (12). Francis's focus turns around the notion of “sexual citizenship,” and it attempts to reveal more about the construction of erotic agency at the intersection of gender and race in the postcolonial context. In view of the state's lack of legal protection for female victims of violations, and the subsequent lack of archival material on women's neglected situation, Francis suggests that it is in the spaces of literature where historians are to find “intimate historical imaginings,” thus covering the lacuna of national historiography through the embodied epistemologies found in fictional worlds (11). Francis's notion of Caribbean ‘antiromance’ brings new possibilities for the construction of intimacy studies. Through this genre of Caribbean ‘antiromance,’ Francis observes in her article “The *Last Stitch*: A Praise Song for My Mother Who Mothered Me” (2010) that writers portray the intimate space to underline the fact that sometimes neither the intimate spaces of the familial home, nor the national homeland, nor the new land where one migrates, are spaces where one can feel comfortably at home (“Last” 161). In her view, Caribbean antiromance writers are actively denouncing the failures of the state with regard to sexual violence and other oppressions of the individual. In doing so, these writers are actively opening new fields to struggle against sexual and racial discrimination (166).



Bearing in mind the above mentioned theories on postcolonial intimate citizenship in the Caribbean, the present dissertation draws upon Adisa's work in order to reveal how personal life illustrates significant socio-cultural transformations, specifically within the heterosexual, monogamous and reproductive couple. I am interested in the sociology of personal lives as reflected in Adisa's literary production. Adisa's work becomes a place where one can find histories of intimacy in a specific space and time period. In this sense, her literary production constitutes a significant historical source. In postcolonial studies specifically, literature is a site of memory of colonialism, as it accommodates the personal histories, and the colonial patterns of behavior which have survived in the psyche, and manifests in the daily lives of postcolonial subjects.

The collective and individual memory that is reflected in Adisa's intimacy narratives are sites of political contestation from where she challenges notions of nation and empire. This construction of memory from below represents the shift described by Paul Gilroy as the movement from the essentialist positions of "cultural nationalisms" to the recognition of cultural hybridity and social inclusiveness of "cultural diasporas" (Gilroy *Black* 2). The concept of intimacy is, therefore, closely connected to the experiences of diaspora inasmuch as the former is a response to the latter. It is indeed in situations of alienation and separation from the motherland when the migrant subject looks more willfully for intimate connections. Intimate connections, as we have seen earlier, occur in the spaces where there is a shared knowledge or experience, such is the case of literature, sex, mothering, or spirituality. Finding these spaces of communion with others, human beings are able to create their imaginary homelands wherever they are.

PART II

ANALYSIS OF OPAL PALMER ADISA'S WRITINGS

Chapter 4

Survival and Resistance: A Caribbean Aesthetics

Chapter 4.1

The Knee Scraper: Questioning Authority

“... for it is not difference which
immobilizes us, but silence. And there are
so many silences to be broken.”

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (44)



Adisa’s cardinal essay “She Scrape She Knee: The Theme of my Work”³⁹ (2008) serves to give shape to her own allegory: the knee-scraper, an outraged, refractory female subject located in her native Caribbean, herself a decolonizing force, yet oftentimes unacknowledged. Adisa’s themes are marked by the contesting presence of the knee-scraper: a wounded woman figure that conveys her nonconformity in spite of the shame projected onto her by a patriarchal society that judges her, condemns her, and discredits her. Other excerpts from Adisa’s work will help illustrate further the author’s assumptions of a Caribbean aesthetics of resistance. This article focuses on a number of poems and essays appearing in *Tamarind and Mango Women* (1992), *Leaf of Life* (2000), *Eros Muse: Poems and Essays* (2006) and *I Name Me Name* (2008). Some relevant passages from her novel *It Begins With Tears* (1997) and her short story collection *Until Judgement Comes* (2007) are also discussed.

Drawn from the first lines of Adisa’s manifesto “She Scrape She Knee,” the following passage condenses the essence of the knee-scraper:

³⁹Adisa’s essay was originally published in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the first International Conference* (1990). Thanks to this first encounter, the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars (ACWWS) was founded on 21 May 1994, in Pittsburgh, USA. Adisa’s piece was later included in her 2008 collection of poetry and prose *I Name Me Name*.



As a girl I often scraped my knee, not because I had poor balance or tripped over my feet but because I dared to be more, or other, than what good girls were supposed to be. I was never a good girl . . . Nice girls never scraped their knees. . . . I see that there is much in common between the little girl who frequently scraped her knee, and has scars to prove it, and this woman, me, who must often walk stiff-legged in defiance of the scrapes that are inflicted, often by the insensitive, the blind, the upholders of norms, traditions, and antiquated values that I had no part in setting and by which I will not abide. I scrape my knee. (“She” 146)

An undeniable aspect of writing from the body is the production of new memory spaces. The knee-scrapers as creative bodies in spite of (or because of) their anger, is a theme widely acknowledged by Adisa. In the above passage, she traces back to her early years and draws parallels with her being a writer today, thus exposing the precursory patterns of behavior that shape her writing. When scraping her knee, Adisa is determined to dismantle inherited values imposed upon the members of her Caribbean community. She brings to memory what it is like to dissent and to fire up different ways of knowing and shaping the world. Following the motif of the knee-scraper, Adisa acknowledges that “to lack scars on one’s knees means one has lived safely” and has “accepted the prescribed rules.” This affirmation describes someone who is ready to face danger for the sake of personal integrity, and yet, in spite of the unwanted pain, she embraces it, and “make[s] marvellous discoveries” (146).

The epistemologies of the affects are latent in Adisa’s creative use of language. This essay is concerned with embracing the affects not as isolated, individual experiences, but as political acts that can be rescued through bodily traces. In order to examine the figure of the knee-scraper as an element of resistance, I will first review how painful emotions and scars contribute to the configuration of cultural identity. Thus, the first two sections will draw upon the theoretical work of Elaine Scarry, Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous, with examples drawn from the work of Adisa. In the last two sections, I will argue that Adisa’s representation of bodies in pain entails a transformation of anger into intellectual agency, an act of textual embodiment that enables the building of alternative epistemologies, thus demystifying the negative stereotype of the angry Black woman. In these latter parts, I will examine Adisa’s writings following feminist insights as formulated by Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, Julia Kristeva, and Alice Walker. It is my contention that Adisa’s work plays a significant role in the politics



of postcolonial and feminist resistance. I will focus on Adisa's routes to dismantle authoritative discourses and colonial practices; specifically via her self-affirmation as a knee-scraper, because it blurs the arbitrary borders traditionally established between emotions and thought.

The Nature and Materialization of Pain

In her seminal study, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1987), pain theorist Scarry explores the nature of physical suffering in torture, concluding that pain is by nature inexpressible, and therefore, unshareable. The unshareability of pain, according to Scarry, is manifest in the case of injured individuals whose physical suffering leads them to a state of speechlessness (60). In this absence of speech, Scarry suggests that there is a kind of "immunity of the body to the state," meaning that the body has an intrinsic ability to keep expressing itself and resist authority (346-347). The trope of the knee-scraper can be understood as the materialisation of pain, an agent of resistance triggered by the speechlessness steered by the intense experience of pain. However, in the case of Adisa, the unshareability endorsed by Scarry seems only vaguely pertinent. See how in her poem "Writing from Inside," Adisa believes in the ability of translating the body's visible expressions of pain into speech as a means to recover from the pain:

no matter the severity
of the wound
words will sponge
your blood up off the floor
soothe
your bruised tissues (30)

Although others have also argued—along with Scarry—that pain is a lonely and private act, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014), affect theorist Ahmed suggests that, whereas pain is a solitary experience, it can never be private. Her response to the apparent privacy of pain is that, because the experience of pain is a lonely act, we feel the necessity to share it with a witness, and secondly, that "the impossibility of inhabiting the other's body creates a desire to know 'what it feels like'" (29). This is what Ahmed calls the "sociality of pain" (28). Indeed, Ahmed represents the skin as something that mediates between inside and outside, that enables the movement of pain from the interior to the exterior (24). She suggests an



intimate relationship between the “materialisation” of pain—when skin enables “the effect of boundary, fixity and surface” (Butler *Bodies* 9 qtd. in Ahmed 24)—and the “intensification of pain,” which explains that “it is through the intensification of pain sensations that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape” (24). It is in Ahmed’s advocacy that bodies are created through their contact with other bodies that the idea of the knee-scraper—a female creative force that yearns to be recognized—breaks through and transforms pain and anger into creativity. Such connection of pain with creativity is not shared by Scarry, who believes that pleasure and pain are opposites, in that the former is creative and the latter destructive (“On Evil” 80). Whereas Scarry’s affirmation that pleasure is world-building, or else, that world-building is pleasurable, leaves pain outside of the equation; for Ahmed—and arguably for Adisa—extreme sensations of pain can lead to situations of world-building, which in the end turns into a pleasurable act.

The sociality of pain implied by Ahmed is aligned with Adisa’s interest in the pain of others; not in order to appropriate it—what Ahmed calls “the commodification of suffering” (32), in which case Adisa would pretend/believe she feels exactly the same kind of pain, what Brown calls the “fetishisation of the wound” (*States* 55 qtd. in Ahmed 32)—but in order to explore how pain works to affect differences between bodies. The mechanisms of empathy are thus activated in Adisa: there is a movement from the inside to the outside that attempts to approach the other’s unknown feelings (Ahmed 30). In Ahmed’s words, the “materialisation [of pain] takes place through the ‘mediation’ of affect, which may function in this way as readings of the bodies of others” (28). In her poem “Speaking the Truth,” Adisa affirms, “i write to keep from suffocating / to lament about children being killed . . . without ever knowing love” (11). She is not only being empathetic, but also she is delving into the nature of the others’ pain. Drawing upon Ahmed’s advancements, it is my interpretation of Adisa’s recurrent lower case ‘i’ that feelings do not belong to or originate in the individual self ‘I’, but that they “move out towards others,” hence they cannot be reduced to a subjective or personal act (208).

In correspondence with Scarry’s observation of the ability of the body to disobey (346-347), Adisa’s knee-scrappers are also renegades, even though sometimes they unconsciously damage themselves. Approaching Ahmed’s sociality of pain, their pain is automatically coming to the surface, trying to reach an external witness with whom to share the injustices they grudgingly put up with. In her essay “She Scrape She Knee” Adisa remembers how Jamaican women scraped their knees “often without knowing why they were felled, and often not being allowed a



moment to acknowledge the pain or massage the swelling” (147). This state of unacknowledged pain can be understood through what Butler calls “the violence of derealization” by which she stresses the fact that being unconscious of one’s suffering unavoidably engenders more suffering (Butler *Precarious* 33, 34 qtd. in Spengler 189). Adisa hereby notices the vicious cycle lived by those who are unable to realize their pain so that it can be verbalized and relieved. The ability of the body to feel and express pain becomes the most loyal communication system to act on behalf of the individual’s integrity; a body language that is to be translated into anger and then into speech so that it can reach a broader public, which is one of Adisa’s main interests as a writer.

Adisa’s figure of the knee-scraper—in its ultimate form as disavowed entity—seems to be aligned with Scarry’s review of the body in pain, a body stuck in the present, hopeless, negated, that is left to be nothing else but pure presence. Adisa points out that “knee-scrappers are never allowed anything, that we seize the moment, the day” (“She” 149), an assertion that directs the reader to the understanding of the ephemeral nature of scraping one’s knee. This observation suggests that the expression of pain cannot be fully articulated outside the moment of suffering. In other words, when there is no injury, we lose our perception of the body, we become less aware of its limits and the place it occupies in the world (Ahmed 27). However, some people are unable to experience pain mindfully, in which case, the outcome could be dramatic, a state of emotional shallowness that can only cause more suffering. This is why Adisa insists on exploring in depth how pain is mediated so that it can successfully arise to the surface. But for her, bringing consciousness to the body does not mean that the pain can only inhabit the present moment. First because, as Ahmed puts it, “the sensation of pain is deeply affected by memories” (25), and second because there is hope, a vision to change the future, if we learn how to read and inscribe our pain or others’ pain; an affirmation that can be scrutinized further in Lorde’s notable work on Black women’s criticism, *Sister Outsider*, the particulars of which I refer to later on (127).

What is of interest for the transgressive potentiality of the knee-scraper is that the intensification of pain renders the body more palpable to its holder. This body consciousness enables us to transcend the limits of what is lived as ordinary, that which one does not realize because of its customary condition. Under pain we are more likely to become aware of the place our bodies occupy in the world, to notice “how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places” (Ahmed 27). This realization of pain, far from disconnecting us



from the world, brings us closer to it. Indeed, argues Ahmed, “the experience of pain does not cut off the body in the present, but attaches this body to the world of other bodies, an attachment that is contingent on elements that are absent in the lived experience of pain” (Ahmed 28). Those absent elements—not available in the present—are the past histories of other bodies in contact with ours, which allow our reconstruction of a given apprehended feeling. In Adisa’s poem “Innate” she reflects on the connection between her pain and the words that insist on telling the story of her ancestors, implying the existence of a cultural DNA:

when I cut my finger
the blood is written
in words
.....
they are the treasures
my ancestors bequeathed me
and though I might pretend
to forget
they are there
these memory words
seeing as the pupils of my eyes (8)

Whereas past memories do not belong to the present, they play a significant role in our construction of the meaning of pain. So the story, that inhabits the past, is brought to the present when we remember how the surfaces of bodies came to be wounded, enlarging therefore our reading of the world, and rethinking the relationship between past and present. Therefore for Adisa, the experience of pain is not an immediate one, but it is mediated by our lived experiences, our contact with other bodies. Put simply, emotions are thought, and they are even more likely to be realized under painful situations.

The Knee-Scraper’s Stories

It is not only the intensity of pain that makes bodies noticeable; the marks left on the body have also the same function (Ahmed 28). The trope of the scar deserves closer attention to understand the figure of the knee-scraper. Adisa is a woman poet proud of her insubordinate, yet painful, attitude. She avows that, even today, “the nosy child is still around in the form of an inquisitive, eavesdropping woman so, alas,



pussy scars always grace my knees” (“She” 146-7). This motif of the scar can be understood through Cixous and Scarry’s perspectives. Poststructuralist feminist theorist Cixous, whose early work focused on the relationship between body and language, considers in *Hélène Cixous, Photos de Racines*, that the scar is something that bears the healed wounds of the past, and that women should cherish it as a trace. For Cixous, the wound is what one feels, and even though it might be painful, it evolves into a scar. The scar is charged with a positive meaning for Cixous, because it represents a story made available. Thus she epitomizes in her simple, yet insightful language: “[l]a cicatrice, ce récit” / “the scar, this story” (26). Similarly for Adisa, the scars are the testimony of that unaffected, yet discerning, little girl who used to scrape her knee. Although the wound is caused by the imposition of norms and obsolete values, Adisa rates it highly, because the body marks it leaves behind allow the body to remember certain untold stories that could not be identified otherwise.

In her poem “Writing from Inside” Adisa insists on the risks that the writer must take, and advises the prospective writer about the possible sores that extracting stories/pus can entail. She gives directions as to how unearth a story in the following verses:

you must be a surgeon
with a scapel
open the abscess
and drain the puss (sic) (29)

For Adisa the outcome of scraping one’s knees—which turns into an abscess before it becomes a scar—is a valuable trace for a suppressed story to be acknowledged and written. This recognition of the story may be carried out either by the holder of the scars or by a second person who is attentive enough to realize it and uses her privilege as a writer to put it in words. Adisa positions herself in either role; both the writer and the injured person are knee-scrapers inasmuch as they are taking risks and enduring hardship to express unaccounted feelings.

Likewise, Adisa demonstrates her ability to enter the intimate realm of her characters’ pain and to challenge the world view externally imposed. In her polyphonic novel *It Begins With Tears* (1997), set in rural Jamaica, she locates the beginning of the stories in the act of shedding tears. In the following passage, that highlights the Caribbean oral tradition of storytelling, all the villagers were sitting together to celebrate the first street light, then three of the women from the



community went on to tell them a story. Ainsworth was a young boy at that time and now remembers how, after being prompted to think about their tears, everybody ended up crying:

The story was their memory. The story was the pain that produced tears. . . . The story was the beginning of their lives that had been told them over and over, but out of embarrassment they hadn't listened; so when the time came for those tales to be useful, they didn't know the details and groped in self-darkness. The story was in the first drop of salty tear that was shed for them, that they shed for themselves.

Ainsworth looked around at his mother and the other adults crying and felt cheated, until he found his own tears. Salty. Sticky. Inseparable from him, like the pain of birth. That was indeed the beginning. (139-140)

These lines indicate that ignoring one's story is pretending one knows oneself enough. Throughout the novel, the connections between the body and the story are made evident every time that a strong feeling affects a character. In the following passage, Adisa uses the phenomenon of shedding tears to probe into the story of Dahlia, an old woman who, together with other female friends, comes to assist Monica who has been tortured by another group of revengeful women. They had introduced pepper into her vagina because she was having an affair with one of their husbands. For Dahlia the picture of Monica cannot be more distressing:

The old woman who had buried her husband and daughter and single-handedly raised her grandson looked at Monica and all the anger and sorrow that she had felt thirty-three years earlier when first her husband then her daughter died, surged up again and the tears she had refused to shed in defiance and stubbornness then, came forth now like a hose turned on. (135)

Crying is a relevant trace for Dahlia's story inasmuch as it enables the pain to come to the surface. Dahlia cries not only for the torture inflicted upon Monica, but also because her tears bring to memory her own hardships. Ahmed reminds us that emotions shape the objects we are in contact with, and that these objects also shape our emotions. Such objects, however, are not necessarily material, they can be imagined (7). Memories therefore, can trigger a feeling. Whereas in the first place



the object of Dahlia's feelings is Monica's suffering, and it is this suffering that shapes her empathetic emotions towards Monica's pain; it is not until her tears come to surface that old memories reach her, unclosing her own contact with other bodies. At this moment there is a switch of the object of her feelings: from Monica's suffering to her own stories of grief and loss. Dahlia's memories come to shape her emotions. These newly thought emotions prompt her to share her own pain. In this case, tears appear rendering the body more visible.

The following excerpt from the same passage serves us to illustrate the mechanisms that transform pain and sadness into anger, and then into action. Out of the group of women who came to the aid of Monica, Miss Cotton's response is empathetic; she feels sad for Monica, but then she seems decided to take action:

In the tub Monica started to moan. . . . Miss Cotton, . . . whose tears had not stopped flowing, stood up when Monica began to moan, stomped the ball of her right foot into the floor and beat her palms together. . . . Olive could see that Miss Cotton felt better now, her sadness turning to rage, so she left her and went into the bathroom. (*It* 135)

Adisa is one of those scrutinizing writers able to recreate her community, not just as an unattached eavesdropper, but as an agent of the whole cultural process, who lives and understands gender, race and class biases. She claims to have found inspiration in those Jamaican women who, living in "a very class- and colour-conscious society," scraped their knees ("She" 147). Along her work, Adisa is successful in articulating these women's personal ways to face adversity with a loving attitude and endless creativity, in a society that often neglects them. In doing so, the author is also reflecting on the discriminatory causes of Caribbean women's hardship.

Adisa's Translation of Anger Into Speech

In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde encourages the necessity for Black women to name their dreams and support each other. This will help them explore the potentiality of their angers and fears, and change their situation (153). Similarly in "She Scrape She Knee," Adisa encourages the production of constructive material out of anger. Knee-scraping serves not only to express her rebellious attitude as a woman, but also as a turning point to construct a more real picture of Caribbean life, and to encourage people to "create a world that is clean, safe, and open to differences" (147). She defines her own writing as a means to give voice to the Caribbean community: "I



attempt to illuminate the myths, to reveal a picture of Caribbean life that is too real for commercials, to reclaim our land and remove us from being simply the property of someone else's dream vacation" (148). Adisa's endeavour to recover a Caribbean tradition resonates with postcolonial literary strategies to rewrite the colonial past in order to "rediscover" the erased "cultural identity" of the "black diaspora" (Hall 393). She admits having learned from knee-scrapers how to be a writer:

To be a writer is to be arrogant, to assume that your "truth" is more valuable, more insightful than that of non-writers; to write is to commit sin to print, pain to inspection, joy to the communal table. But this is one side; the other side of being a writer is to be humble, to have the desire to share a joy, a pain, a vision not yet realized, sometimes not even formulated. A writer is a person with vision, a seer, a mouthpiece for the voiceless, the mute, as well as an observer of the talker, the braggart, the fool. Writers all scrape their knees. (147)

For Adisa, daring to articulate what has not yet been said is an act of self-assertion as well as of deference, because the writer needs to pay close attention to unaccounted feelings and name them with determination. Yet the writer knows that she is bringing into existence not only her own experience, but also the stories whose voices are silenced, thus acting on their behalf. As Adisa claims in "Speaking the Truth":

i write to give sound	
to the small voices	shut out
silenced	denied access (11)

The caesura splitting the last two verses allows a visual separation that may indicate the fracture between the subaltern bodies and their voices. This painful dismemberment, this amputation of the voice can be repaired through her writings, it can be re-membered. Adisa, the knee-scraper, is determined to take up the responsibility to speak on behalf of other individuals whose unprivileged social situation renders them invisible.⁴⁰ Adisa is aware of the risks she is taking as a

⁴⁰Questions on accepting one's privilege to speak for the subaltern subjects have been largely addressed by postcolonial critics such as Said in *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (1994) and Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1993).



spokesperson, in her poem “Writing from Inside,” she warns her audience of the exposure that writing entails:

first
decide it’s worth
the risk
even before you understand
what’s to be gained (29)

Stepping into the ‘unknown’ is a distinctive feature of the spokesperson. In fact, in that poem Adisa affirms that she has to “surrender / kneel before / this god” (“Writing” 30). This god stands for the word, which implies that there is a spiritual, intimate connection with language. Weir-Soley observes how in the Caribbean, as in West Africa, the sacred is expressed through art forms, like “literature and orature” (141).⁴¹ Surrendering to the word as if it were a deity implies that one is ready to embrace whatever language brings, even if it is painful, and to accept it as if it were some kind of divine providence, a voice that is to reveal some truth. For the intellectual who writes on behalf of others, scraping her knee is a risk as well as a must. The imperative to scrape her knee is rooted in her “desire to share a joy, a pain, a vision not yet realized, sometimes not even formulated” (“She” 146).

We have already discussed the inexpressibility of pain, unless it is through the body. Indeed, although pain cannot be reproduced beyond the groans, limping and tears, it leaves a trace. This trace is what triggers writers like Adisa to delve into the unsaid. For Adisa, then, writing is not a smooth path; finding the accurate words to voice one’s truth, or someone else’s truth, takes probing deep feelings that are too difficult—or too sensitive—to articulate. In “Writing from Inside” she warns: “words can contain / any sore” (29). The act of writing is for Adisa about accepting the pain one might encounter, and being confident that words, emerging from such soreness, are to be itching so they can heal:

[words]
will squeeze all the
abusive memories

⁴¹The term “orature” was coined by Ugandan linguist and literary critic Mr Pio Zirimu to defend the richness of oral tradition in East Africa (Ngũgĩ *Homecoming* 70, *Decolonizing* 15). Brathwaite discusses forms of Caribbean “auriture” in “History of the Voice” (267).



through the pores
and wash you clean (30)

Pain must not dissuade the writer from writing. In fact, enduring hardship seems to be a necessary step in the act of verbalizing resistance. Note how in part I of her poem “Speak and Speak and Speak Again” Adisa warns:

silence offers no reward
silence is never silent

the words not spoken
 give you headache
 a gnawing pain
 in your stomach
 knots in your shoulder blades

.....

 silence
 leaves scars on your body (43)

Adisa is warning about the violence of derealization mentioned earlier: Speaking is likely to be painful, but it will be even more painful to remain silent. The poetic voice is encouraging her readership to give voice to their memories, however painful they might be. The speaker assures that the act of writing will reduce the fear to speak and will enable writers to understand and heal from the past traumas, as well as to acknowledge their capacity to perform transgressive practices. In her comparable defense of poetry, Lorde—to whom this poem was dedicated—reminds her Black sisters that poetry is the weapon they need to use in order to get rid of past hatreds, address the future and make any possibility real: “we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old ideas disparage” (38).

There is a passage in Adisa’s short story “Trying Words” from the collection *Until Judgement Comes, Stories about Jamaican Men*, that is worth mentioning here with regard to the potentiality of words and the motif of the knee-scraper. In this story words are personified as the transmitters of memory. All along the story, they chase Dr. Bowen, who, having moved to the USA, makes doomed efforts to leave behind his Caribbean heritage, of which he is ashamed. Throughout, Dr. Bowen



eventually restores his Caribbeanness. At one occasion, his memory words take him back to his grandmother's voice. She once tried to explain to him why the slave owners "clipped his great, great, great maternal grandmother's tongue" instead of her feet, before she could be able to run away from the plantation. Dr Bowen had wondered why it was her tongue they damaged, if "it was her feet that allowed her to escape from enslavement" in the end; to which his grandmother answered: "Is not only feet know path. Tongue does climb tree too" (151). Dr Bowen's ancestor speaks about the power of the word as follows:

Me always did know words had power. When me was enslave, it was the only thing dat was free. It was words that led me to the path of freedom. It was words that kept me running, even when me did tired and blister cover me feet. And every time de overseer say how we no good, how we lazy, how we is savage, me pepper him wid me mouth; me use words fi give de others faith: me use words fi remind meself me free, always free. (157)

First of all, Adisa's representation of Jamaican nation language—a manifest strategy of Caribbean orature—is not arbitrary. Interposed with English, the inclusion of local language gives a Caribbean color, emphasizing the intention of the author to embrace the world view she is trying to restore (Ashcroft et al. *Empire* 41). The recognition of vernacular languages "reminds us that language is a human behaviour," whereas the dominant version of Standard English generally considers language as a prescriptive model (46). The development and implications of vernacular languages in anglophone Caribbean literature are further developed by Brathwaite in "History of the Voice," where he coins the term "nation language" to explain how English has been influenced by African language structures (265-267). The above excerpt also reflects on the colonial use of torture: After being cut off her tongue, this slave managed to escape the plantation system by means of her feet. This speechless character, herself a knee-scraper, would not lack strength to flee colonial domination, on the contrary, she would gain it using her body scars as a location of memory and a precedent for resistance.

The mutilated tongue symbolizes that the body remains the last agent able to lead into action what verbal language cannot. "Physical pain," asserts Scarry, "does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate revulsion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (*Body* 4). Adisa's depiction of the mutilation of



the tongue represents not only an amputation, bringing forth suffering and consciousness, but it also implies the destruction of her character's ability to speak, bringing her to an original state of linguistic absence.

This state of pain that is previous to language is what French feminist Kristeva in her "Revolution in Poetic Language" called the semiotic realm, or the maternal imaginary. For Kristeva, the symbolic, or linguistic state, emerges through the repression of the semiotic, or imaginary, non-linguistic state. It is through the poetic language that the repressed (semiotic) elements are replaced: "In 'artistic' practices the semiotic—the precondition of the symbolic—is revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic" (103). The semiotic, therefore, can be represented in the less conventional symbolic representations, such as experimental poetry and peripheral literature (like women's literature), with which the writers can transgress the limits of the symbolic realm. The embodiment of language is also included within the semiotic realm in Kristeva's accounts; thus the semiotic is not only exercised in creativity, but also in intense, extreme moments that require a dynamic communication, such as unspeakable pain, fear, rage or even during psychosis (103).⁴²

Both Kristeva's and Scarry's perceptions of feelings as expressed through non-verbal language can be discussed in relation to Adisa's statement as a writer. In terms of expressing the most intimate feelings of anger and pain, it is these theorists' contention that pain is able to destroy verbal communication; however, for Kristeva non-verbal communication (the semiotic) is required as a prerequisite for symbolic communication to take place. Meanwhile, for Scarry the repression of the symbolic is rather negative and hopeless. Adisa's objection with Scarry would be: "I do not want to see anyone have to grit teeth, shrug off the resistance, and walk on stiff legs. But alas, even in my writing I find that both my readers and I scrape knees" (147). For Adisa, expressing pain through the body is not only ineluctable, but also a precursory act to further non-conformist articulations. Far from an ostensible acknowledgement of pain, Adisa affirms that pain and anger cannot be avoided, let alone erased, when personal integrity and a people's self-determination are at stake. An appendix to Kristeva's assumption of poetry as the most capable means to unsettle the symbolic order, can be found in Adisa, who translates anger into speech

⁴²According to Kristeva, it is in the domains of holiness, madness and poetry that the semiotics is released and is able to disrupt the symbolic order of language. See Kristeva: "Stabat Mater," in *Tales of Love* (235).



through the prosaic as well as through the lyric. Indeed, peripheral writers belonging to oral traditions consider narrative as a source of knowledge, and not as an evil force to be resisted (Friedman ch. 9). In her attempt to challenge established literary genres, a common feature of Adisa's writing is to include prosaic elements within poetry and vice-versa.

Black Women's Anger Revisited

Adisa's writings explore the structures of power implied in the construction of the myth of the angry Black woman. She attempts to legitimize anger, not as an essential feature of Black women, but as a powerful tool that enables them to take up action and perform political change. Both the intensity of pain and the bodily marks bring what is inside to the surface (Ahmed 26-27). The trope of the knee-scraper enacts the bodily memory of women whose pain has been silenced but whose anger insists that their pain be recognised. For Black feminists, feeling anger is a necessary step for Black women to respond to sexist and racist epistemologies. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde convincingly asserts: "My response to racism is anger. . . . My fear of anger taught me nothing. . . . [A]nger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification. . . . Anger is loaded with information and energy" (124, 127). Adisa, like Lorde, is aware of the creative possibilities for survival inherent in anger. Like Walker's Black women artists in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, who leave their marks in whatever materials and mediums they can afford (239), Adisa realizes in her essay "She Scrape She Knee," that most of her female friends, whether they are artists, singers, writers, scholars, photographers or mothers, are also "knee-scrapers," women who keep doing what they want in spite of the fact that they will be wanted back to their assigned corners. The author is aware that

doing what we do, in the society in which we live, demands payment for our disregard of the law – Women, know thy place and thy place is often in the kitchen or horizontally disposed. Let me hasten to add that I find both positions appealing at times, but choice is the operative mode in this regard. So we scrape our knees. (146)

The use of the archaic form "thy"—very common in church speech and canonical literary texts— reveals the kind of authority Adisa is subversively mimicking



(Bhabha 85-92). Adisa claims that, not only does she “have great fun” but also, she learns about her “potentials as well as [her] limitations, and [she] experience[s] the Mother-God within [herself]” (“She” 146). The recognition of a goddess who is not male and lives not outside of herself, but within, produces a different possibility for the spiritual authority to exist. This possibility transcends both the location and the gender of an externally appointed Christian God. Adisa condemns the disposition of the patriarchal laws that unfavorably affect women. She demands that such social prescriptions of the passive woman whose power is limited to the domestic realm be reviewed; and that women be able to choose their place. Here Adisa is defying the “cult of true womanhood” of the Judeo-Christian tradition that provided salvation for the Black woman only if she behaved piously, morally and virtuously (Weir-Soley 22-23).

It is thanks to the work of writers who scrape their knees that anger moves forward and transforms pain into knowledge, creating spaces that have not been inhabited before. Adisa’s angry Black woman, rewritten as the knee-scraper, does not get stuck in the present. To illustrate this point, Adisa brings the example of “Jamaican Queen Mother of verse and humour” Louise Bennett, one of the greatest influences in her writing:

Louise Bennett stole the time, and this created space for me. . . . it was then that I decided to use our rhythms in my poetry, my stories, in the recording of our lives. It gives colour and flavour and validates our cultural ethos. Bennett allowed me to be brave and risk the surprised satisfaction of being myself. (“She” 149)

The space created by Bennett implies that Adisa lacked a place from where to express herself. This absence of a fixed residence, argues Ahmed, implies that “gender permeates all aspects of social life” and that in its “worldly” status, feminism becomes “a critique that loses an object, and opens itself up to possibilities that cannot be simply located or found in the present” thus bringing hope and change into the future (176). Adisa seems to suggest that, if willing to be an intellectual, the female Caribbean writer is doomed to experience adversity, but yet, as Said writes, this is the only path “to advance human freedom and knowledge” (17). With the figure of the knee-scraper, Adisa vindicates the role of the Black intellectual woman. According to Said the colonised subject “must develop a resistant intellectual consciousness before he [or she] can become an artist” (16). In order to achieve



intellectual agency, the artist must know “how to use language well” and “when to intervene in language” (20). Furthermore, Said sees the intellectual as a representative figure that is “publicly recognisable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability” (13). In this regard, Adisa labels Bennett as “a bold knee-scraper” who “was allowed to flaunt her sassiness, her tenacity, her affirmation of herself and us” (“She” 149).

For Adisa, non-conformist women can find a safe place to express themselves through writing; she remarks, however, that this place is not fully theirs, that it is stolen. Note that in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous describes her *écriture féminine* with the verb “voler”, which in French means both flying and stealing. Cixous explains that women have only been allowed to exist as ‘he’, where they act conventionally and perform the received structures, whereas a woman as ‘she’ is inevitably subversive, as she is “questioning the framework of institutions and blowing up the law, breaking up the truth with laughter” (888). For Adisa, subversiveness also consists on the disruption of a phallogocentric world view by means of a fearless and shameless female voice. Women who desire to take action for their own sake need to take up the word and make a different reading of it. Indeed, it is through her writing that Adisa raises consciousness and, like Bennett, creates a space of dialogue that enables women to exchange different experiences and feelings, so that they can examine the implications of such feelings and experiences in the construction of power relations.

The creation of spaces for consciousness-raising is of great significance for feminist resistance, because in order “to question legitimate institutions and authorities, most people need to know that they are not alone, crazy, or misguided” (Tavris 246-7 in Ahmed 172). Aware of this, Lorde suggests that Black women must take the courage to acknowledge their dreams, so that they can shape a better future by scrutinizing the reality of their present situation (153). Lorde suggests that Black women should stop hating each other and create a real sisterhood. In her essay “She Scrape She Knee”, Adisa takes up the notion of sisterhood by acknowledging the existence of Caribbean women who have inspired her to become the woman writer she is today: “I must admit that my examples were almost always women who never showed any diffidence in the face of adversity” (149).

In connection with Adisa’s endorsement of a non-conformist women’s writing, Lorde is aware that women’s emotions and feelings have not been accounted for in the construction of the world; however, she knows they exist in some places which she qualifies as “dark because they are ancient and hidden.”



Lorde insists that poetry has the gift to name those ideas which are first felt and later born in the poem, and she thinks that Black women need to learn how to cherish and respect these hidden sources of their power (36-37). Similarly, Cixous impels the necessity for women to put themselves into the text and locate their role in history. For Cixous, the dark place relates to women's oblivion and is therefore a marginal location. She thinks that, in the same way as Africa, the dark continent, is a colonized territory; women are also colonized by men ("Laugh" 875-7). Cixous is aware that women have been disciplined into thinking that this darkness—this horizontal position in Adisa's excerpt above—is a good place for them: "we have internalized this horror of the dark," she concludes (878).

In her poem "Madness Disguises Sanity" Adisa considers her writing as a space where she can express her anger safely, and as the most effective weapon for women's voices to reach other people. She thinks that a Black outraged woman protesting in a public space would probably be stigmatized with the stereotype of the angry Black woman, which assumes anger as an essential characteristic of Black femininity (Harris-Perry 88-93). In this poem, Adisa secretly wishes her anger could be acknowledged. The last stanzas of her poem read:

To be one
of those
desolate men
who lounge on
stink alleyways
forever talking
to the wind
their words
bullets
people shy from

But I am woman
conditioned
to nurse
my scream
like a mute child

So I write



The female poetic voice yearns to be one of those vehement, opinionated men that are often found in open spaces, careless about what others might think about their manners. In her view, society is not ready to acquiesce women's anger. Angry Black women are ethically disavowed, their madness is considered as an intrinsic pathology which they most likely will need to have looked at.⁴³ This double oppression of gender and race is in agreement with Ahmed's assertion that "the cultural politics of emotion is deeply bound up with gendered histories of imperialism and capitalism, in which violence against the bodies of subaltern women is both granted and taken for granted in the making of worlds" (170). This poem epitomizes the ill treatment that rebellious, indecorous women receive in a male's world, and the ensuing difficulties they face to play a relevant role in their communities. The poem implies that women who desire to "speak out against the established 'truths' are often constructed as emotional" and hence, they fail the standards of reason that allegedly "form the basis of 'good judgement'". Such denigration is the product of a prejudice constructed by and for the patriarchal structures of power. Considering women's anger and emotionality as a trait of inferiority with regard to reason and thought is thus normalised by the establishment, that considers feminism hostile and as "an extension of the already pathological 'emotionality' of femininity" (170). This feminist remark can also be found in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a novel inspired by Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Here, Rhys rescues the figure of Brönte's madwoman in the attic, Antoinette, and unveils the entrapments of this Creole woman's life and the causes of her voicelessness. By giving voice to the unvoiced women who lead a humble and silent existence, writers such as Rhys and Adisa bring up important questions regarding not only gender alienation, but also race differences in the history of the Caribbean, and the subsequent moral barriers established between what is normal and what is insane.

Like the Greek mythical figure, Medusa, the angry woman who in Cixous' cardinal text "The Laugh of the Medusa" releases her anger through a rejoicing, fearless laughter, Adisa's knee-scraper channels her anger through her own creativity, an activity that makes her laugh and rejoice. In Adisa's essay "Words

⁴³Elaine Showalter's work on madness and hysteria in women's literature and in the portrayal of female characters must be addressed here. In *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (2009), Showalter defines women's madness as a deviation or contradiction from the traditional female role.



Sculpting Self” she asserts: “I write to realize the dreams left behind. When I write I seldom get angry, I have more energy and hope beams from my eyes” (19). Likewise Walker makes reference to the intense spirituality and creativity of her forebearers. She makes public the past histories of women who in the slavery period were forced to bear first, then lose their children. Walker argues that these women were “abused and mutilated in body” and had to “force their minds to desert their bodies.” In abandoning their bodies these women reached a deep spirituality of which they were often unaware. Walker portrays them as a sort of “crazy Saints” or even “Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (232-3). Black women were deviant, resisting figures portrayed as madwomen in the patriarchal discourse (Boyce Davies 77).

In the above instances, madness and anger are interchangeable inasmuch as the state of being mad/crazy can be interpreted as the effect of surfacing rage. Madness is connected to the scar because the scar is the trace that renders visible the origin of madness. Such origin could be a repressed angry feeling. Indeed, both the expression of pain and the scars are the testimony of a story of violence that has been proscribed but struggles to survive. Through the trope of the knee-scraper—a resistant woman who harms herself out of rage because she is not allowed a safe space to demand her rights as a human being—Adisa observes that, whenever a woman tries to dissent, she is stigmatized as “womanish,” a woman whose independent ways are a threat to her community or family (150). Adisa claims to have written her collection of short stories *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* in memory of “those women who never have access to microphones, who carry their madness sewed into their skirt hems.” Adisa makes it clear that she is committed to “[g]iving voice to this madness that besieges us, . . . to our quiet fears and invisible tears, . . . to our struggles, our victories, our determination, I scrape my knee, she scrapes her knee, we all scrape our knees” (“She” 149).

Adisa’s figure of the knee-scraper offers interesting possibilities for affective political resistance in literary practice. First because it examines the ways in which other bodies/objects affect us in our understanding of our place in the world, and by extension of the world; and secondly because it brings into value the potentiality of resistance inherent in the imaginary spaces created by literature. Aligned with Scheherazade,⁴⁴ whose ability to tell stories saved her from being murdered, Adisa’s

⁴⁴In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade’s storytelling is represented as a response to the agony caused by the certainty of her death. The implications of survival and resistance of the imaginary spaces created by Scheherazade can be read in Gärtner’s “Las mil y una noches: Viaje a los territorios de la

words aim to free herself and others from the inherent tragedy of life, which in this context can be read as the tragedy of the doubly oppressed voice of the Black Caribbean woman.

Chapter 4.2

The Writer of the Pebble: Synecdochizing the Subaltern Community

“And when I write about the people there, in the strangest way it is as if I am not writing about them at all, but about myself. The artist then is the voice of the people, but she is also The People.”

—Alice Walker, “Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist” (138)



As we have seen, one of Adisa’s main preoccupations in her decolonizing agenda is the necessity to recover an Afro-Caribbean identity. As indicated in the theoretical framework, matters on improving the present through the restoration of the lost histories of the colonial past, as well as on how to represent a community whose identity has been undermined, are central matters in postcolonial writing. The present chapter explores these aspects in Adisa’s literary production. It analyzes in detail her interest in becoming a spokesperson of different Caribbean subaltern voices, ranging from women’s stories of insubordination to the largely evaded experience of outlaw male figures. I will particularly examine three poems by Adisa: “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble,” first published in *Tamarind and Mango Women* (1992), “Me” from her volume *I Name Me Name* (2008), and “Three Finger Jack,” appearing in *Leaf of Life* (2000), unequivocal examples of Adisa’s recreation of the history of the Caribbean as reinterpreted from below. Other pieces by the author related to these three poems are also commented throughout the chapter. Many of the stories she engages in depict the continuation of cultural colonialism in present-day Caribbean communities, and give way to a debate on the motives of historical continuity and the representability of the subaltern.

The theoretical focus I apply in this section turns around Spivak’s contentions on how to make it possible for the subaltern to access and impact the public sphere so that their community can be represented. The main theoretical framework I am applying in this chapter is drawn from Spivak’s latest volume *An*



Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization (2013) where the author suggests that accessing the public sphere is not a necessary indicator of progress, and she insists that it is also necessary to implement an aesthetic education that assists the subaltern to rearrange their desires; i.e. to have them genuinely want to have political agency, othersiwe said, to educate them so that they have an aspiration to claim their rights and obligations as citizens (438-439). In this work Spivak expands on her concept of strategic essentialism, a strategy for self-representation that emphasizes repeated singularities within a given peripheral group—thus disregarding differences—in order to impact on the larger society (432, *Other* 281). She believes that if the literary and artistic imagination have assisted nationalist agendas, they can also “impact on de-transcendentalized nationalism.” The point of such de-transcendentalization is that the literary imagination has to teach the singular imagination to “go beyond the self-identity of nationalism toward the complex textuality of the international” (*Aesthetic* 281), or, as she also puts it, to take “the ‘nation’ out of nation-state” (291). Spivak’s humanist project draws upon cognitive linguistics and the poetics of translation, thus exploring the implications of tropological movements—such as metonymy and synecdoche— extant in the narratives of cultural memory. Hence she explores the possibilities of synecdochizing oneself as a writer and/or teacher so that one can create material that represents the subaltern group. A movement/translation that can also be observed in Adisa’s writing, inasmuch as it enables social inclusion and attempts to create spaces of democratic behavior among the subaltern, from where grassroots intellectuals and activists may arise.

Adisa’s poem “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble” seems to respond to Spivak’s claims about the importance of synecdochizing oneself as a spokesperson (*Aesthetic* 437). This poem, that is dedicated to Kamau Brathwaite—the Barbados-born poet and scholar who Adisa first met in 1976 (see Introduction)—is written in response to this author’s recurrent metaphor of the pebble in his poetry trilogy *The Arrivants*, each of whose parts was published in 1967, 1968 and 1969 separately. In Brathwaite’s poem “Pebbles” appearing in this trilogy, the poetic voice portrays the burden of the Caribbean traumatic past, by suggesting that his “island is a pebble,” so dead that it cannot bring life, so infertile that it can only cause death: “It will slay/ giants/ but never bear children” (*Arrivants* 196). One of Adisa’s most representative tropes can be found in her interpretation of the pebble, an element that in Brathwaite’s poem symbolizes the Caribbean after colonization, and which Adisa



borrows and reinterprets in order to enhance its potentiality for cultural resistance. In “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble” Adisa acknowledges Brathwaite’s metaphor, but finds in the professedly fruitless pebble the vestiges of a repeated story of survival and resistance in the Caribbean colonial experience that bears within a productive, creative people:

i must
remember
the seas that i crossed
i must face
this voyage
without shame
i must
claim
this land
that is now
my home
i must
remember
the death of the amerindians

my birth
was smeared with blood
other than my mother's
the pebble
was pressed
between their toes
so the lie
could be enforced (*Tamarind* 78)

The anaphoric repetition of the imperative “i must” along the poem engages the reader to relate to the speaker and understand her requirements. This repetition brings a cadence that is only slightly altered in the second stanza, but it does not miss the drumbeat that holds steady up to the last verse. In spite of using standard English in this poem, the metric breaks with the English traditional patterns. Also,



the disruptive use of the poetic voice ‘i’ in lower case—recurrent in Adisa’s poetry—can be explained with Spivak’s claim of the “right to the metonym/synecdoche political performance of collectivity” that allows us to shift from the “universal” experience to the “particular” one (*Aesthetic* 437). In this case of troping, and borrowing White’s graspable words, the “universal propositions,” are drawn upon cultural memory, and they work as “extended synecdoches,” whereby the subaltern subject, or pebble for that matter, can be inferred as a part of the whole colonial process. On the other side, the “singular existential statements” articulated in first person singular, work as “extended metonymies,” the reference point is the subject, but it targets the larger Caribbean community (*Tropics* 3). Synecdoche understands “the particular as a microcosm of a macrocosmic reality” and thus moves “towards the integration of all apparently particular phenomena into a whole,” whereas metonymy is “reductive in its operations” and understands history as a complex relationship that connects “one phenomenon to another as a cause to an effect” (73). This tropological movement helps to shape nonconformist identities among the subaltern that may conform a breeding ground for cultural resistance and agency. For instance, the imperialist aesthetic education through universalizing syllogisms—such as ‘all blacks are slaves’; ‘all slaves are inferior’; therefore ‘all blacks are inferior’—represents a tropological structure that acts first by reduction (or generalization) then by representation (or synecdoche). In White’s words, the act of troping is a sudden move “from the universal to the particular which logic cannot preside over, since it is logic itself that is being served by this move” (3). Therefore, because logic is contingent on figures of speech, it is through the use of such tropological structures that discourse can destroy any dominant epistemology based on any imposed logic (2). In fact, with Adisa’s poem on the pebble, a hidden truth is being restored, resulting in the revelation that what is true for the colonizers, is a lie for the colonized. Drawing upon Spivak’s reflections on cognitive linguistics, the act of synecdochizing oneself cannot take place unless we understand the “metalepsis” existing in historical texts. That is to say, unless we are aware of “the substitution by metonymy of one figurative sense for another” that enables us to infer the existence of a second text from the dominant tropes existing in the legitimate text. A special case of metalepsis as used in historiography, is the pervasive substitution of cause for effect (*Other* 36). In this regard, as a postcolonial writer, Adisa is able to deconstruct the colonial text, she reads between the lines so as to uncover and remember (re-member) the unofficial history of slavery and exploitation. A history



that was not the effect of the official history, but its main cause, hence the lie. The main cause for imperial expansion to take place was the carnage of the indigenous people of the Caribbean and the transatlantic slave trade.

According to the poem, Caribbean people experience a double birth: one which is biological, and another one which is cultural. The blood that enables life does not only make allusion to the matrilineal ancestry, but also to the blood spilled in the name of colonialism, after the colonial slaughtering of indigenous people who lived in the same islands before Africans were shipped out to replace them. The figure of the pebble in Adisa's verses seems less defeating than in Brathwaite's poem "Pebbles". Indeed Adisa's imperative of a second birth is not arbitrary; it insists that we are not dealing with a barren people nor with an unproductive culture. These verses demand that the traditional historical facts be completed with the facts stemming from the communal, popular memory. The Caribbean voice in the poem condemns the colonial truths intricately inscribed in syllogisms of the kind mentioned in the above paragraph, because these are Western essentialist axioms that discriminate the indigenous Caribbean people and the imported African populations.

The pebble that colonizers pressed against their own toes indicates their efforts to keep indigenous and African cultures suffocated. In the poem they are called liars, thus the poet's revelation is that they aggrandized their own version of the facts and called it History (with a capitalized 'H'). This passage illustrates the fact that historiography has traditionally "tried to clear up the epistemological status of historical representations and to establish their authority as explanations, rather than to study various types of interpretations met with in historiography" (*White Tropics* 52). The rebel voice in this poem does not give up on her search of a different history (with a small letter 'h' because it has been lowered), in spite of the fact that the pebbles (her people's culture) have been kept under water, effaced under colonial dominance. This has made Black people in the Caribbean believe that they have no history nor value whatsoever, just like a pebble has no apparent marks indicating how it became a pebble, or what its development was like undersea.

The way Adisa interprets historical events is key in her task to reconnect Caribbean past and present. Hence her insistence on questioning established colonial truths can be easily explained. As White argues, historians are bound to interpret the materials that will conform the model of the historical process they narrate. One reason is that there are more historical facts than one can possibly include in a single



narrative, and hence historians have to exclude certain facts as unimportant to their purpose. Another reason for interpretation is that, when necessary facts to complete a narrative are lacking, it is the historians' task to fill up this gap with their own inferences and speculations (51). This preference of the interpretation over the explanation of historical facts is what makes of historiography a less objective field of study, thus problematizing the authority of established epistemologies (52). In *Woman Native Other*, Trinh goes further and questions the false divide that has traditionally been established between fiction (what she calls story-telling) and facts (what she calls story-writing), as if all fiction writing was a lie and all factual writing was the truth, thus privileging History over history. She makes allusion to the figure of the "African griot and griotte", who is at the same time "poet, storyteller, historian, musician and magician." Thus she attempts to dismantle the obsession with truth as opposed to lie, and to foreground the "magicality" that exists in the act of revealing stories, "for the [factual] Past perceived as such is a well-organized [fictional] past whose organization is already given" (120).

It can therefore be deduced that the trope of the pebble depicts yet another shift that builds a bridge between the official History and the unaccounted histories (from the general to the particular). Through this tropological movement, in Spivak's words, the writer intellectual "prepare[s] the field for sharing" the stories that have been under water (*Aesthetic* 441). These stories, writes Adisa, "stumble out of" the waves, which are naturally contained in the sea (*Tamarind* 79). The imagery of the waves and the sea serves to understand Caribbean creolization and its non-linear processes. Whereas the sea represents the traumatic displacement undergone in the Middle Passage, and by extension cultural colonialism, the symbol of the waves, with its movement to and fro, offers a possibility to reinscribe the story by looking at the past in order to imagine a better future. Brathwaite's concept of the "creole adaptation" explains the Caribbean people's ability to appropriate Western cultural elements and transform them into instruments for survival and resistance (*Roots* 263-264). This overlapping of two cultures can also be read through the postcolonial critique that explains how "borderline conditions" characterized by a "cultural hybridity" can be used to "translate and therefore re-inscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity" (Bhabha Location 6). Thus, this emergence to the sea surface enables a space where differences among the Caribbean subaltern are blurred "for the sake of agency" (*Aesthetic* 441). As drawn from Brathwaite in his poem "Pebbles", the pebble represents the history of imposed imperial



epistemologies—flooded with essentialist explanations held as truth—that submerged the history of the enslaved people before colonial rule. In order to avoid the ungraspability of truth—that “exceeds meaning and . . . measure,” and thus can easily turn into a lie—Trinh suggests to distribute “the story into smaller proportions that will correspond to the capacity of absorption of our mouths, the capacity of vision of our eyes, and the capacity of bearing of our bodies.” Thus, Adisa’s poetic voice claims a review of history from below that enables the re-creation of her people’s portion of history. A rewritten truth that is repeated—as in the movement to and fro of the weaves—in the form of stories that conform the group’s shared truth. Because, as Trinh would put it “[e]ach story is at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole” (*Woman* 123). It is writing from below, from the body, from what is particular and graspable, that the pebble can be perceived as part of a bigger picture. This is Adisa’s advocacy in her poem: the belief that transformative poetic action can produce collective memory:

now i
must catch the water
in my mouth
use its salt
to embalm me
until each wave
that I stumble out
of writes
the poem
that breathes
through my mouth (*Tamarind* 78-79)

Very much in correlation with Brathwaite’s concept of tidalectic as explained in his essay “Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms”—whereby the sea is represented as the carrier of history, as discussed in chapter 3.1—in this poem the seawater stands for the Middle Passage and the traumatic dislocations of millions of slaves. The poetic voice synecdochizes as a pebble; in this case the pebble could symbolize an enslaved ancestor drowned at sea. The poetic voice itself, embodied in this corpse/pebble, holds the water in her mouth (from where language is to emerge) and uses its salt to “embalm” her body, thus protecting its existence from decay and



oblivion. Every time a wave uncovers this pebble/body, it produces a story that had been submerged. The poem of the pebble emerges, pulled by these wavy verses, and is allowed to breathe at the surface, where its audience can learn of the stories of the slaves who died in these very same waters. In this case we can note the apparently passive role of the poet, who patiently waits for each wave to uncover the story, instead of forcing it to be the way she wants it to be. This is one of Adisa's concerns, to represent her community as it unfolds in front of her. In fact, as part of the Caribbean community, Adisa—like Spivak would put it—does not only attempt to study the subaltern—those who are in “a position without identity”—but also to learn from them through figuration (*Aesthetic* 439). In other words, she synecdochizes herself on behalf of the Caribbean subaltern community. The synecdoche is thus a tropological movement—from the particular to the general—that serves the intellectual writer to put herself in the shoes of the subaltern, and recognize their interests, thus becoming the part that represents the whole (439). It also brings forward a distinctive cultural group to which her Caribbean readership can ascribe safely and by which they can be represented. As Adisa claims,

a writer is always at the center of every work she produces, but she must get out of her own way, and the way of the characters and stories in order for the work to really live and have impact on readers. She must create a distance, and exercise judgment so that the necessary historical, social, political and personal data that belongs and feeds the works can be woven in flawlessly. (interview with Calderaro n. p.)

This statement reveals Adisa's ability to synecdochize while at the same time adopting a necessary aesthetic detachment from the stories she narrates. Because her “stories are character based” she has to truly listen to the characters' voice, to their story, because sometimes “the story [she] thought she wanted to tell does not fit with the story the character wants to tell” (annexed interview). Therefore, although the work is her own, she needs to be aware that the characters are not herself, and thus she makes efforts not to make them do what she would do.

The movement to and fro of the waves in Adisa's poem represents continuous change. The story, in fact, is never told the same way, for, as Trinh puts it “things that do not shift and grow cannot continue to circulate” (*Woman* 123). Furthermore, Malian writer and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ affirms that



speech is the materialization of forces, and “[i]f speech is strength, that is because it creates a *bond of coming-and-going* which generates *movement and rhythm* and therefore *life and action*” (“Living” qtd. in Trinh 127-128, emphasis in the original). Adisa’s perception of storytelling is productive inasmuch as it is embedded in the back and forth movement of the Caribbean people/history which she interprets/translates into words. Brathwaite, endeavored to surmount the colonial psyche, is similarly auspiciously aware of the speech (and thus action) found in the texture of pebbles. So in his poem “The New Ships” he writes: “white teeth / smooth voices like pebbles / moved by the sea of their language” (*Arrivants* 124). This perspective can be contrasted with what Brathwaite calls “the Sisyphean statement”—that he criticizes in V. S. Naipaul and in Derek Walcott’s early work—which is nothing less than a negative model for Caribbean repetition that always ends back where it started, like Sisyphus carrying the stone, a lost cause; whereas the tidalectic paradigm that Brathwaite proposes, moving back and forth, suggests just the opposite (*ConVERSations* 30). In Brathwaite’s words, the Caribbean tidalectic is, drawing upon his contemplation of an old woman sweeping sand in her yard, “like the movement of the ocean she’s walking on, coming from one continent / continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future” (34). In a similar correlation between poetry and history, Brathwaite’s understanding of tidalectics has been interpreted as a “geopoetic model of history” and as a “methodological tool that foregrounds how a dynamic model of geography can elucidate island history and cultural production, providing the framework for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots” (DeLoughrey *Routes* 2). In Adisa’s poem, the image of the pebble, embedded in the back and forth movement of the ocean’s waves, provides an in-between space from where to reflect on the relationship between colonization and diaspora that conforms the history of the Caribbean; a history that is better characterized by circular fluidity than by linear progression. The place from where the pebbles arise to be deciphered corresponds to what Bhabha would call a “Third Space,” which is a “cultural positionality” that forces us to revoke any idea of fixity and purity of meaning, thus giving way to the ambivalence and potentiality of the sign, which “can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (*Location* 36-37).

The verses in “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble” can be read as an analogy with postcolonial hybridity, by which hegemonic language is appropriated



by the colonized subaltern and used to challenge existing epistemologies. Thus the salt (i.e. the discourses of cultural resistance), is contained in the seawater (i.e. the imperialist discourses), and it is able to embalm the undisclosed stories/pebbles of slavery, so that they can be recovered long after the facts have taken place. Adisa's interpretation of the history of the Caribbean through remembrance requests a revision of the colonial paradigm. Furthermore, her symbolization of the pebble and the sea enables a review of history, and the recognition of non-European epistemologies extant before, during and after colonization in the Caribbean community.

In close connection with the notions of representability implied in "How to Write the Poem of the Pebble," in her piece "Words Sculpting Self," where prosaic and poetic style intertwine, Adisa stresses: "I write . . . to preserve my tradition that is being eradicated by urbanization and 'progress'. I write to instigate, to let people get involved in their respective communities, and to work to end racism and sexism and all those other social organizations that keep us apart" (*Eros* 19). Adisa's literary task as a spokesperson to her Caribbean community is aligned with Spivak's affirmation that, for the practices of the subaltern to be validated in the field of historiography, it is the duty of the humanities to provide the subaltern with an "aesthetic education" that gives them the "permission to be figurative," that is to say, that allows them "to put aside difference and synecdochize to form collectivity" with the "hope that from a subaltern intellectual may come ideas that will bear fruit" (*Aesthetic* 437, 439).

As Adisa affirms in an interview, she became a writer because "I have to be the voice of these people who are marginalized" (interview with Serna-Martínez 207). In another interview, commenting on her poem "Will the Real Island Please Stand Up" (*Tamarind* 10) Adisa remembers her realization that the decolonizing themes of independence had not really materialized in the psyche of the Caribbean people, most of whom were Black, working class and poor, and were still treated, and still behaving, as subordinate subjects.⁴⁵ Although feeling deeply upset and

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Adisa spent three years in Jamaica in the lapse between College graduation in 1976 and her postgraduate studies, that started in 1979. This poem was written shortly after she returned to America in 1979, and it reflects the combination of disenchantment and responsibility that Adisa felt towards her Jamaican community as an adult and educated young woman. (Adisa interviewed by Dawes 184).



displaced—as she was criticized for being Americanized, an accusation that she did not abide by—Adisa nonetheless professes: “I wanted those of us who are more privileged, either because of education or because we were raised middle-class, to help Jamaica stand up” (interview with Dawes 184). This affirmation is latent throughout her work, and is made explicit in the dedication of her first short-story collection *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (1986): “May the sisters without voices be given microphones” (n. p.); and in her poem “Speaking the truth”, where a confident poetic voice affirms “I write to give sound / to the small voices / shut out / silenced / denied access,” Adisa’s intention is to bring the silent into visibility and speech. The poetic voice uncovers child abuse and criticizes the church and the school for indoctrinating. In a warrior style, she insists at the end of the poem: “writing is my weapon/ i aim it well,” fully aware that the written word creatively engages a number of theoretical issues concerning education and parenting (*Leaf* 11).

Adisa’s poem “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble” serves as a precedent to her later essay, “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble: A Hybrid Caribbean Identity,” where she reflects on the colonial education she received as a child and the poor stimulation her people got to write their own literature. Jamaican laureate poet Louis Bennett, whom Adisa met in several occasions, is described by Adisa as an exceptional artist whose work has certainly encouraged her and many others to become, like Bennett, writers of the pebble and give voice to the collective memory (*Postcolonialism* 202). In her poem “Dedicated” she writes: “to the griots / those seekers of words / those who know / that to put words / to memory / is to let history live” (*Traveling* 4). Furthermore, in her hybrid text “A Writer in the Caribbean” the author affirms that she was educated to have “inextricable responsibility to [her] Caribbean community,” something that comes so natural to her as to utter “I don’t even think of presenting a community voice in my work, but it is always present because I am always connected to the circle;” to which she adds, “Yet I vehemently oppose prescribing to a writer, (any artist for that matter) or dictating that an artist’s work support ‘the cause’ of revolution, whatever that might look like” (*Eros* 11). Whereas Adisa enhances the virtues of her Afro-Caribbean heritage when stating “I will use my writing to revive cultural vehicles that I believe to be sustaining and nurturing,” she is nonetheless also critical when she claims to write “to point out our provincialism, our homophobia, our Christian biases, our self-hatred, our colorism, our classism, our many prejudices and divisive ideologies that keep us



from progressing as a people and a world community” (12). Adisa’s voice is thus committed to her community and yet incorruptible; she celebrates the Caribbean people and culture, but she is also critical about its self-destructive aspects. Among Adisa’s poems that insist on the importance for the Caribbean people to rescue the collective memory and celebrate their Africanness are “Innate” (*Leaf* 8), “Pan-Africanism” (*Name* 38), “The Drum is the Heart” (*Traveling* 44-45), and “Indigenous” (*Caribbean* 12-14).

In Adisa’s terms, the Caribbean people “are still trying to write the poem of the pebble,” which indicates that the colonial epistemologies are still latent, and people need to find their own voices and struggle for self-determination (*Postcolonialism* 198). This reflection on the presence of colonial footprints in postcolonial cultural production is closely related to Boyce Davies’ critique of postcoloniality as a condition not yet achieved. As this critic affirms in *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, “reshaping [cultural codes and structures] is not symmetrical with decolonization practices” (81). After her realization that colonialism has not yet been eradicated, Boyce Davies’ point is that

post-coloniality represents a misnaming of current realities, it is too premature a formulation, it is too totalizing, it erroneously contains decolonizing discourses, it re-males and recenters resistant discourses by women and attempts to submerge a host of uprising textualities, it has to be historicized and placed in the context of a variety of historical resistances to colonialism, it reveals the malaise of some Western intellectuals caught behind the posts and unable to move to new and/or more promising re-/articulations. (81)

I would like to accentuate four points from the above passage that will shed some light on why writing the pebble is still so important for Adisa in the postcolonial context. First, postcolonialism cannot ignore the ongoing existence of colonizing practices, and thus it does not ensure that the colonial system has been overcome. Second, that emergent peripheral discourses risk to be rapidly absorbed by allegedly postcolonial discourses, which would make it impossible to study the postcolonial group from below. See Spivak’s explanation (in the theoretical framework chapter 2.1) on the high chances for the subaltern difference to be synecdochized by the dominant culture if there is no infrastructure for the subaltern to synecdochize



themselves; i.e. if the subaltern are not educated to “claim collectively” and to “engage in action validated by that very collective” (*Aesthetic* 437). The third point is that location is pivotal if we are to avoid any kind of totalizing approach. The consideration of place is a call for difference awareness across postcolonial places. Lastly, in her criticism of postcolonialism, Boyce Davies contends that the “elision of gender” must be one of the aspects to be criticized in the imminent deconstruction of postcolonial discourses (*Black* 85). Thus she considers Black women's textualities as anti-imperialist rather than as discourses embedded in male-centered postcolonial premises (86). From her point of view, women of color “move their imagination away from dominating authorities” such as postcolonialism, and she does not think that feminist articulations need to be justified “subsuming under another master discourse” (87) because there is a “limited vision of theorists like Fanon on the question of women” (88). These four debates on postcolonial theoretical flaws are examined further along the present chapter, which will help to elucidate to which extent Adisa's preoccupations are in agreement.

In her writing, Adisa turns most of her attention to female figures, all of whom serve her intention to decolonize postcolonial theories, or as she would put it, to “write the poem of the pebble” (*Tamarind* 78, *Postcolonialism* 197-210). If the previously examined poem “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble,” lays the ground to uncover the Caribbean histories of survival and resistance, the poem that follows, “Me” (*Name* 93-94), reflects the same struggle, but focuses on the added value of a female perspective, which in the early postcolonial discourses had been overlooked. Written in an insubordinate tone, and mixed with Jamaican nation language, these verses enact the continuity of colonial opposition to British rule in colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial times. Hence Adisa brings about insubordinate Black female voices to give away the fact that the decolonization process has not yet reached its end. Presented in the form of a riddle in which the audience is supposed to guess the name of the poetic voice, the apparent voice of Maroon Nanny—one of the most important figures in the history of Jamaican slave rebellions—is crisscrossed with other voices of rampant, independent women that still exist in the Caribbean. What Adisa seems to convey is that, nearly two centuries away from the abolition of slavery in Jamaica, the same old story of belittlement is repeated; the same old refractory responses occur. In Boyce's words it is important for Black women writers to “racialize and historicize their definitions of motherhood” (*Black* 137). In her poetry Adisa rescues a female model in the



mythical personality of Maroon Nanny, also known as the Queen Mother Nanny of the Maroons, thus exploring the meaning of motherhood in the Caribbean. According to Bilby and Steady, this figure symbolizes “the vital role of women in ensuring regeneration and continuity to a fledgling society struggling for survival” (“Black” 459).

Following the griot tradition that is central for the Caribbean decolonizing practices of survival and resistance, in Jamaica, accounts of slaves who courageously liberated themselves and their people are a strong component of the local folklore. Notable among these are the stories surrounding the Maroon communities. The Maroons of Jamaica, like those that existed throughout the Americas during the slavery period, were runaway slaves who fought against colonial power and established their own societies high in the mountains (Alexander and Rucker *Encyclopedia* 476). In Jamaica, the story of the Maroons can be traced back to the time of the Spanish settlers—who were in the island from 1494 to 1655 and introduced the first African slaves in 1517. Spaniards granted their slaves freedom in return for military service to fight against the British conquerors, who finally took over the island in 1655 (Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia*: 581).⁴⁶ In the lapse between the Spanish and the British occupation of Jamaica, slaves from African, Arawak and Moorish descent took advantage of the weakening situation of the colonial state and escaped to the mountains, causing Maroon societies to grow in number. Away from the plantation system, their modes of resistance were formidable and intimidating. A series of slave insurrections became habitual within the Jamaican plantation system, “setting the stage for the Maroon Wars of 1720 to 1739” (Dunn 261). Though many of the Maroons died in the battle, they eventually signed treaties with the British authorities in 1663, 1670 and notably in 1739, “granting them lands and sovereign rule,” which eventually “ensured the position of the planters” (Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia* 581; Palmié and Scarano 158). The descendants of the Maroons were never overthrown or incorporated into the larger Jamaican society (Bilby “Maroon” n.p.). As such, they continue to live today either in their ancestor's settlements or in other portions of land subsequently allotted to

⁴⁶The first slaves brought to the West Indies by the Spaniards were not Africans, but Moorish citizens forced into exile and shipped out to the West Indies by the Catholic King of Spain in 1503. Interestingly enough, the Moors, who throughout the Middle Ages were the most experienced mariners and cartographers, were enrolled as a party of Columbus' conquering enterprise. They certainly met with their fellow enslaved countrymen in the New World, and it was believed at the time that they encouraged the slaves to run away. See Afroz: “As-Salaamu-Alaikum: The Muslim Maroons and the Bucra Massa in Jamaica” (3).



them in Jamaica, all of which can be found in the mountainous regions of Cockpit Country (Leeward Maroons) and the Blue Mountains (Windward Maroons).

One of the most prominent figures of the plantation uprisings led by the Maroons was Nanny, an African-born military leader also known as Queen Nanny, Maroon Nanny or Granny Nanny, the Maroon ancestress par excellence. The name Nanny comes from the Akan language *Nanani*, a name traditionally given to a respected “first mother” (Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia* 336). In Adisa’s tracking of an original voice where the African traces are made visible, the poet has declared that she thinks of Maroon Nanny as her “matrilineal ancestor” who gave her “courage to speak [her] voice.” As Adisa insists, “people have voice, but they don’t necessarily have the courage to speak it, to speak it in the way that they should, so that it impacts and influences others” (interview with Serna-Martínez 205).

The myth of Nanny of the Maroons tells the story of two sisters, Sekesu and Nanny, who were brought to Jamaica during slavery. The former was unable to fight against the masters and remained in the plantation. The second one “rebelled and fled to the mountains, from where she waged a fierce guerrilla war against bakra (the British)” (Bilby and Steady “Black” 457). The Maroons consider themselves to be descendants of this dauntless woman warrior who was born in the Gold Coast, in modern-day Ghana, and led her people to fight against the colonial forces in Jamaica. Indeed, many of the Jamaican slaves belonged to the group historically known as Cromanti people, a heterogeneous cultural group that “consisted of a variety of Gold Coast cultural groups” such as the Akan, the Ewe and the Ga peoples (Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia* 335). The Akan societies are formed by “matrilineal clans” where they believe to have a mythical common ancestress. In order to preserve the myth of Maroon Nanny, the Maroons, see themselves as Nanny’s yoyo—meaning Nanny’s progeny”. Grandy Nanny’s offspring grew up and fought for their independence, which they achieved long time before Sekesu’s progeny in the plantations were granted freedom (Bilby and Steady “Black” 457-458).

Maroon Nanny is represented in the Maroon tradition as a military leader as well as a ritual specialist who had supernatural powers (458-9). In fact, the most prominent slave rebellions in Jamaica were led by Obeah men and women such as Nanny, who “led the resistance against the British during the First Maroon War” (Baron 236). Although Obeah “acknowledges a spiritual belief system” it is not considered a religion, but a “sacred healing practice” that is customary in Caribbean communities, and used as a means to “empower, protect, heal, and liberate African



people” (Baron 236, Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia* 725). The origin of the word Obeah derives from the West African Ashanti word “*obay-ifo* or *obeye*” whose meaning is witch or wizard. Since the earliest slavery times the British had relegated Obeah as “the superstitious beliefs of backward people,” however, they grew aware that this practice gave “the black population a sense of agency and authority.” Because of its potential danger as a source of insurgency, Obeah and its related cultural practices, like drumming, were forbidden along the 17th and 19th centuries. Obeah still “carries with it the same . . . pejorative connotations as witchcraft” (Baron 236). Nonetheless, for those who are related to it, Obeah embodies “resistance to oppression and an insistence on African-based notions of personal and political autonomy” (237).

The supernatural manifestations in Obeah are not deities—as is the case of other Caribbean belief systems like Santeria or Voudou—but “spirits of the dead,” who are “called on for a desired end, both good and bad” (236). Also, “in Jamaica it is believed that duppies (i.e. spirits of the dead) have the ability to appear in very particular forms” (Boyce Davies *Encyclopeida* 807). Adisa’s poem “Me” reveals this aspect of Maroon Nanny as an Obeah woman performing her rituals to call on the

spirit of an ancestor. The verse “me the duppy spirit confusing the confused” indicates the ability of Granny Nanny to be taken by a spirit (93). Once materialized, this spirit is able to disturb those who are not able to differentiate the person being carried by the spirit with the spirit itself. In the verses appearing further below she is describing the ritual through which these *duppies* are being drawn to her body:

me doing the yanga
wheeling and turning
until spirits ride me (94)

The anaphoric use of the personal pronoun ‘me’—in Jamaican nation language ‘I’ and ‘me’, also written ‘mi’, can be used interchangeably as personal pronouns (Adams *Understanding* 20)—holds

the rhythmic pulse of the poem, drawing attention to the emotions that the poet is trying to get across.

The use of ‘me’ as personal pronoun and not as object pronoun is emphasized by the poetic voice herself:

The voice of the poem—far from belonging to one single body—carries within multiple voices from different moments and women in history, all of them dissident and non-conformist. The poem is presented in the same volume both as a graphic poem with the shape of the letter ‘M’ (*Name* 92), and as a poem structured in stanzas of different lengths (93-94). Although I am quoting from the latter, it is

⁴⁹ A higgler is a West Indian word designating "A person who travels around selling small items; a pedlar." See Oxford dictionaries online. A banca, or bankra, is "a square-cornered basket made of palm 'thatch', with a lid and a handle." See the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (p. 27).



will not be held down,” which translates into Jamaicans’ reputation for being rebellious and standing up for themselves, championing statements such as “I’m gonna do my own thing,” “We’re gonna do what we want,” or “you’re not gonna stop us” (annexed interview with Serna-Martinez xx). Adisa acknowledges the benefits of this attitude, but she regrets, however, that it may be turned against Jamaicans because such behavior is pushing individualism to the extreme, and “there is very little adherence to law.” She observes that by doing their own thing, people have stopped respecting each other and that this is preventing Jamaican society from “creating change in a more transformative and uplifted way.” In any case, the meaning of *leggo* in this poem seems to be connected with the Obeah ritual, the woman dancing and letting go of herself, in order to prepare the ground to be inhabited by a duppy.⁵¹

The poetic voice in “Me” is telling the experience of being taken by a duppy; she is one that confuses and destabilizes, because it rejects expected conventions of belonging and attaching to a monolithic, essentialist identity and embraces the multiplicity of identities. Opal Adisa is not the only one to revisit the myth of Maroon Nanny. Other fellow poets such as Louis Bennett also draw on this image, as in her poem “Hero Nanny.” Here it is made explicit the multiplicity of names and places to which Maroon Nanny is attached: “My granmodder tell me say dat fi her granmodder tell har say dat Nanny Town and Compong Nanny an moore Tung Nanny was de selfsame Nanny. Mmmm” (n. p.).⁵²

Similarly, the poem “Me” powerfully affirms the self not as a creature belonging uniquely to the present time and space, but as a body that carries within the histories of its ancestors, a body whose memory honors and recalls its roots with the self-assurance that this connection to the past reinforces and instigates resistance back into the present, while at the same time propels the new generations into future action that will help maintain the tradition. In Adisa’s poem, the poetic voice remembers the stories of her ancestors to bring her strength into the present moment, so that she can face the future and endure whatever pains are necessary in order to

⁵¹In literature there are other writers who mention *leggo* in the context of the ritual jargon. See for example British playwright John Constable’s *Sha-manic Plays*: “Aright, Miss Rose. I go drum for yuh, and yuh can dance and shout and jump up and *leggo* and fall down and roll on the ground and foam at de mouth and anything else yuh got to do to let it all out” (64).

⁵²“My grandmother did tell me that her grandmother had indeed told her that Nanny Town and Compong Nanny and moore Tung Nanny was the very same Nanny. Mmmm.”



raise and educate her offspring, who are nothing less than the future holders of culture and knowledge:

Me the squatter
the so-help-me-god
fi me picknie dem gwane have more

me with the hunger wanting to nyam⁵³ (93)

This passage, explicitly written in Jamaican nation language, is derived from the previous verses on a spiritually rich woman who is taken by spirits and has a strong sense of herself. The poem now articulates the voice of a Jamaican poor woman who struggles to give a good life to her children. Although the speaker now seems more worldly and defenseless than the previous image of a strong, spiritual woman; she shares with the figure of Granny Nanny, the Obeah woman and warrior, the spiritual strength she must have to overcome her extreme situation. This poem can be better understood if contrasted with the work of Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (2005), where the Afro American author explores the term *womanism*, which she qualifies as universal when she claims, for instance, that Black women in history are capable and "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (xi). In the chapter named after the title of the book, Walker makes reference to the intense spirituality and creativity of her forebearers in Black American history: she makes public the past histories of Black American women who in the slavery period were forced to bear first, then lose their children. Walker argues that these women were "abused and mutilated in body" and had to "force their minds to desert their bodies." In abandoning their bodies, Walker resumes, these mothers and grandmothers reached a deep spirituality of which they were often unaware. More than "sexual objects", Walker portrays them as a sort of "crazy Saints" (*Search* 232). They were, indeed, deviant, resisting figures portrayed as mad women in the patriarchal discourse (Boyce Davies *Black* 77). As a matter of fact, Walker claims, those Black women trapped in slavocracy would rarely find pleasure in the acts of sex or mothering; thus their "springs of creativity" had to find a release somewhere in

⁵³"Me the squatter / the so-help-me-god / for my children to be able to have more / Me with the hunger wanting to eat"



their “lives of spiritual waste” (*Search* 233).⁵⁴ For Walker, the creativity of Black women, in a time when writing and reading were punishable for Black people, resides in the oral tradition of singing songs, sewing, quilting and gardening (*Search* 234, 237-238). Walker consciously subscribes to her mother her “heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength” and believes this is a major realization in the formation of her identity as a woman of African descent (243). Similarly to the slave woman mentioned earlier in the analysis, who condemns rape and is determined to not to have a baby forced upon her (*Name* 93); the woman in this excerpt is portrayed as a single mother who has little resources to provide for her children. Single motherhood in the Caribbean is very common, sometimes the fact of young girls being raped and having to mother the child leads to school abandonment and hustling.⁵⁵ Many of these abused women are mistreated and undervalued for their unwanted pregnancy and motherhood. Because of the suffering experienced, as in Walker’s assumptions, these women portrayed by Adisa do feel the necessity to abandon their bodies and reach a more spiritual existence, like that of the Obeah woman also described in the poem “Me.”

In connection to the theme of motherhood and motherland that is addressed in her poem “Me,” it is necessary to mention that Adisa has already commented in her essay “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble” that she uses the words “birth” and “breath” in her poem of the same title to suggest “a child taking its first breath” and thus gaining “independence from its mother;” which symbolically speaking translates into “a colonized country’s liberation from the mother-country / colonizer” (*Postcolonialism* 204, 205). In fact, Adisa turns her attention to the imposed contradiction she finds in regarding the colonizing country, Britain, as a mother; given that the colonizers stole people from their original mother-country, Africa, a fact that should depict a rather antagonistic relationship. Note how the poetic voice mentioned earlier refuses to mother the offspring of the slave master, which is also a rejection of the violence and cultural imposition received from the colonial system. In Adisa’s view, this relationship triggers a “schizophrenic consciousness” in the mind of the colonial subject. This translates into a latent sense of inferiority among the colonized who, no matter how skillful

⁵⁴The term ‘slavocracy’ is generally used in historical texts to designate the domination of slaveholders in the plantation systems of slavery, as occurred in the South of USA before the American Civil War and in the West Indies where the first colonized territories were managed as plantocracies. See the website at: <<http://www.memidex.com/slavocracy>> (Last accessed in August 2012).

⁵⁵See documentary *Tell the Children the Truth*, by Amanda Sans.



and talented, would always be judged by the standards of the colonizer, and thus would never achieve an equal status in a heterogeneous colonial/postcolonial society (205). As a rejection of this motherhood

In relation with the historical and geographical context of Maroon Nanny, early displacements undergone by slave Jamaicans are mentioned in the following verses from “Blue Mountain.” The title itself makes allusion to the mountains placed in Western Jamaica where the Windward Maroons took settlement. The poem describes the geological formation of the island, “volcanic burst / erupting from the ocean / to make me a home” to portray the diasporic nature of the Caribbean ethos. This approach to geopoetics, as found in the tidalectic approach mentioned earlier in this chapter, reinforces the intentions of a writer of the pebble, someone who looks for historical traces in the surrounding landscape, that is personified as a female body:

africa marks my feet
 entangled in sea-weed and salty tears

 but jamaica snaked me
 in the kinks of its hair (2)

The description of the Caribbean landscape is full of other sensual and intimate images, such as the “fragrant wind” or the “salty tears,” that may indicate a female voice (2). Africa stands for her feet, where her roots are, whereas the entangling sea-weed makes allusion to the kidnapping of West-Africans and their subsequent transportation by slave ships through the rough Middle Passage of the Atlantic Ocean. The salty tears mirror the suffering on account of the uprooting of her people. The kinky hair in the next lines is attributed to Jamaica, a geographical place personified as a Black woman, welcoming the speaker into the secret darkness of her African-textured hair.

It is a widespread strategy of subversion in most ex-colonized literatures to associate the body of the woman with the landscape for the sake of nationhood. This is observed, for instance, in the work of Irish poet Eavan Boland, who revisits for subversive reasons “the long-held association between earth/country and women” (Villar-Argáiz *Eavan* 246). This woman poet tries to “escape from the traditional role of mothering” first by debunking the inherited Catholic myth of the Virgin



Mary; then by rescuing the “mystical past” in the figures of “elderly sisters who had a magical power” such as the witches, who enter the poetic scene to inquire about the received history and finally dismantle and transform the symbol of Mother Ireland (118-119). In the last two lines of Adisa’s poem “Blue Mountain,” this symbolic association of womanhood and territory also occurs. The poem starts by rejecting the woman’s body “as the dark continent to be penetrated and pacified . . . to be invaded and colonized as expressed by Cixous . . . her productive and reproductive capacities exploited” (Boyce Davies *Black* 79) and it offers an alternative to nationalist identity embodied in the Black woman: “It is not from my mother’s womb / where you can trace the beginning of my beginning.” Instead, she places her home in her heart, a body location, and also a symbol of affection, on which the multiple territories of her history are inscribed:

home is in my heart
i claim many lands (Adisa *Leaf* 2)

This final statement positions Adisa’s poetic voice as a migratory subject. According to Boyce Davies (*Black* 36) for a Black woman to be a migratory subject implies that she “cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place” and as such, she constructs the Black female subjectivity by following “the paths of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses” (37). By claiming multiple origins, Adisa is foregrounding the hybrid nature of the cultural heritage of the African diaspora. Her language, therefore, needs to convey the conceptual maps found in these diverse places. In doing so, the poet is able to reconstruct a legitimate representation of self.

On the other hand, the role of mothers not as symbols of the nation, but as the real guardians of the African heritage in the Caribbean, is also claimed in Adisa’s poem “Maroon Nannie Knows the Name” included in the collection of poetry *Caribbean Passion* (2004), in which the poet portrays the image of a woman who takes care of her community:

she does wash
all de time
she children's clothes
she country's poverty



she ancestors' epitaph

she does sweep
 all de time
 cities heap with spoils
 men's trampled manhood
 dreams swallowed by avarice (73)

This poem clearly disrupts the traditional layout of the poem, the arrangement of the verses move forward and then backward thus indicating fluidity, an aesthetic appreciation of the tidalectic theory of history. The use of nation language, as mentioned earlier in this study, is a common linguistic and stylistic device in Adisa's writings, and it emphasizes an active performance in the quest of a Caribbean identity. In her study of 2002 *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*, DeCaires Narain also considers nation language as a device women must use to challenge the "patriarchal" and "cerebral" language that the English language implies (92). As a distinctive grammatical feature of Jamaican nation language, the subject pronoun "she" functions as subject and object pronouns indiscriminately. The grapholect "de," sometimes spelled 'di', refers to the article "the," conveying a logical correspondence between spoken and written forms that does not exist in English (Adams *Understanding* 20, 8, 15). In the first stanza, Maroon Nanny washes both the clothes and the poverty of her people, mixing both literal and figurative languages. The allusion to washing her ancestor's epitaphs should also be interpreted figuratively, because this woman, as mentioned later in the poem, has the role of keeping the memories of her people. In the second paragraph, the use of the verb "sweep" is used first literally, when she sweeps the cities' spoils, and then metaphorically, when applied to "men's trampled manhood" and "dreams swallowed by avarice." This means that the woman in the poem is able not only to clean the physical dirtiness in her community, but also to shape and remodel its peoples' identities, noticing the misled manhood she intends to detach from men.

As explained earlier on, Maroonage was a key form of resistance to slavery in the New World which involved both men and women. They searched to liberate themselves from the toughness of the plantation system, and many managed to set up successful alternative communities away from the plantations (Steady and



Bilby “Black” 451). As such, they enjoyed both a powerful military system, which protected their people from colonialist threats, and a core for social, cultural and economic stability, which enabled the physical and social continuity of a clan struggling for survival. Women in the Maroon communities developed a matrifocal system of cooperative power (453). As observed by Adisa in an interview, cooperativeness is indeed a feature that exists today among market women: “they support each other [...] they really have a community” (interview with Serna-Martínez 218)). This act of female cooperation is revived in Adisa’s poetry. Stressing the connections between two alternative archetypes of Caribbean womanhood, the mythical and the real woman, Adisa characterizes in the poem “Market Woman” (*Tamarind* 81-84) the shared features of her market woman with Maroon Nanny, the warrior. Here the poetic voice, that of the market woman, says:

am I not
Granny Nanny
fighting
wid de Maroon
guerrillas (82)

In this poem, the market woman complains about the people who look at her, such as the tourists with their cameras or the upper class ladies with their “barb-wire face[s]” (*Tamarind* 84), but who do not know who she really is: “but wha dem know bout de market woman” (83), she keeps repeating. Then she sings a litany of the multiple aspects of her life, thus claiming her right to represent herself. The observation and recreation of the market woman enables Adisa to write the pebble, or what is the same, to rewrite the history of the Caribbean from below. In the following verses, the market woman insists on defining herself, and conveys more information about her person:

See dese breasts
[...]
they have nursed
seven pickney
and delighted more men



and is three man
 did father me
 seven pickney
 and me did love all
 of dem (81-82)

The market woman as a social figure challenges the social conventions of family and womanhood. She practices “serial monogamy”, as Adisa puts it (Serna-Martínez “Rewriting” 218), and proves to be unbound to men in her relationships. The seven children (‘pickney’ in Jamaican patois) she has had out of three different relationships indicate not only her fecundity, but also the position of this autonomous woman as the provider of the family, a role generally attributed to men. Lorde affirms that “Black women have been taught to view each other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male,” which leads to a “denial of self” (*Sister* 50). This is not the case of the market woman who, undoubtedly because of her economic independence, does not need to rely on men to secure her existence and her family’s. The embodiment of the market woman as a mother challenges the patriarchal conceptions of motherhood as institution that Rich also seeks to debunk, successfully defeating the myth of “the economic dominance of fathers over the family” (Rich *Lies* 196). There is in this representation of the market woman a parallelism with the central authority exercised by Maroon Nanny: in Maroon communities, even though it was mainly men who went to fight, “it was Nanny who had the greatest, most enduring authority, while headmen came and went” (Kopytoff 301 qtd. in Steady and Bilby “Black” 460). That is why the poetic voice of the market woman compares herself with the mythical figure of Maroon Nanny, ironically affirming: “am I not / Granny Nanny” (*Tamarind* 82).

Through the figure of Maroon Nanny, we have seen how Adisa, in her determination to be a writer of the pebble, goes back to the legend of the fugitive slave as represented in the Afro-Jamaican mythology. The above analysis evidences Adisa’s ability to synecdochize herself as a member of the Caribbean community. We have also seen her ability to include a diversity of Caribbean female voices, and to cleverly weave their stories into one single historical fabric. Adisa uses this association of similarities, strategically ignoring differences, to help women synecdochize themselves; that is to say, to have them feel as part of a greater tradition of resistance and survival. Other poems by Adisa that recover female



stories of rebellious resistance and care for their community are “Reminder” (*Leaf* 12-14), “What’s in a Name, Ask Maroon Nannie” (*Caribbean* 72), “Com See Dem Down By De River Wid Water In Dem Hem” (*Tamarind* 97-99), “Foremother I: Mary Prince /1788?-1833)” (*Name* 27-28) and her short story “Trying Words” (*Judgement* 142-160).

Another way in which Adisa shows her efforts to synecdochize with the less represented layers of society can be found in the following analysis where she gives voice to the subaltern within the subaltern, bringing to the fore delicate situations that connect marginalization with colonial heritage in the Caribbean community. The controversial story exposed in her poem “Three Finger Jack” is key to understand her commitment to portray the subaltern voices, while at the same time avoiding personal or external bias. In recovering legendary folk stories like that of an unbribeable rebel, she vindicates and recreates her African cultural heritage, but also, she aims at questioning and condemning colonialism. The story around the figure of Jack Mansong, also known as three-fingered Jack, a Jamaican legendary runaway hero of the late 18th century, was reappropriated and made popular by the British romantics through several publications and dramatic performances. Although Jack’s story has received great notoriety ever since, it is also true that “critical accounts of his life have been largely Eurocentric and pay scant attention to the Jamaican perspective” (Botkin 494). Contrary to what happens with the figure of Maroon Nanny, who is by all considered a national heroine in Jamaica, the acknowledgement of Jack’s deeds is rather controversial, and he has not always been considered a hero in his own land (503-504). It is precisely the ambiguity of characters like Jack which has enabled postcolonial writers and historians to reinterpret Jamaica’s colonial past. Furthermore, in the aftermath of plantation societies, the existence of folk stories depicting “morally ambiguous outlaws or anti-heroes” have a potentiality to assist people in overcoming socio-economical struggles, because it allows them “to imagine alternative possibilities” for survival (504).

The figure of three-fingered Jack is recalled by Adisa to raise the question of cultural colonialism and subsequent neocolonialism. The poetic voice wonders whether he is not the Jamaican rebel himself:

i must be three finger jack

 protecting women and children



waylaying soldiers
i'm rebel who will not be slave

who is slave and who is free (*Leaf 4*)

The poem is written in a critical tone that, as explored further below, contrasts the situation of the runaway slaves during colonization with the situation of free Black people in neocolonial Jamaica. The conversational style of the poem, articulated in English combined with Jamaican nation language, gives an account of the speaker's West Indian background. The absence of upper case letters—which is the norm in Adisa's poetry—may be interpreted here as a technique that suggests equal rights for self representation, and a clear intention of unity, and invitation for the upper-case letters to synecdochize with the rest of the letters so as to form a collective of similar letters. This intention to synecdochize is also reflected in the speaker's motives examined hereby. The affirmation “who is slave and who is free” is repeated between stanzas along the poem, providing a call-and-response pattern that is very common in African rooted musical and linguistic systems (Stone 10), and that enable to “establish a potential relationship between storyteller and audience in oral storytelling” (Callahan 257).

The legend goes that Mansong was a runaway slave between 1780 and 1781 and led a group of fugitive slaves in the Blue Mountains, having “murdered” on the way “hundreds of travelers” and thus considered a “dangerous outlaw” at the time. Three-fingered Jack was not a Maroon, but his story is closely connected to that of the Maroons, because he was allegedly captured and killed by Quashee, who was “a christened Maroon” that once cut off two of Jack's fingers in a “skirmish.” Some time afterwards, it is told that this Quashee gave Jack death for the reward of freedom and 300 pounds (Botkin 494). Adisa calls back into memory this story, disclosing it as an act of betrayal and division among runaway slaves:

quashie knew freedom as a maroon
yet he caught me for 300 pounds reward
cut off me head
nailed it to a pole
and marched up and down the road



who is slave and who is free

(*Leaf 4*)

After the first Maroon War that occurred in the 18th century (1728-1739), a treaty was signed between the Maroons and the colonial state that conceded “independence and territorial autonomy” to the Maroons in exchange of their alliance with the English, which resulted in the Maroons themselves “returning runaways and suppressing rebellions” (Botkin 505). This entangled transaction—far from being an emancipatory one—seems to be, in Jack’s perspective, one of the colonial strategies to dismember the African community and have Black people under colonial dominance and dependency. In a 1980s staged version of the legend in Jamaica, entitled *Mansong*, Ted Dwyer, a Jamaican educator and playwright, questions the problematic posed by this collaboration, as portrayed in the following lines: “Jack fight fe freedom too, Quashee. But you wan go kill fe freedom? Jack one a we own people So dat we can be free? No Quashee, dat no mak no sense” (Dwyer 39 qtd. in Botkin 499).⁵⁶ In *Mansong* the voices of the slaves and Maroons are reported in Jamaican patois, which “contributes to a sense of community and solidarity among the cast and audience, for whom patois is standard” (Botkin 499).

_____ In Adisa’s poem, Jack’s audience is given voice and thoughtfully questions the meaning behind the labels “free” and “slave” as a response to Jack’s stanzas with the refrain “who is slave and who is free” (*Leaf 4*). In fact, Adisa is probing for any inconsistencies in the naming conventions, to the point that meanings seem to swap from one term to the other; thus, the allegedly free person turns to be a slave, whereas the so-called slave gathers the conditions to be recognized as free. In the context of Jack’s story, slaves would attain freedom at the expense of other slaves’ freedom. Drawing upon this observation, Adisa outlines the parallelism between both past and present situations and ascertains that the colonial status quo in Jamaican society is being maintained:

in these post independent/neocolonial days

the slaves’ freedom is wagered against

designer clothes and fast food franchise

(4)

⁵⁶This passage, translated in standard English, would read: “Jack fights for freedom too, Quashee. But do you want to kill for freedom? Jack, one of our own people so that we can be free? No Quashee, that makes no sense” (my translation).



This is a rough criticism to remind her audience that the dominant culture has passed from British hands to American hands, a process that places Jamaicans against the backdrop of a new colonial state. From these lines, one can get the idea that designer clothes and fast food chains are not but a token of freedom in Jamaica, nothing less than enticing traps for the capitalist/neocolonial system to keep its grip on power. Likewise, in their introduction to *Global Neo-Imperialism and National Resistance: Approaches from Postcolonial Studies*, Belén Martín Lucas and Ana Bringas López claim that globalization is an euphemism for what in reality is a new form of imperialism. Therefore, they observe that “[r]esistance to economic, political and cultural neoimperialism has given a predominant role to nationalistic discourses at a time when many thought nationalism to be dead” (8). It could then be affirmed that, today, consumerism represents the new face of the slavery system: a slavery to possessions, and that it is from nationalist forms of resistance that these forms of neocolonialism should be debunked. Jack’s voice provides a response by borrowing the words awarded to the audience of the poem, and concludes his own stanza inquiring: “hard to say who used to be slave and who is free,” thus inviting the readers to reflect on the story of Mansong and the alternative meanings it entails.

In the last stanza of “Three Finger Jack,” Adisa opens up a comparably dramatic situation that awaits those who reject the rewards—or rather traps—of the colonial / capitalist system, and therefore decide to live on their own resources. Thus, the voice of the legendary figure insists on the currency of his own story, and brings forward the existence of windshield cleaners in the roads of Kingston, who have the same rebel features as Three Finger Jack with a different guise:

but me not dead
me come again
see me in the face
of the youth
begging a money
to clean your windshield
at trafalga traffic light

is me same one_____

(4)



Windshield cleaners are very common in the main roads of Kingston; however, their means to make a living is disapproved by many citizens—specifically drivers. This is maybe because, indeed, they have a reputation for assaulting the motorists to whom they “harass and spit,” because they “refuse their demands to have their screens wiped” (Bell n. p.). Today, self-employment in Jamaica is massively carried out by windshield cleaners and street vendors who approach cars offering bananas, doughnuts, journals and other goods. These vendors could be considered, at first sight, a form of resistance to colonial dominance, because they sell directly with no intermediaries or franchises. But deep inside, it is not. Firstly because their financial activity is not being accounted for, i.e. their services are ignored by the legal authorities, and therefore, they are neither acknowledged as union or recipients of any kind of rights, nor are they requested to dutifully pay their taxes. According to Spivak, the decision of a citizen to live and work outside the institutions recognized by the state “is a kind of subalternity because the part is no longer part of the whole” (*Aesthetic* 438). As a matter of fact, subaltern citizens do not see themselves as part of a whole collectivity within whose ranks he/she and his/her actions may be recognized. They do not have access to the public sphere where they could represent themselves. They are outside the law for better or worse. Also, there is the uncomfortable truth that the lowest classes in Jamaica, no matter how hard they work, know that they will have it difficult to own a car and other middle-class goods. This fact might make some of them feel frustrated and act aggressively, a reaction that must not be overlooked. Deep inside, it is social class differences which are to be found at the core of the “windshield cleaners” issue.

Furthermore, what is certain is that there is a long story of colonial legacy behind this behavior. In this poem Adisa brings to the fore questions on the legitimacy of windshield cleaners to be self-employed and work hard for their own survival without having to lose their dignity. In doing so, this socially-concerned author adopts the voice of three-fingered Jack and turns this figure into the “synecdochized” leader of a collectivity whose subaltern members—including himself—lack infrastructure and knowledge to speak for themselves, but whose voice is rescued by the poet so that it can find a response among the poet’s readership (Spivak *Aesthetic* 437). With regard to the actual readership of Caribbean authors, a question that could be explored further is whether critical works such as Adisa’s are reaching the curricula of the educational authorities in Jamaica or elsewhere in the English-speaking Caribbean; and whether teachers are being trained



to implement an aesthetic education that enables the subaltern population to become critical citizens willing to represent their subaltern community in the larger society. To explain this in Spivak's words, "[s]ubalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action" (*Aesthetic* 431). To become agents of their own lives, to have their demands impact in the public sphere, these subaltern citizens need to be able to move into hegemonic structures; to do so, they must learn how to synecdochize themselves in favor of the group. In other words, the subaltern subjects must know that if they unite in their similarities (racialized, gendered, social, or else) with the members of their community, they are creating strong ties of belonging so that, when one of the subaltern gains social status, he or she will be able to speak for his/her community and represent the group as in democracy. According to Spivak, only when the subaltern turn out to impact (to get a response, or have a conversation with) the dominant system, can we speak of agency and resistance.

Although the task of giving the possibility for agency is not only the duty of the humanities, it is important to bring literary works such as Adisa's to the classrooms and into the cultural spaces, so that they can help educate the subaltern as critical thinkers with instruments, infrastructure and a will to be agents of social change. In any case, Adisa knows too well that the readers of her poetry are not likely to be these subaltern subjects, as she states in an interview:

Books are a luxury in the Caribbean; it is not like in Europe or even America. My books sell for some outrageous hundreds of dollars, and an average person just can't afford it. They are barely affording school books for their kids; they can't afford books as it's still perceived as a middle-class thing, and the middle-class people want to read books from America. (interview with Serna-Martínez 215)

___ What seems to be her humble intention is to bring these issues at the center of the middle-class citizen's consciousness. In poems such as "Three Finger Jack", she gives voice to an anti-colonial folk hero that reminds her readership that the disenfranchised people in Jamaica do have their own commonalities—most of them are Black, working class and poor—and that it is in the hand of the middle-class citizen to enable them to have access to an "aesthetic education" that permits them to figuratively think of themselves and act as part of a larger group with a common



cause. Adisa is aware that the subaltern cannot speak, but citizens who hold some kind of political hegemony (intellectuals, social workers, lawyers) can, and must, provide the subaltern with infrastructure that, whenever necessary, enables them to take active part in the mechanisms of democracy. As Spivak claims, the only way to achieve agency is by belonging to a collectivity (*Aesthetic* 437).

The situation of social exclusion in which the poorest sectors of the Jamaican society find themselves recalls three-fingered Jack's doomed legend. Contrary to Spivak's demand for a politics of identity through collectivity, Jack Mansong's fight for freedom was about being financially and ideologically independent; likewise, he rejected bribery or any kind of collaboration with the plantation system:

The Maroons . . . were hired to quell the disturbance and dispersed the gang of rebels led by Three Fingered Jack. A free pardon was offered to the rebellious slaves and all accepted, except Mansong, who from then on fought his battles against the state alone (Walker, *Jamaica Observer* 2007).

As a result, this legendary rebel was proscribed from society, a strict subaltern, and for long he has been considered the most fearful criminal in Jamaica. This belief survives today in descriptions of him as "Jamaica's first infamous bad man" (Walker 2007: n. p.). According to Colonel Frank Lumsden of Charles Town, Jack's strength and ability to live as an outsider was admired by the Maroons, but they, nonetheless, wanted this man dead because he "disrupted all sorts of order" (Lumsden qtd. in Botkin 504).⁵⁷ Jack has also been considered the "Robin Hood of the Tropical Forest" (Botkin 499). In the early 19th century anonymous publication entitled *The History of Three Finger'd Jack, the Terror of Jamaica* a final statement denouncing

⁵⁷Charles Town is a Maroon village located in the Buff Bay River, Portland. They originally occupied Crawford Town up in the Blue Mountains, but after signing a Peace Treaty with the British, they moved to their current location. Granny Nanny's captain, named Quao, was the leader of the Charles Town Maroons. See article "Charles Town Maroons" in the website of the Blue and John Crow Mountains National Park. The title of Colonel is given to the head of every Maroon settlement. Colonels are elected every five years. See James Damon's "Legal Pluralism and the Maroon Legal System" (n. p.). Colonel Frank Lumsden was elected colonel of the Windward Maroon community of Charles Town in 2005, and he devotedly exercised this power until his death in 2015. During this time, he successfully revived the "moribund Maroon settlement that seemed destined to lose its traditions as young people left for jobs elsewhere." See *Jamaica Observer's* "J'can Maroon leader Frank Lumsden dies at 73."



slavery reads “the worst of all traffics—the AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE!” (41). An affirmation that, in connection to Adisa's poem, could lead readers to question whether he was the criminal and the colonizers his victims, or if it was just the opposite situation. In effect, the legend of three-fingered Jack seems to incarnate what for some could be “a vicious criminal” and for others “the benefactor of oppressed peoples” (Botkin 504). Jack Mansong's ambiguous identification enables dialogism, as in Bakhtin's idea of perceiving the world as an entity that is continuously being discussed and reread. In *Speech Genres*, Bakhtin points out:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. (170)

In this dialogic line of thought, Adisa's reading of Jack's story reverses the situation in which the rebel has been traditionally confined, thus suggesting a different viewpoint. She places at the center the voice of the Black legendary figure everybody speaks of and invites her audience to hear him speak. The recreation of this legendary—dare I say historical—character of African ancestry turned first a slave, then a runaway, is a call to dismantle the meanings that have traditionally been assigned to individuals living on the margins. In the case of “Three Finger Jack” Adisa underlines the rejection of pure darkness that is so common in Jamaican society. The differentiation made after “color gradation” has been perpetuated in Jamaica and the whole Caribbean ever since colonial times to indicate social status. As Adisa claims, “[t]o be darker was to be ignored, no matter how smart one was; one was expected to work harder to prove one's worth” (*Postcolonialism* 205). As a result, it can be inferred from the poem that both three fingered-Jack back then, and windshield cleaners today, seem to be too black, not white enough to fit in the



(white) capitalist structures that shape neocolonial societies. Therefore, they are not taken seriously as autonomous self-employed entrepreneurs and legitimate citizens.

—In order to better grasp the dilemma exposed by Adisa in this poem, it is helpful to borrow once again Spivak's words when affirming that "[c]lass is not a cultural origin, although there is working class culture. It is a sense of economic collectivity, of social relations of formation as the basis of action" (*Aesthetics* 431). Drawing upon Marx, Spivak accurately explains this phenomenon by identifying "the two ways of being a class," one which is "constative," and another one which is "performative." Subaltern people belong to the constative class as far as they do not have a consciousness of class, and therefore they cannot represent themselves and pass to be represented by others. The archetype of the outlaw hero embodied in three-fingered Jack seems to fall into that category. The members of the performative class are, on the contrary, able to represent themselves and others. For Spivak, the difference between subalternity and agency lays in the recognition of the individual action. For the latter group—the performative class—it is recognized, for the former—the subaltern or constative class—it is not. Thus following Spivak's reflections on the significant difference between "constative" and "performative" classes, we could confirm that the extreme resistance of the subaltern is—as impersonated in the figures of Jack Mansong and the windshield cleaners—doomed to be disapproved (*Aesthetics* 432).

There are many issues that can be addressed in this single poem on three-fingered Jack. What draws my attention for the purpose of this chapter is that the basis of action of the windshield cleaners in question—the lower social class in Jamaica—is not being recognized by the established law. Adisa reminds us of this obstacle for social achievement in the following lines from "Naming" (*Name* 96-98):

but who named the law the law
 the law has two names
 and I name one unjust
 they drag me to the jail
 claim my name was mentioned
 in connection with freedom
 that I was referred to by name
 that I am to give the names



of my compatriots

(97)

This poem condemns in a denunciatory tone that the colonialist system has been misnaming African diasporic people and their history of survival, questioning once more, as in “Three Finger Jack,” who is to be called a criminal. The tone and style of the poem seems to foreground the experience of a Black woman in the US, and her disapproval of the bigotry with which legal and police authorities treat the Black community in America. In the above passage a female voice denounces the hypocrisy of the legal system by exploring the mechanisms that make Black people balk at using the law on their behalf. The speaker of the poem, similar to the story of the Maroons who betrayed three-fingered Jack, denounces the coercive strategies used to divide the subaltern and mitigate their plans for resistance. The point is that the Black community’s quest for freedom becomes automatically suspect for the dominant institutions whose system favors them alone. Following Spivak’s theories that maintain that “to want to hegemonize the subaltern” transforms the academic intellectual into a “permanent persuader,” this passage claims that those who can access the public sphere and make things change may have very good intentions, and might even be interested in the freedom and agency of the subaltern, but in the end, they are only being “constative;” they are making “no effort here to touch the subaltern or . . . to question the political strategy that appropriates the disenfranchised.” Therefore Spivak suggests that a “performative” approach is adopted whereby the “academic intellectual” has an “interest of changing historiography” and is able to decode and subvert “the elite texts” (*Aesthetic* 433). This vision of performative intellectuals is quite similar to Adisa’s.

Other examples where Adisa adopts the subaltern voices to condemn the colonial legacy perceived in post-slavery and post-independence social inequalities are: “We are formed from volcanoes” (*Tamarind* 76-77), “Ethiopia Unda a Jamaican Mango Tree” (33), “Sky-Juice” (*Caribbean* 82-84) and “Nuh Glory in Povaty” (85-86). These poems confirm that Adisa writes as an incorruptible and committed eavesdropper who aims to represent and give voice to the lives of oppressed Caribbean people in their ongoing struggle against the effects of colonialism. Her task as a writer, as explained earlier in this chapter, is to allow the subaltern to speak through her. To do so, she enacts a tropological move (synecdoche) by which she—the middle-class intellectual—strategically becomes part of the defenseless group, while at the same time she detaches herself from them emotionally and



ideologically, so as to avoid believing that she is her own characters at all. Thus Adisa could be considered a privileged intellectual figure who can speak for the disenfranchised and make public and visible what the lower classes cannot condemn themselves from their unprivileged position.

Chapter 5

Erotic Agency and Embodied Freedom

Chapter 5.1

Spirituality, Sexuality and Resistance



As we have already seen in the theoretical framework on chapter 2, gender subjectivity and Black diasporic identities serve as spaces for resistance for Afro-Caribbean women writers. Drawing upon the “pedagogies of the Sacred” endorsed by M. Jaqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, in this section I explore Adisa’s particular vision of the Sacred as an empowering expression that is “to be found in the meeting ground of the erotic, the imaginative, and the creative” (322). According to Alexander, the Sacred does not limit itself to metaphysical practices, but it also embraces embodied practices. Hence, spirituality is manifest in the physical world, and in everyday aesthetic expressions, “whether in written or spoken word, the rhythm of drum, the fashioning of an altar, or any of the visual arts” (323). Sexuality is also an embodied practice that can be elevated to the Sacred: It enables bodily interactions that help us find our inner creative power, as well as transcend our body limitations in order to connect with other forms of knowing. Sexuality can thus be understood as a form of political resistance and as an “evidence of sexual agency,” once historians stop looking at it as a form of “exploitation and deviancy” (Sheller *Citizenship* 250).

In the fictional works analyzed hereby, *It Begins With Tears* (1997) and *Painting Away Regrets* (2011), Adisa unfolds the social benefits of uniting two traditionally opposed fields, namely, religion and sexual politics. With the exception of the works of sociologist Mimi Sheller, and theorist of transnational feminism M. Jaqui Alexander, very few studies have concentrated on the questions of citizenship from below in the Caribbean, as achieved through sexual politics and spiritual practices, and thus I will draw upon these authors in the present analysis. It could be affirmed that Adisa’s writing runs afoul of the secular intellectualism that dismisses religion as what Karl Marx called “the opium of the masses.” This secular position thoroughly rejects “any serious engagement with religious discourse as a grounds for politics” (Sheller *Citizenship* 46). For its penchant to unaffectedly insert mythological elements in her description of everyday contexts, Adisa’s fiction could be perfectly identified as a literary expression of magical realism.⁵⁸ Correspondingly,

one can acknowledge a political authority behind her emotional and spiritual language. Like in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), commented by P. Gabrielle Foreman, the communities depicted in Adisa's novels similarly embrace what lays "outside the parameters of 'reality' in the Western World" and bring up a blended cosmology that "amplifies the parameters of our present reality" (Foreman "Past-On" 298). The ability of the writer to "pull readers into her own amplified reality" is directly connected to faith, "a necessary component of magic realism" that draws readers into a space that seems to suspend their usual connections to the 'logical' and the 'real'" (299).

Following Audre Lorde's assertion that there is a close relationship between sexuality, spirituality and personal and political empowerment, Adisa's fiction shows how Caribbean women have, despite their political exclusion, found ways to impact and transform their families and the larger community. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," which serves as a starting point for the theories developed along this chapter, Lorde redefines the erotic as a category which is not limited to the sexual realm, and describes it as "an assertion of the life-force of women, . . . a creative energy empowered" that needs to be retrieved "in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." Inasmuch as feelings belong to the realm of the spiritual, Lorde argues that it is a mistaken predisposition to separate the spiritual from the sexual and the political, and that this tendency compels the spiritual to a "world of flattened affect" and self abnegation (55-56). Lorde's postulations are expanded in more recent feminist scholarship such as Donna Aza Weir-Soley's *Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women's Writings*. In this volume Weir-Soley argues that because Christianity has attempted to split the sexual from the spiritual, and the colonial "discursive tradition" has represented Black women as "sexual deviants," it is a central question for Black women writers to represent Black women as both sexual and spiritual beings (2). Weir-Soley's endorsement of the "poetics of eroticism" as a means to minimize "the effects of historical traumas and facilitate healing, creative adaptation, recuperation and resistance" (5) can also be connected to Adisa's use of the erotic. The erotic side of her characters represents their ability to survive and resist in the face of imposed epistemologies.

_____Magical realism is also referred to as magic realism and marvelous realism.



The poetics of eroticism in Adisa's work should be understood as the natural disruption of the intimate practices into the public sphere and vice-versa. In this chapter I draw upon Mimi Sheller's *Citizenship from Below, Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* to discuss the relevance of Caribbean kinship and other intimate practices. Although Sheller does not underestimate the role of African Jamaican women in the public spaces, she explores a more complex understanding of the domestic as the site from where women engage in public politics. In her work, she enables "the interplay between gendered discourses and state power," thus blurring the borders between the private and the public spheres (50).⁵⁹ The quoted text hereby is my translation from Spanish. Carole Boyce Davies' in-depth studies of Caribbean migrant women—as reflected in *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, and *Caribbean Spaces*—constitute an imperative referent for my reading of the gendered construction of imaginary homelands in *Painting Away Regrets*, analyzed in the second section of this chapter.

I also address the work of Sara Ahmed as developed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* to understand the implications of movement in the production of emotion. Drawing upon the Marxian analysis of the logic of capital, Ahmed develops a logic of "affective economies" that identifies the emotions, not as static objects originated within individuals, but rather as "processes of movement and association." As such, the "objects of emotions circulate or are distributed across a social as well as a psychic field" (44-45). In this line of thought, Ahmed's explorations on the mechanisms of hate and love are of significant value for the present analysis, and will be dully addressed (42-61, 122-143). Bringing up this idea that recognizes the emotions as products of displacement, Ahmed highlights the necessity "to leave behind the place of the ordinary," which she calls "wonder." For Ahmed, the distancing from what is lived as ordinary, and thus taken for granted, is created in the emotional response of wonder. Therefore she argues that this capacity for wonder before ordinary events has allowed women, and specifically Black feminists, to be critical about the established forms of political struggle (182). What is of interest for the present chapter—in terms of the connections between sexuality and spirituality—is Ahmed's observation that the intimate relationship between "the emotional response of wonder, critical thinking and forms of activism" has enabled

⁵⁹In "La codificación del espacio en clave de género" ("Encoding the space in terms of gender"), Irene Pérez Fernández discusses that the domestic is not only a space, but also "an attitude" that is learned through a series of practices internalized naturally. Thus this learned attitude is embodied in the domestic space, which conditions women to repeat "a certain pattern of social behavior" (569).



Black feminists like Lorde and hooks to “break with old ways of knowing and inhabiting the world” (183). I also intend to connect Ahmed’s rejection to study wonder only in terms of the sublime and the sacred, and to consider wonder also as a corporeal experience. In this sense the material experience, not far from the Divine, opens up for new extra-ordinary things that may unveil unexpected interpretations of reality.

Ahmed’s suggestion that the sacred and the material are not opposites, inasmuch as they both share the capacity to make us wonder, is also reflected in M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*. Alexander views here the sacred as something that is embodied and hence intervenes in the activities of everyday life (293). In the following analysis, in agreement with Adisa’s theorizing on the spiritual as political, I will also substantiate Alexander’s affirmation that the sacred is not a private act, but rather a social act that mirrors and impacts the society in which it is performed (295).

Adisa’s first novel has been put forward as one of the most motivational readings for young adults in *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teacher’s Guide to Books That Can Change Teens’ Lives* (Ayers and Crawford 2004). As specified here under the categories of “Spiritual Journeys” and “Feminist” writing, “Adisa gives us new insights into the complexities of a community’s web, as well as into women’s secrets” (119). The most comprehensive scholarly work, up to date, on *It Begins With Tears* is included in Donna Aza Weir-Soley’s study *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women’s Writing* (2009), in the chapter entitled “The Erotics of Change,” (141-183). In this book Weir-Soley presents an in-depth analysis of Adisa’s novel, along with that of writings by Toni Morrison and Edwige Danticat. For her insightful reading of Adisa’s work and for accomplishing vital epistemological connections between the sexual, the sacred and the political, Weir-Soley’s study is notably addressed in the present chapter. Other critical approaches to the novel include Pin-chia Feng’s essay (2002), which explores jointly Adisa’s novel and Brodber’s *Myal* (1988) in their “efforts of constructing a New World writing in religious contexts” (151). Also, Suzette A. Spencer’s essay (2001) focuses on how Adisa’s female characters are caught in patriarchal structures of power, especially in relation to physical and psychical forms of injury, and to the punishment for such actions. Most recently, the novel has been explored by Elina Valovirta (2014) in order to understand how meaning is negotiated within a cross-cultural reading. Valovirta analyzes *It Begins With Tears*, along with other novels by



Caribbean female writers, on the topics of sexual shame, healing, masculinities and the erotic as power. Finally, Suzanne Keen (*Empathy* 170-171) mentions Adisa's work as an illustration of how an author can evoke empathy intentionally. The above-mentioned critical works have done significant research on the sexual and spiritual features in *It Begins With Tears*, an approach that has encouraged my own interest towards the intersections between spiritual practice and sexual behavior. It is my contention that the border crossing point between imaginary spaces and embodied territories, "the synthesis of the sexual and the spiritual" (Weir-Soley 226), in connection with the imaginary spaces nurtured by personal and collective memory through myth and ancestors' stories, affects not only the ways in which Afro-Caribbean female resistance is exercised in Adisa's novel, but it also addresses some questionable assumptions about embodied and imaginary knowledge.

Her second novel *Painting Away Regrets* has been reviewed in journals such as *The Caribbean Writer* (Serna-Martinez) and the *Journal of West Indian Literature* (Forbes). Jamaican-born writer Keisha-Gaye Anderson also offers a revealing interview with Adisa about this novel in her website.⁶⁰ In spite of the perceptions on sexual and spiritual association that Adisa's last novel adds to the body of contemporary Caribbean literature, scholars in the field have still not paid sufficient critical attention to it. It is therefore my intention to devote the second part of this chapter to exploring further the bridging between the spiritual and the sexual as portrayed in *Painting Away Regrets*. I consider that this novel is politically meaningful for Caribbean practices of self determination, not only for its creative approach that merges the Afro-Caribbean cosmological system with modern life in the US, but also for its insightful look upon heterosexual practices within the domestic space. The novel—a story of divorce—explores how the private affairs of a married couple can be read as a reflection of gender, race and power relationships as they develop in the public sphere.

Caribbean Kinship and Rituals of Healing in *It Begins With Tears*

It Begins With Tears is a polyphonic novel that explores discourses of modernity and tradition. As such, the novel brings together the community-based rural life of Jamaica and its sacred epistemologies along with the emerging American urban lifestyle and its materialist values. The novel's main narrative develops in the fictional

⁶⁰See the interview "Painting Away Regrets: A New Novel by Opal Palmer Adisa, Ph.D." on March 26, 2012 at www.keishagaye.com/newsletter846488.htm (Last accessed June April 20, 2015).



setting of Kristoff Village, immersing readers into the often radical gender divisions present in Jamaican peasant communities. With this factor in mind, the text foregrounds a network of kinship among women that is going to call into question capitalist definitions of progress. All women in the novel are marked by their sexual experience and/ or their spiritual practices to the point that they are able to impact the rest of the community. Thus there is Angel, an Afro-American woman married to a returned villager; Beryl, whose trauma of rape marks her life and that of her community, as will be explored in section 5.2; Monica, a local woman who has recently returned to the village after having lived for years as a prostitute in Montego Bay; and Peggy, Grace and Marva, the frustrated women whose revengeful act against Monica raises important questions on the impossibility of sisterhood within patriarchal structures.⁶¹ Other female characters include the soul sisters Arnella and Valrie; their mother Velma, and Miss Cotton, a respected priestess and healer who, together with Arnella will help the women of Kristoff Village to restore their spiritual balance. As the narrative develops, women complete their transformation and healing through an only-women, communal ritual by the river that enables them to benefit from “the maternal power of the water.” As already indicated by Feng, “[t]he regenerating and nurturing power of the river water/milk nurses Angel, as well as other women, into a new life and reestablishes bonds with ‘mothers’ they were deprived of long before” (166). These women’s stories of physical and psychical recovery illustrate how sacred rituals serve to rise above sexual trauma. The rituals of naming, feeling and performing that occur in the river at the end of the novel represent a step forward for these women on their way to gain political freedom through their erotic agency.

Because of its healing attitude towards “the bodily and mental trauma” of a whole community and its recreation of “folk culture and rituals,” Adisa’s novel has been set forth to illustrate what Kamau Brathwaite calls the “jazz cadence” in the novel (Feng 165). The “jazz novel,” according to Brathwaite, is a narrative that explores a “folk-type community” as an organized whole whereby each character “is felt and seen to be an integral part.” Thus, the idea of jazz as an “aesthetic model” leaves behind the exploration of the individual as an alienated figure—in the most existentialist form of Faustian individual conflict—in order to embrace a “gestalt/

⁶¹See chapter 5.2 for a more comprehensive account of Adisa’s recreation of sexual violence and patriarchy in the hands of women.



communality” of the society that is mainly articulated “through its form” and “rhythms” (*Roots* 107-108).

The novel starts with a brief introductory list of the characters, informing of their main activities and the places they belong to. Next, the prologue describes a place called Eternal Valley and its inhabitants. This secondary narrative provides a landscape that turns around the figures of Devil and She-Devil, a married couple whose actions seem to materialize into weather phenomena and influence the inhabitants of Kristoff Village. The prologue informs the readers of the universe they are about to enter, and works as an invitation to visualize a cosmology that bridges two worlds, the heavenly and the earthly. As observed by Spencer, the troublesome relationship between Devil and She-Devil symbolizes the difficulties women encounter when trying to resist patriarchal values. What happens in Eternal Valley, she affirms, “contains the seeds of gendered violence that swell and give birth to the tears, the raindrops that shower Kristoff Village in between a persistent sun, our ray of hope and female resistance” (109). Hence, Eternal Valley, the setting of the secondary narrative, Weir-Soley stresses, represents Adisa's attempt to create a world where “resistance to gender division and male dominance” can be entertained (182). With the creation of an ideal feminist-lead universe, Adisa is opening the debate on how sexuality and gender relations mirror and determine the moral and political standards of the Caribbean society. In the narrative spaces of Eternal Valley, which for her represents the “alter ego” of Kristoff Village (182), Adisa creatively rewrites the Jamaican popular saying used when it is rainy and sunny at the same time: “Rain ah fall, sun a shine, Devil a beat him wife,” a saying that slightly changes its final part in some areas of Jamaica into “Devil and im wife a fight,” which indicates that the woman is not the naturally expected victim of the confrontation, but plays an equal part in it (145).⁶² Thus in Adisa's version of the folk saying, Devil and She-Devil are portrayed as two people in a conflicting relationship. In fact, she enhances the role of the female character of She-Devil, by portraying her as a dominant, sometimes aggressive woman:

Devil said without reflection, ‘Now you actin like oman. A good oman treat her man like him is man, and tek pleasure in him pleasure.’⁶³

⁶²“The rain is falling, the sun is shining. Devil is beating his wife” and “The Devil and his wife are fighting.”

⁶³‘Now you’re acting like a woman. A good woman treats her man as a man, and takes pleasure in his pleasure’.



. . . she couldn't remember a time when they weren't together . . . not once had Devil ever cooked her a meal. (4)

. . . She-Devil reflected. She had risen early to prepare a breakfast to Devil's liking. And this was how he thanked her, by saying that her value was only in pleasing him. She-Devil got hot. Steaming, sweating, hot. She hauled the cast-iron pot off the stove and knocked Devil on his head. (5)

This vehement attitude is not paradigmatic of women's roles in Christian narratives; however, it reflects "extant stereotypes of working-class Jamaican women," which are the ground material of "organic Jamaican feminism" (Weir-Soley 146). One of the most common stereotypes in Jamaican rural society is that men tend to "choose big women as wives." As a result, Weir-Soley observes, these women "could easily overpower their husbands" in physical confrontation, thus deflating the assumption that men "are automatically the aggressors in physical confrontations" (239-240). Although they cannot be applied to make generalizations, sometimes these stereotypes hold true. In spite of the fact that the elements that conform domesticity are traditionally connected to women's oppressive status, in this case Adisa illustrates how a woman can subvert expectations and transform the apparently harmless cast-iron pot into a weapon of female defiance. Nevertheless, Adisa does not limit her writing to depicting this "homegrown feminism." She intersects it with some characteristics of Western feminism such as the "gendered division of labor that unfairly burdens women within the domestic realm," and the self-conscious acknowledgement of feminism as both a theoretical and political field (Weir-Soley 146). Such feminist instances shed insight on the mechanisms of Jamaican women's responses to patriarchy. They simply fetch the tools they have at hand and transform them to match their necessities of personal freedom and erotic autonomy.

The rest of the novel is structured in five parts, each of them introduced by a title and a few verses that anticipate the subsequent contents. Each part is in turn divided into smaller sections with a title which gives significant clues about how to interpret the contents. The author's structural intentions are announced in part I, entitled "How it began" (9), which reads as follows:

several strands of thread
held in a hand
then woven



into a pattern
each strand
remains distinguishable
separate
from the others

Adisa's declaration of her narrative intentions, with its own rhythmical iterations and arrangement of colors, invokes a unique quilted design. Following this pattern, the spiritual aspect of the text can be first acknowledged in the depiction of two coexistent worlds and the unmistakable ties existing between them. Far from representing the sacred and the material in binary terms, Adisa is able to appropriate existing elements and transform them, thus showing how apparently opposing forces—the spiritual, the sexual and the political—can work together for the benefit of a resistant community that is rooted in West African cosmologies and the agricultural tradition. As already justified by Weir-Soley, “the sacred is expressed in the Caribbean through art, craft, dance, folktales, rituals of birth, death and healing, worship, proverbs, music, myth, and what some westerners might dismiss as superstition, and of course, through literature and orature” (141). The sacred broadens into artistic creativity and everyday expressions, thus including not only the ceremonial practices, but also the folk oral traditions and beliefs and their materialization in all aspects of life. Since the sacred is a creative force that everyone can handle, it can also be transformed and accommodated to the individual's condition. Likewise the heavenly location of Eternal Valley represents Adisa's intentions to rewrite Judeo-Christian mythology. Her reinterpretation of Devil and She-Devil provides a personal and hybridized cosmological model that serves to shape life in Kristoff Village, the material world where most of the novel develops (144).

In an unpublished interview with Kamau Brathwaite that Adisa has generously supplied me with, Brathwaite perceives magical realism “not [as] the fantasy realism of García Márquez; it is really based upon notions of *vodoun*, obeah, *konnu*, African cosmology, jazz (multiple representation/improvisation),”⁶⁴ as well

⁶⁴*Konnus* are fragments of the carnival tradition in the Caribbean, “the konnus that we know throughout Plantation America are the visible publicly permitted survival ikons of African religious culture.” See Brathwaite's “Alarms of God — Konnu and Carnival in the Caribbean.” p. 90-91. The science of Obeah is introduced in chapter 4.2. Vodoun, the Haitian Afro-Caribbean religion whose spirits are known as Lwa, is further discussed along the present chapter.



as it is rooted “in the hard harsh realities of the *Trench Town Rock*/ stone road that we have to walk and live in, as people who are still in the chain(s) and chain-gang of slavery, . . . with every day the struggle to survive.” Both elements establish for him “a constant dialogue between harsh reality . . . and the light (and life) at the end of that road,” in a kind of “symbiosis” that he calls the

tidalectical relationship that we find in diurnal/eternal nature; where & when (space/time continuum) the two things are combined outside *and* inside us; so that the struggle that we constantly have to deal with because of our history, somehow, nevertheless, ends, in some strange way, in what I now begin to call *radiance*.

Brathwaite further indicates that although it is necessary to name the Afro-Caribbean spiritual forces, a more significant step would be for Caribbean people to understand their meaning, to “become comfortably part of that physio-spiritual communication/celebration (inappropriately called ‘worship’).” For Brathwaite thus, this cosmology would represent a natural approach to the world, just “like breathing, like the food we grow and eat,” and not some “special & exotic” thing. He insists that it be “natural not only magical realism.” Adisa agrees with this vision. Both discuss about the importance of what she calls “incorporating the continuum from *nation-language*,” which indicates that nothing really comes into existence unless it is spoken. This act of naming, they believe, needs to be done in the language of the people whose histories are to be recognized. Thus in connection to Brathwaite’s resignification of magical realism, nation language becomes “the shape and shade and shadows of the language. Not only or ‘simply’ the convention or convenience of language, but its plantation and middle passage and slavery, . . . the tone the vibe the drone the drum the dance/chant.” For Braithwaite, Caribbean “culture and its nation language” are to be understood as “vibration.” This conversation with Brathwaite is significant because it also reflects Adisa’s concerns about language and cultural forms, which she thoughtfully expresses in her choice of Jamaican nation language—for both her characters’ and sometimes for her narrative and poetic voices—as well as in her employment of the natural and spiritual forces as integrated and integrative parts in her fiction.

Another means by which Adisa includes the spiritual element in *It Begins With Tears* is through the incorporation of West African cosmologies, specifically



from the Yoruba religion called Ifa. The Yoruba is an ethnic group from what today is known as Southwest Nigeria (Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia* 138). Among the foundational principles of Ifa is the belief in a sacred life force, known as Ashé, that emanates from Olodumare, a God that is considered multidimensional, because it manifests itself in a multiplicity of forms, inhabiting both physical elements and human beings, like “avatars, that make the Sacred tangible” (Alexander *Pedagogies* 299). These Yoruba mythological deities, largely known as Orishas, exist today in many religious cults across the African diaspora, such as Vodoun in Haiti, where they are known as Lwa—also spelled Loa—Santería in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil, Shangoism in Trinidad and Tobago or Pocomania in Jamaica (Boyce Davies *Encyclopedia* 119, 159, 228, 824). Adisa, a keen observer of the manifestations of the divine in everyday life, uses this knowledge to portray an Afro-Caribbean worldview in her writing. Hence, Arnella, Valrie and Monica—the three female characters that I am going to focus on—are directly connected with the sacred figures of Oshun, Oya and Erzulie respectively. Other characters that I am going to discuss briefly in this section and that are clearly connected to Yoruba deities are Miss Cotton—represented as Yemoja's daughter—and Godfree, who is featured after the characteristics of Shango.

After the prologue introducing Eternal Valley, the first part opens up with Arnella—a dressmaker and priestess in training—who is about to go into labor. The fact that she is pregnant announces her fertility and therefore her connection with the reproductive nature of Oshun, the Yoruba force of beauty, love, sensuality, sexuality and female fertility (Eyin and Eugênio 145, 155, Torre Santería 74, 75). Just like the rest of the Orishas, Oshun is represented with a series of distinct attributes. Thus her element is the sweet waters, including rivers, waterfalls, sources and lakes. Her color is golden-yellow; her number is five; and her symbol is a fan with a mirror (abebé), which suggests that vanity could be one of her flaws (Eyin and Eugênio 155, Adisa *Painting* 360). Oshun is also associated with life, healing and female creativity. Thus Adisa represents Arnella as an artist who exhibits Oshun's energy through her “quilt making” and “craftwork” (Weir-Soley 108). The following lines describe her humble, yet delightfully arranged house, thus informing Arnella's embodiment of Oshun's energies:

At the far end, a large window looked out at sunflowers and a mango tree with gerba growing around the roots. The tree was encircled by water-



washed white stones, each of which she had lovingly hauled more than a mile from the river. Sighing, Arnella surveyed the contents of her room. The yellow curtains with frilly lace along the border that were now blowing softly in the morning breeze, she had sewn. Examining them gave her a deep satisfied feeling, as did the sight of the three large wall-hangings made partly from the same piece of yellow cloth. (Adisa *Begins* 12)

If compared to Oshun's features, Arnella's sense of harmony and contentment with her own self-made world is closely related to her assigned Orisha, especially in connection with the mirror. The creativity that characterizes Arnella is double: on the one side her pregnancy, that is no other thing but her ability to bring human life into existence, to create life; and on the other hand her occupation as a dress maker, a creative vocation that brings her joy and fulfillment. On top of being a mother and an artist, Arnella is a priestess in training, which suggests her potential to be a spiritual guide and healer. Thus, her sensual features are not just confined to self-pleasure and physical complacency. According to Philip John Neimark in *The Way of the Orisha*, the erotic energy of Oshun transcends the material, and hence the limits of self:

The sensuality of Osun also offers us an opportunity for transcendence, a chance to be open to the world of spiritual energy through orgasm. During orgasm we experience pure feeling, and afterwards we are better able to cope with our routine responsibilities. That, in great measure, is what the world of spiritual energy is all about—it replenishes our energy. (Neimark 140 qtd. in Weir-Soley 171)

Arnella's conjunction of spirituality and sexuality is perceptible in different occasions throughout the novel. An inherent characteristic of Oshun's devotees is their "irresistible sensuality and charm," which enables them to seduce others effortlessly (Weir-Soley 172). Indeed, Arnella and her sister Valrie have a very intimate relationship. Their relationship is so close that they both love the same man, Godfree, with whom they entertain a consensual sexual relationship:

They were everything together, for each other, and insisted on sharing everything, including Godfree.



'Which one a oonuh wan me fi chase you?'

'You have fi chase both a we,' they said, giggling, and taking off in the direction of the mountain range.⁶⁵

They kissed his cheeks. They pulled down his pants and laughed at his teapot. They teased him. They played with him, they fell in love and slept with him, together, under the ackee tree, and they were going to remain that way forever, together. (*Adisa Begins* 69-70)

Their relationship is an “unconventional and unexploitative” love triangle, “in the sense that it is informed not by his choice but by the women’s” (Weir-Soley 143). This reversal questions the traditional assumptions that it is the man’s choice the “principal catalyst for . . . long-term relationships with women” (Spencer 116). Godfree, whose name indicates once more *Adisa’s* intention to rid her characters of a Judeo-Christian God (Weir-Soley 148), seems to have been shaped following the traces that characterize Shango, the Orisha of supreme power and sexual virility: he is a womanizer; he dominates fire and is the master of thunder and lightning. Shango is also the dispenser of justice (Eyin and Eugênio 202-219, Torre 64-66). Also, his double-headed ax is made of wood (Torre 65), the material that gives name to the section introducing Godfree in the novel, entitled “Wood,” a word that in Jamaican English also means penis (Weir-Soley 143). Furthermore, Godfree, following the family business, is a carpenter, but as an adult he discovers that he has become a master of wood: “he was discovering that he was not only a carpenter but a sculptor who knew the taste of wood” (*Adisa Begins* 44). The fact that both his and Arnella’s respective professions are described as pleasurable activities that bring sensuality and satisfaction to their lives is significant. As argued by Lorde, the erotic fulfillment entails a spiritual wholeness in the individual: “For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand for ourselves and for our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy that we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us” (“Uses” 56-57). The erotic description of Arnella’s and Godfree’s daily activities underlines the importance of learning from life through the senses in order to achieve a unique and integral vision of the world. I intentionally use the adjective integral in the sense of whole and undivided, thus opposing it to the disintegrating effects of isolating the erotic aliveness from the spiritual, intimate acts of everyday life.

⁶⁵‘Which one of you do you want me to chase?’ / ‘You have to chase both of us.’



Influenced by Western conventionalisms, and in spite of loving the two women, one day Godfree decides he wants to get married. He proposes Arnella first but she refuses, offering him to marry her sister Valrie instead. Miss Dahlia, Godfree's grandmother, who has reasons to approve of and celebrate her grandson's relationship with both Arnella and Valrie, fathoms the two sisters as follows: "They were very close, and would willingly die for each other, she was certain, but they were two different women" (Adisa *Begins* 110). For Valrie and Godfree's honeymoon, however, Arnella is not allowed to share their hotel room. It is Milford, her father-figure, who absolutely rejects Arnella's request. He is reluctant of the unconventional kinship ties of his wife's (Olive's) family, which is now his own. This scene gives hints of the patriarchal and hierarchical system that lies beneath rural life in Jamaica, mainly as a result of colonization and Christianity. In spite of his negation, and surreptitiously, "the Sunday night before they come home, Arnella met them in town and the three spent a glorious day surrounded by each other's love" (112). As suggested by Weir-Soley, this could be a case of what Adrienne Rich would call "a lesbian continuum" (Rich "Compulsory" qtd. in Weir-Soley 172). Although "the blood ties between these two women complicate an overtly sexual reading," by deliberately constructing such a "deep and provocative relationship" between two women, Adisa announces "the antidote to female competition and to the breakdown of communal values" (Weir-Soley 172). Furthermore, by challenging heteronormativity, the author subverts an important part of the hierarchies and dismemberment of mind, body and spirit produced by Western colonization. With such dissolutions of traditional notions of sexuality and female kinship, Adisa breaks down the monolithical thinking that for centuries has placed the secular over the sacred (especially when the latter is not Christian), the male over the female, the heterosexual over the homosexual, and the divine over the erotic. The work of decolonization would be therefore "to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment" (Alexander *Pedagogies* 281). Hence the powers of the erotic lay in the choice of opting for a love triangle that is consensual and whose mechanisms serve to strengthen rather than to weaken the inner yearnings of its members, as well as their ability to create active citizenship from below (Sheller *Citizenship* 243-245). In sum, as Lorde proclaims, when sharing (instead of using) each other's feelings, we become more liable to distrust alienating



influences that contradict our right to be whole and to awaken individual and communal wisdom: “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (“Uses” 57).

The love triangle performed by Arnella, her twin sister Valrie and Godfree in *It Begins With Tears* resembles the story about the mostly conveyed as quarrelsome relationship between Oshun, her sister Oya (also a goddess of rivers and sweet waters), and Shango from the Yoruba mythology. The legend goes that Oya was the first wife of Shango and his fellow warrior, but Oshun, his mistress, was his favorite (Torre 59, 75-76; Eyin and Eugênio 166). This parallelism reveals Adisa's understanding of West African cosmological structures, but also her attempt to rewrite the myth, which enables the author to reinforce female sisterhood in her revision of Afro-Caribbean kinship practices. It is interesting how Adisa insists on the possibilities of a non-hierarchical system that regulates sexual and family ties. As Weir-Soley clearly examines:

It is through her relationship to Valrie that Arnella is able to establish an identity that allows her freedom to do the work of a mother, lover, healer, and artist without the restrictive structures within which traditionally gendered roles entrap women, making them unable to fulfill their true potential. (172)

The fact that these sisters share the same man and that they later mother together Arnella's Baby girl clearly interrupts patriarchal structures of family bonds, thus questioning the cosmologies that are at the very base of colonialism and Judeo-Christian cultures. In this sense, the family rhetoric that uses the private spaces as a “school for citizenship” and the women as “the teachers . . . serving a conservative function” is disrupted in Adisa's novel every time that women contravene the prescribed public lessons that aim to rule private life (Sheller *Citizenship* 162). The practice of a balanced love triangle is recreated in the present text as well as in Adisa's latter novel *Painting Away Regrets*, which will be discussed further on along this chapter. It is not surprising that female Caribbean authors examine the topic of polygamy in their work, and reflect on its forms and possibilities. Indeed, it is very common in the Caribbean for men to have what is known as 'outside' children, that is to say, a man having kids with a woman other than his own wife, which may result



into the father's sacrifice of the welfare of his first children "as a condition of a new romance or to strengthen the economic contribution in a new union" (Brown et al. 94). The absence of the father is also notable in cases when men do not provide for their children from the very beginning, leaving their 'baby mothers' in charge of their offspring, a behavior that has certainly enforced the image of men as irresponsible fathers, and which "may affect male-female relations and the male's willingness to assume conjugal and fatherly responsibilities" (10-11).

Maybe as a result of the fatherless condition that repeats throughout the Caribbean families—the author herself has written in many occasions, notably in her collection *I Name Me Name*, about her father's absence from an early age⁶⁶—Adisa insists on sisterhood as a structure of female kinship that transcends blood ties and that is to form the base for community building and the survival of its inhabitants in everyday life. There are many examples throughout the novel where parenthood practices disrupt the traditional kinship models. These domestic intrusions clearly unsettle the "symbolic" base for the "construction of the nation" that places women "only in the roles of wife, mother, and sister—never as citizens in their own right" (Sheller *Citizenship* 162). For instance, Velma gives birth to two girls, Olive and Arnella (we will see below that Arnella and Valrie are not biological sisters, but aunt and niece respectively), and in any case does she acknowledge the existence of a father, affirming that it is God who owns her daughters. The figure of the father, and therefore the hierarchical patriarchal structure that a fatherly presence entails, is silenced on behalf of a matrifocal model for parenting. By foregrounding "subaltern women's voices and actions," Adisa explores in her novel "the possibilities for recovering an anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal history submerged in official sources" (Sheller 11). Although the reader is informed of Velma's mysterious relationship with a married man (Adisa *Begins* 65, 67), those intimate encounters are left to the reader's interpretation and they are also left open to innuendo and skepticism among the villagers:

'How you mean nuh man nuh involve?'
 'Is fool and stupid and just born you think we is?'
 'So me neva know you did name Mary?'

⁶⁶Adisa has told me during a personal conversation that her father had an outside family, and that she has half-siblings on her father's side



‘But even Mary did have sense find Joseph.’⁶⁷

...

Velma offered no explanation; would not announce the name of the man responsible for her condition and was not ashamed or contrite about her state. (63)

Adisa exposes the Christian myth of the Immaculate Conception that dubiously bridges virginity and motherhood. Her characters’ skepticism dismantles the cult of the Virgin Mary, who got pregnant without sexual intercourse, allegedly through Divine intervention. Furthermore, the villagers’ wonder about Velma’s innocence is not a spiteful act of destructive mockery. It rather implies a declaration of intentions: those villagers are proving wrong the biblical discourse that needs to create the Divine Virgin’s antithesis—that is to say the stained prostitute—in order to elevate the spiritual experience above the sexual. Another fact that dismantles the traditional family structures is that Arnella and Valrie are not legitimate sisters. Indeed, Sister Olive is not the biological mother of Arnella; she is Arnella’s sister. The truth is that both Olive’s mother (Velma) and Olive herself gave birth to the girls on the same day. Then Velma turned sick and it was Olive who nursed the two baby girls (*Adisa Begins* 67). The two girls lived in the same household ever since and thought they were twin sisters until they discovered they were not. This happened the day when they accidentally heard their parents quarreling, and their father, Uncle Mildford, complaining:

‘A tired a you damn blasted family. No one know who is who. Is only two picknie me have, so me nuh know why three a call me daddy and me hafi mind three.’⁶⁸

Arnella and Valrie was playing hopscotch in the yard and thought Uncle Milford were referring to Milton, their little brother. Certainly he didn’t mean them. (*Adisa Begins* 68)

⁶⁷ ‘What do you mean that no man is involved?’ / ‘Do you think we are fool and stupid and just born?’ / ‘So I never knew that your name was Mary?’ / ‘But even Mary had sense to find Joseph.’

⁶⁸ ‘I’m tired of your damn blasted family. No one knows who is who. I only have two children, so I don’t know why three are calling me daddy and I have to take care of three.’



The household structures that exist in Kristoff Village are indeed a reflection of many peasant communities in Jamaica. Such family systems have been labeled as "disorganized" and received by a number of anthropologists as a deviation from Western prescriptions of family structures.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, there have been studies of peasant communities in Jamaica that retrieve distinct features that are common to Afro-Caribbean households and that happen to represent the continuum of peasant cultural resistance (Weir-Soley 173).⁷⁰ The voice of Uncle Milford represents in many aspects that of the patriarchal and colonial worldview that criticizes what does not match the traditional Judeo-Christian expectations. However, it is through this matrifocal network of Black women/sisters who support each other in their roles as mothers, nurturers and healers of the community that the story of Kristoff Village is written.

The strong ties existing among this group of village women challenge the Western vision of traditional kinship and calls attention to a sisterhood system that transcends blood ties. Miss Cotton's traces, a conciliating figure in the community, can be paralleled to those of the Orisha Yemoja, the mother goddess of all bodies of water that connects all peoples, gives orientation and educates her children (Eyin and Eugênio 194-195). Yemoja is connected to the stories of the Middle Passage and is an Orisha known to be crucial in the survival of the people and culture of the African diaspora (Alexander *Pedagogies* 292). Miss Cotton was also once an obeah woman (Adisa *Begins* 38). Accordingly, Adisa depicts her as the "Seeyah" woman of the community, the Jamaican word for visionary, an old woman who is "aligned with the ancient African cosmos and connected to the natural world and the world of the spirits" (Weir-Soley 143).

Monica's features, on the other hand, correspond to those of Erzulie, the Vodoun goddess that embodies a penchant for both sexual and spiritual wholeness (Weir-Soley 7-8). Monica's preference for the colors blue and red (Adisa *Begins* 27, 31), which, together with pink, are the colors used in the imagery of Vodoun to represent Erzulie, also indicate parallelisms between this Lwa or Vodoun spirit and Monica. Monica's complex, and apparently contradictory personality defies binary oppositions and unsettles those around her, a reaction that corresponds to the ambivalence reflected in the figure of Erzulie. In Weir-Soley's words, Erzulie is "a

⁶⁹See Besson's "Land Tenure and Kinship in a Jamaican Village" (36-107) and Mintz' edition *Slavery, Colonialism and Racism: Essays* (484), where a number of anthropologists who support this thesis are mentioned.

⁷⁰See previous footnote.



model of black female subjectivity that would reconnect sex and God-consciousness, spirit and flesh, in the making of a nonidealized, possibly self-contradictory, assuredly self-seeking, folk-directed, black woman whose ontological motivation is a divine quest for wholeness" (7-8). In this respect, Monica could be compared to *Beloved*, the central character in Toni Morrison's novel of the same name, because, just as *Beloved*, Monica's disturbing sexual behavior represents what Weir-Soley sees in *Beloved* as

a transgressive model of eroticism that enacts a counterhegemonic discourse through which to read, reinscribe, and reconstitute the healthy synthesis of sexual and spiritual energies as a necessary antidote against the vitiating effects of slavery on the African-American spirit and flesh. (9)

This unconventional paradigm for women can also be found in Janie, the main character in Zora Neale-Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, one of the first Black female novels where African spirituality is shown as central to Black female identity formation. Here Erzulie is used as "the leitmotif that introduces and sustains the synthesis of spirituality and sexuality in the portrayal of Janie's character" (Weir-Soley 7). According to Joan Dayan in her study "Erzulie: A Women's History of Haiti," Erzulie's main traces reflect those of "women during slavery—whether white, or mulatto mistresses, negro servants or mulatto concubines, in their vexed class and color connections" (11). As a woman who uses her body and sexuality to access material goods and social status, Monica can be compared to Erzulie's performance of survival within the colonial power structures, inasmuch as this Lwa articulates and embodies "a memory of slavery, intimacy and revenge," that brings back the times when "men and women, black and white, found themselves linked in the throes of power and domination" (Dayan 11). Dayan examines the figure of Erzulie in order to explore the cult of mystification that tends to split "women into objects to be desired or abhorred," a belief that is dismantled with the figure of Erzulie, who incarnates different aspects of women and celebrates difference within every woman and among them. Dayan affirms that "[t]he ideal of woman, pure of stain, fixed on her pedestal, is only possible in the male imaginary because of the invention of a dark, debased sister" (8). Likewise, the Christian interpretation of the world as a set of binary oppositions simplifies the complicated essence of human behavior and produces unfounded hierarchies. Therefore, the necessity to enhance



and validate a category, like that of true womanhood, is accomplished through the definition of what the elements fitting into this category are not. Hence, what does not fit in the definition is placed outside, into a subaltern category that serves on its turn to reinforce the meaning of the original category. Adisa's shaping of Monica after Erzulie's ambivalent traces represent the author's intentions to dismantle the simplistic division of women into pure virgins and stained prostitutes.

In spite of her resolution to be less sexually driven and live a less indulgent life, no sooner had Monica settled in than she started an affair with Desmond, a married man from Kristoff. Out of revenge, Desmond's wife (Grace) and her petty girlfriends, Peggy and Marva, assault Monica in her own place, where she is left tied up and "half dead from the fire raging in her womb" (Adisa *Begins* 133), as one of her assaulters had "shoved her peppered fingers as deep into her womb as they could reach until the cup of chopped peppers was empty and her fingers were on fire" (131).⁷¹ Monica's assaulters put pepper in all her orifices, causing her an endless pain they think she deserves. The "violation of the female body" is a central theme in Adisa's novel, which will be explored separately in the next sub-chapter (5.2), especially with regard to the impossibility of sisterhood within patriarchal structures of love, and to the weightiness of shame and punishment as indicators of the established moral ideals. The focus here, however, will be on Monica's healing from such brutal invasion of her body, a recuperation that "demands a greatest effort in terms of exorcism" (Feng 166-167). The beginning of Monica's collective healing process starts when Miss Cotton—to whom Monica is closely related—is awoken from her sleep. In her dream, Miss Cotton has a vision of Monica's agonizing episode, and goes to her rescue. Beryl, Angel, Velma, Miss Dahlia, Olive, Valrie and Arnella are also urged to help Monica and organize themselves to do so. When they reach her house, their empathy towards Monica's grief is remarkable: "They all ached. The crime was too violent for words. The lips of their vaginas throbbed in sympathy, their wombs ached, and their salty tears left stain marks on their faces" (Adisa *Begins* 136). The fact that these women are interconnected through bodily pain to the point that "a violation against one woman in the community is portrayed as a transgression against all," opens the possibility for the rituals of "private and collective cleansing" that take place at the end of the novel (Feng 167). These rituals of healing create a space for pain to be recognized, to be named and shared with

⁷¹In *Sexual Feelings*, Elina Valovirta borrows Ahmed's explorations on shame to explain how "Monica's shamelessness becomes a shame for which she needs to be punished" (Valovirta *Sexual* 91).



others. Borrowing Spencer's classification of rituals in Adisa's novel, I will focus in this analysis on the "rituals of forgiveness, rituals of physical and emotional healing" and rituals "of communal and individual cleansing, following physical violence." Chapter 5.2 will deal with rituals of birth, violation and "celebration of the ancestors" (Spencer 108).

In her reflections on the damage caused to indigenous Australians, Ahmed observes that the pain inflicted upon one individual affects the whole community, which becomes "torn apart." Therefore, "the community is damaged insofar as 'attachment' with loved ones are severed" (*Cultural* 34). Ahmed's understanding of the politics of pain is reflected in Adisa's novel whenever the traumatic experience of a character affects other members of the community. Thus Ahmed insists that the "stories of pain must be heard" because "forgetting would be a repetition of the violence" (33). This explains Arnella's exhortation for Monica to name her assaulters during the healing ceremony at the river: "Call dem out. Name dose who peppa you. Name dem; dem not you sistas." (*Adisa Begins* 215). In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen observes that Adisa's novel achieves exactly the opposite of what she calls "empathic inaccuracy" (the author's inability to trigger an empathic response in the reader). In connection with the above passage on women's bodily responses to Monica's pain, Keen underlines: "Adisa cues readers to the appropriate response by marking the rescuers with the symptoms of emotional contagion" (137). Thus, Adisa's ability to provoke an emotional response in her readers triggers mechanisms of empathic behavior that are to influence the ways in which readers approach and understand the cultural politics of Monica's doomed incident. I want to borrow here Ahmed's notion of the "contingency of pain," which examines how "stories of pain involve complex relations of power" (22). In effect, there is no "relation of equivalence" between the "reader" and the "victim" of the story (21). Similarly, I would argue that Adisa's claim to suffering on behalf of Monica in her writing is revealing in terms of the affective responsiveness to pain. Pain is to be understood as "a contingent attachment to the world" (Sartre *Being* 333; qtd. in Ahmed *Cultural* 28), and not as an emotion subject to cause the readers' empathy in order to free themselves of strong, personal emotions, as it occurs in catharsis.⁷² Indeed, the reader does not go through the process of overcoming the

⁷²In "The Last Stitch" (162), and in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* (8, 47), Donnette Francis insists on the fact that Caribbean antiromance does not embrace catharsis. See chapter 3 on how antiromance may promote Caribbean women's agency outside the canons of tragedy and romance.



character's pain and "the healing of a community" simply in order to feel "better after hearing about individual stories of success" (Ahmed *Cultural* 21). Rather, I think, borrowing Ahmed's reflections, that the exposure to these intimate stories of pain encourages the reader to become attached to "the world of other bodies." That is to say, the reader is moved towards other bodies by reading (i.e. being in touch with) their stories. The reason why the stories move the reader outside of herself/himself is because these stories touch her/him at the emotional level (28). After all, as Ahmed reminds us, the word 'emotion' etymologically means "to move or to move out" (11). Adisa's deliberate political choice to invest in stories of pain is reinforced by blending her characters' private exposure to storytelling and testimonies with her own storytelling as a public art form. To paraphrase Ahmed, responding to the pain of others does not mean that one has to feel exactly as the others do; but rather that one is "open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel" (30). The ungraspability of the other's pain is what "calls me back to my body, even if it is not in pain, to feel it, to explore its surfaces, to inhabit it" (30-31). Thus, Adisa's claim of empathy in *It Begins With Tears* encourages the reader's understanding of the mechanisms at work in the processes of cultural belonging. Such mechanisms can be found in the "failures and possibilities, the contingencies and contradictions of female everyday experiences" (Francis "Last" 162).

Miss Cotton and Arnella play a central role in the looking-after of Monica. As Miss Cotton's right hand, Arnella's dedication to take care of Monica outstands, not only for her predisposition—she can be of use outside the domestic space because her sister Valrie is looking after the baby—but also for the unique intimacy with which she carries out her healing endeavors:

Monica groaned and writhed on the bed. Arnella knelt on the bed, leaning over Monica's exposed lower half. Bracing on one hand, she brought out a breast, which was hard with milk, and began to express it all over Monica's swollen inner thighs and blistered vaginal area. (149)

This passage reveals Arnella's healing capacities through her own body fluids. The abundant flux of milk makes reference to her ability to nurture and heal. It is also a fluidity that recalls the river goddess Oshun, and her connection with Yoruba healing practices. But it is not only women who perform healing rituals by means of their



fluids in Adisa's novel. Desmond also offers Monica his love and care by giving oral sex to her, as

he bent to slowly lick the remaining pepper from the folds of Monica's labia and the mouth of her vagina. He blew his love-breath and ran his tongue over every space, every fold, every membrane of Monica's private self, and imagined that he felt her healing under the moist attention. (Adisa *Begins* 157)

The traditional role assigned to women as pleasure givers within the patriarchal system is significantly reversed by Adisa in this scene. But Monica is not receiving oral sex for the sake of self pleasure only: Desmond feels for her and is trying to soothe her pain. She is benefiting from his saliva (his intimate fluid, as it is Arnella's milk) because he loves her, and wants her to recover and be back to him: "he was confident his love was strong enough to make her well. He wanted her well, to love strong and passionately over and over again" (157). But also, he felt responsible for the pain inflicted upon her, because "as a married man, Desmond was himself the actual adulterer" (Valovirta *Sexual* 149). He had been unable to take the decision to quit his wife and family in order to stay with his loved one, and he knew that Monica was paying the price of his cowardice: "Last night he had failed to come home because he hated confrontation, but his action had left the way clear for someone to attack and deeply hurt his love" (Adisa *Begins* 156). Thus Monica—the former prostitute, "the perpetual giver whose body can be used by men at will" (Valovirta *Sexual* 148)—transforms into a lovable person. She has been sharing with Desmond intense erotic feelings and, as a consequence of sharing "the power of each other's feelings," to quote Lorde, has aroused between them ("Uses" 58).

Valovirta affirms that Desmond's sexual healing ritual indicates, on the one hand, his will to absorb and share "in the pain that is a result of their transgressive lovemaking" (Weir-Soley 178; qtd. in Valovirta 149). On the other hand, his spiritual attitude also "brings a change to the sexual politics that has previously characterized Monica's existence as a provider of pleasure" (Valovirta 149). Desmond's act of devotion serves also for the women in charge of Monica to realize that he has not been using her as a sexual object, but that he does care for her and loves her. Valovirta observes how the minor roles of men in Caribbean women's fiction, such as Desmond's in *It Begins With Tears*, could be envisaged as an attempt from these



writers to underline “more democratic gender relations” where men do not take over, but rather participate in helping women recuperate and “heal from wounds inflicted by internalized misogyny on the part of other women.” This approach “challenges the prototypical notion of black Caribbean masculinity as absent or abusive” (Valovirta *Sexual* 145-146). Desmond’s share of the responsibility by joining “the women in the healing ritual,” offers a way out from the “gender separation” that characterizes Kristoff Village throughout the novel (Weir-Soley 182-183). It is in this scene, as Valovirta acknowledges, that “earlier gender segregation dissolves” (*Sexual* 149). This critic also observes that “Adisa’s depiction of oral sex stands out in Caribbean women’s writing,” because she represents sex as a healing and redemptive tool, “as something that sustains and preserves life.” Adisa’s co-edited volume *Caribbean Erotic* gathers together individual attempts to enunciate “a decidedly oral dimension of sex and love-making” (Valovirta *Sexual* 149). In effect, Adisa’s poems “Nothing but Love” (*Caribbean* 40), “A Smile on My Face” (41-43), and “What I Want” (44), included in this volume, are a clear example of the author’s clear intentions to uncover oral sex, to get rid of the taboo and to embrace sex as a source of pleasure and beauty. Such intentions can be read in verses such as “i feel your tongue / unfurling my petals” (40), or “your tongue and fingers / travel down back streets/ . . . I didn’t know were there” (43), and “let your tongue / tease my thighs apart / turn me gentle / placing your head / in my calabash” (44). Also the sexual fluids are metaphorically brought to view as in the following verses where the tongue of the male sexual partner has been sucking the poetic voice’s female body, starting at the toes, and stroking

every nerve
 until heat rose from my skin
 yet you continued to tantalize
 until my wetness flowed
 a stream meandering
 to meet the river (41)

The condition of water meeting other water is as illustrative of river formations as it is of oral sex practices. This meeting indicates a communion as well as an increasing fluidity that will allow the movement forward of the water, until the river will finally reach the ocean. The metaphor of the river and the ocean is a universal metaphor



that brings (bodily) life, eroticism and (spiritual) death into the cycle of life, a cycle that is based on physical and spiritual regeneration. The river, a symbol of fluidity, is a central part in *It Begins With Tears*, as it is the place where women go to heal and let go of their painfully concealed secrets. A case in point is when Valrie and Arnella—daughters of river deities Oya and Oshun respectively—reconcile after the birth of Baby-girl and recover from the trauma of not being real twins. In the following passage the confinement of the river merges into the vastness of the ocean in a figurative way, meaning that the bitterness withheld is finally released into the uncontrollable, dark passages of oblivion. As Alexander indicates, the river starts to remember, impelled by the rhythms of the ocean waves, “reminding the body of a prior promise of its ultimate surrender” (*Pedagogies* 321):

Arnella breathed through parted lips, still journeying to that place far away, where the river banks open into the ocean . . . Both Arnella and Valrie felt light, giddy, a feeling they hadn’t experienced for many, many years. After Arnella nursed the child, Valrie changed her diaper, and the three walked up the river, the salty air stinging their nostrils. (*Adisa Begins* 112).

The imminence of the ocean, Arnella’s mind yearning for it, and the salty atmosphere sharply pricking their nostrils, announce the fated pain inherent to transformation and growth. As indicated by Meredith M. Gadsby in *Sucking Salt*, it is due to the experiences of the Middle Passage, when slaves “chose to ‘suck salt’ by diving into the ocean rather than endure bondage in a foreign land,” that the ocean and its salt have eventually become symbols for the sustenance and preservation of the “spirit against degradation.” Hence the effects of the salt are considered “to preserve, heal, cleanse, balance, season, and strengthen” (45). It is crucial to note that salt is a fundamental component, not only of sea water, but also of tears, the most recurring symbol of incipient recovery in *It Begins With Tears*. The title itself gives clues about how the process of recovery must begin. It must begin through the most intimate body fluids one can shed, the stubborn waters/emotions one stingily holds within. Tears are therefore a bodily trace that emphasizes Adisa’s notion of the scar, as studied in chapter 4.1. They are unequivocal signs of a past story that needs to surface, that needs to be heard, that needs to be healed. By means of her characters’ tears, Adisa underlines the incorruptible ability of the body to break open the psychic numbing. The “ritual of female sympathy” that occurs when the women



of the story bathe in the river is what breaks the “persistent ‘latency’” of “unspeakable memory” and opens “access to the past.” It is along these lines that the ritual “attain[s] the form of narrative memory” (Feng 168). Once the story is released, like a stream of tears meeting the river of communal history, it is possible to recover from the personal trauma, that is indeed collective, and to decolonize from below.

In connection with tears, the watery elements recreated in the above passage bring to the fore the healing powers of fluidity, translated into the human necessity of making and adapting to changes and letting go. Accordingly, Alexander personifies the ocean as a female force that is able to open up memories of self that have been put underwater by the manipulation of history and power structures. As this author points out, the “Ocean, . . . will reveal the secrets that lie at the bottom.” ‘She’ needs no name, (like the Atlantic, the Pacific, and so on) because she is “her watery translucent self, reaching without need of compass for her sisters whomever and wherever they are.” The ocean, then, “will call you by your ancient name” thus impelling you to answer because you have not fully forgotten, because “[w]ater always remembers” (*Pedagogies* 285). The strength gained from the ability to flow represents an aspect of the erotic in its own right, and as such, a tool for Adisa’s female characters’ resistance to colonial and patriarchal impositions. As Lorde would put it:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (“Uses” 53)

The healing ceremonies that Miss Cotton and Arnella arrange for the group of women from their community take place in the river called River Mumma. This is the name also given to the spirit mermaid of the river in Jamaican peasant folklore, which symbolizes both Oshun and Yemoja (Weir-Soley 176). The ritual ceremonies enacted in the river evoke a series of erotic, sensual experiences, like “the warm water that was like expert hands massaging their bodies” (Adisa *Begins* 215). The river ceremony enables women to turn to their inner feelings and to acknowledge the sources of their pain by naming them, a necessary step in their healing. Likewise, at



the river, Monica will call out the names of the women who peppered her, and Beryl will also name her story of rape that she had secretly kept for herself out of shame. The healing rituals that take place at the river are enacted with both "spiritual and sexual overtones that foreground the power and possibility of the erotic" (178). Adisa's recognition of the power of the erotic as a source of female resistance is aligned with Lorde's affirmation that women must acknowledge their own erotic power in order to become, not only sexually and sensually whole, but also spiritually and emotionally balanced ("Uses" 56). As Adisa herself conveys in Spencer's essay,

my first objective in this novel was to look at healing and to try to understand why there is so much pain among black people apart from the issue of slavery. What I realized is that we have not healed from slavery because we have not done any rituals; and, in fact, a lot of rituals are absent from our lives. In all cultures, not just African cultures, whenever there is some kind of trauma there is a ritual performed to bring back balance to the community. But many of us black people in the new world have not practiced any kind of rituals. (108)

Adisa's attempt to represent and understand African diasporic spiritual practices is a clear evidence of the author's decolonizing agenda. As we have seen, the spiritual and the sexual work together throughout the novel in a variety of healing rituals that build kinships of sisterhood within the community as well as male participation in the community's struggle for sexual and spiritual freedom.

Bringing Back Home in the Erotic and Imaginary Spaces of *Painting Away Regrets*

Adisa's second novel *Painting Away Regrets* could be just a story about revenge, or the pointlessness of revenge. Nevertheless, as the plot develops, the marital conflict between a Black Caribbean woman and her Afro American husband reveals much more. What starts as a story of a woman plotting to kill her husband ends up being a story about how kinship ties can inform of a larger conflict between what we call Western progress and the traditions that are latent in African diasporic circles. The story of Christine, a Jamaican woman settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, is told against the backdrop of Afro-Caribbean cultural and mythological elements. Erotically charged and yet politically relevant, the story gives account of a woman's



evolution from passionate, uncontrollable actions, into a widely conscious, subtle and yet strong, self-healing attitude to life. This story is set in the middle of a divorce, and it posits the domestic as a dangerous place rather than a safe place where warmth, love and intimacy can develop. In fact, as stressed by Boyce Davies, the home and the village are often regarded in Black women's writings as "sites of compulsory domesticity and the enforcement of specific gender relations" where many women feel subjugated (*Black* 65). The intrusion of emotional imbalance and violence through a male agent serves to question home, love and family, and to take the domestic sphere to a political level. The dangerous characteristics of the domestic space recreated in Adisa's novel is aligned with Francis' concept of the Caribbean "antiromance" that will be discussed later in this chapter ("Last" 161). In this novel Adisa brings Christine's Caribbean home from the domestic center outwards, which makes her critical about the patriarchal basis of national identity and colonialism. Boyce Davies seems to agree when observing that, for the Black woman writer, "the rewriting of home becomes a critical link in the articulation of identity," a practice that resists forms of domination and looks toward the origins of a people, but which "also locates home in its many transgressive and disjunctive experiences" (*Black* 115).

In spite of the fact that, in literary criticism, the domestic space is traditionally read as a reflection of the larger society, sexuality has usually been blacked out from this category, and therefore stripped of the accompanying rights. Thus one can see how important writings on female sexual politics are, more often than not, unfairly undervalued, and cast outside the territory of political narrative. Maybe it is due to the bias played upon narratives of intimacy, for their array of (apparently gratuitous) private affairs; or maybe it is because they are written by people who are not afraid of such prejudiced critical reception, but who nonetheless are susceptible of being punished for their audacity.⁷³ Following such critical

⁷³In *M. J. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge reflects on the heroic qualities of third person (secular) confession. The implications of confession can be attributed to the act of writing, inasmuch as writing is a kind of confession that involves the author's responsibility for the acknowledged truth. Coetzee insists that any articulated truth can be considered autobiography. In his own words, "all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it" (Coetzee *Doubling* 17 qtd. in Attridge 139). In this regard, Attridge affirms: "the most difficult task in articulating the history and condition of the self is admitting that of which one is ashamed, that which one's very body resists admitting." Nonetheless, it is only when the individual explores into that which is secret and shameful, that she can find the "source of that which is wrong in the self" according to the established moral standards (147). Adisa's audacity has been



prejudices, it is not surprising that *Painting Away Regrets* has been labeled as “a romance novel in the Mills and Boon/ Harlequin/ Silhouette/ Nora Roberts tradition” (Forbes “Painting” 119), an affirmation that can be easily contested by addressing Donette Francis’ notion of what she calls the Caribbean “antiromance,” a genre “where writers foreground intimate lives to underscore that neither familial home, national homeland, nor immigrant nation function as safe spaces of belonging (“Last” 161). By chronicling “state failures, sexual violence, and individual constraints,” Caribbean antiromance writers are using such features “as important ground clearings necessary to plot better futures” (166).

Back in her last years of college Christine falls madly in love with Donald, one of her summer flings, and rapidly discards Okello, the Ugandan student with whom she has been flirting. She marries Donald, and years later she realizes he is an irresponsible, selfish man who is not who she had belief he was. By the time they are divorcing, they already have four children. Issues on the children’s custody and the division of goods complicate things. Christine hates Donald deeply and starts having murderous thoughts. She will then realize how blind she was to entertain an ill relationship that consumed her inner power and creativity. Indeed, throughout the novel she often feels that she has lost the erotic touch within her marriage. She misses sexual intimacy with Donald, who besides, does not approve of her artistic drive (Christine is a corporate lawyer who decides to give more space to her painting) nor of her spiritual practices (she eventually leaves behind her Afro-Caribbean beliefs). We can here understand the erotic disempowerment in Lorde’s terms, as a disconnection from the emotional, the sensual and creative forces of everyday activities. This disconnection does not mean to stop doing things, but to forget about “how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing . . . that sense of satisfaction and completion” (“Uses” 54).

Along with the intimately portrayed story of Christine’s marriage with Donald, spiritual forces appear intermittently to perform their distinct role and determine Christine’s destiny. The divine and the worldly overlap each other to the extent that, at times, both levels of existence are not easily distinguishable. As in her first novel, here Adisa recreates African-rooted cosmologies and uses them not only to assist her character’s struggle to overcome personal difficulties, but also to portray how the worldview of an African Caribbean woman in the diaspora in

explicitly accounted for by Winston Nugnet in “The Audacity of Palmer Adisa.”



America can carry in itself a larger history of cultural resistance.⁷⁴ The novel shows that the divine has nothing to do with any kind of transcendence of the material; it is—as M. Jaqui Alexander puts it in *Pedagogies of Crossing*—in continuous intervention with “the material, the quotidian,” which are “the very bodies through which divinity breathes life.” In this respect, the body works as “the direct instrument of the Divine”, as a kind of “mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead.” It is as if the Divine was there for us to make some sense out of our quotidian experiences. In this sense, the Divine can be understood not only as the practice that assists “cultural retention and survival” within the communities of the African diaspora, but also as that system of symbols, terms and other “organizational codes that the Bântu-Kôngo people used to make sense of the world;” an approach that connects the spiritual with the epistemological (293).

Structurally, the novel consists of a set of nine episodes each of which starts with an introduction to a sacred force, embodied by either deities or other elements of the Yoruba tradition, like the Ase, or even by the figure of Christine’s dead grandmother, Nannie.⁷⁵ Each introduction is followed by a series of titled subsections that are in conversation with the introductory element. The author’s figurative prose used to describe the spiritual elements is conducted as if a chorus was summoning the main theme of each episode. This chorus-like narrative effect is similar to the call and response structures so common in African modes of representation. The importance of the word as an element to bring things into existence is central in African diasporic cosmologies. Likewise, it is “through voice [that] one is able to make àshé come to life” as Boyce Davies clarifies. Boyce Davies also emphasizes that it is “through this logic of antiphony and call and response” that “both art and àshé have efficacy” (*Caribbean* 73-74). The movement back and forth of this call and response pattern, similar to Brathwaite’s ‘tidalectic framework’ (*ConVERSations* 34), functions like an echoing chant that plunges the reader into the most resentfully concealed parts of the human mind. As remarkably

⁷⁴See Boyce Davies’ *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (130-151). Adisa’s volume of poetry *Traveling Women*, written in conjunction with Afro-American poet Devorah Major, also weaves the political with the domestic from a perspective of gender.

⁷⁵The Ase, Àshé, or Àxé is the life force in the Yoruba religions that assures the dynamic existence and enables things to happen (Eyin and Eugênio 274). Literally, it means “so be it” (Alexander 299). Although in the New World Ase is considered a vital principle with no specific human-like imagery, Adisa recovers its Old World depiction as “an ageless woman with a baby asleep on her bag,” thus conveying continuity and change (Adisa *Painting* 36).



interpreted by Elizabeth DeLoughrey in *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literature*, a ‘tidalectical’ worldview would formulate a cyclical kind of evolution, similar to that of the ocean waves, as opposed to the Western traditional models that favor opposite binaries and linear progress:

Tidalectics engage what Brathwaite calls an “alter/native” historiography to linear models of colonial progress. This “tidal dialectic” resists the synthesizing telos of Hegel’s dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean. (2)

In Adisa’s novel, the movement back and forth between time periods breaks with the traditional linearity of time, as well as with the teleology—the attachment to purpose, or “causal explanations” (Bienenstock 55)—characteristic of dialectical thought. Brathwaite’s temporal framework of ‘tidalectics’ finds resonance with Kristeva’s conception of women’s time as non-linear, cyclical and fluid. Kristeva affirms that, by adopting the circular rhythm of the female space, female narratives can disrupt patriarchal notions of linear time (“Women’s” 193). Through notions of fluidity and circularity both authors seek to deflate Western patriarchal structures of power. Adisa’s novel is thus arranged in a circular manner, with the novel starting *in medias res*. This moment is recovered at the end of the novel, episode IX, where—after the memories recalled throughout the episodes in between—the narration returns to the opening scene. The non-linear movement of Adisa’s narrative is arranged with such fluidity; the effect is that one is impelled to be a lively part of the whole picture, dragging one’s own life into the text, and reaching a state of spiritual ecstasy and deep understanding of Christine’s wounds. There is also throughout the narrative a movement that connects the spiritual with the material spaces. Spiritual elements serve not only to introduce each part of the narrative symbolically; in fact, they also disrupt the worldly level in the form of appearances, dreams and even human beings who, enacting the role of a spiritual force, will intervene directly in Christine’s life. This non-linear structure of weaved narratives—that mix the sacred and the material levels, that join spirituality with eroticism, the past with the present, and the spiritual with the political—give a broader dimension to the human condition of being woman, Black and migrant.

Furthermore, this new merging dimension reminds of Lorde’s understanding of the erotic (the “psychic and emotional”) as the “creative energy empowered” that



is “the nurturer . . . of all our deepest knowledge” (“Uses” 55). Thus eroticism, understood as emotional responses to life, deflates European-American epistemologies, and proves that neither our thoughts nor our emotions are linear. It is interesting to note here, as discerningly pointed out by Ahmed, that the word ‘emotion’ has its roots in the Latin word ‘emovere,’ which means “to move or to move out,” and that emotions are therefore related to movement but also to attachment: “What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place.” Therefore, in the same way that movement “connects bodies with other bodies” (*Cultural* 11), it also brings together apparently opposing fields, like past, present and future; material and imaginary spaces; or spirituality and eroticism. The continuous movement in Adisa’s particular way of narrating establishes a connection between these elements, bringing forward the idea of circulation and unity within a heterogeneous reality. Therefore what is happening in the present is shown to be attached to what happened in the past or what is going to happen in the future. In the same way, what seems to be mere intimate experiences (be they spiritual, sexual, artistic or erotic), carries within epistemological and political implications that enable the character to understand her situation in her family, her community and the world at large.

Episode I is presided by the Orisha Eshù-Elegbá, also known in the New World as Exú, Baba Elegba, Elegua/ Ellegua and Legba (Russell 9). This figure is described as “the messenger, mediator and philosopher” who “stands in the middle of life’s road” but refuses to offer advice and, instead, “detains people or sends them on, depending on his mood” (Adisa *Painting* 9). In the Yoruba tradition Eshù-Elegbá is the deity that represents the first ancestor. He is believed to embrace all the conflicts and contradictions inherent to human beings. Thus he is not fully bad nor fully good; just like any human being, he is able to love and hate, make war and peace, unite and divide. In fact, Eshù-Elegbá embodies the absence of dualism that is characteristic within the Yoruba tradition, thus ignoring the opposition between good and evil, understanding that what seems good for one person can be bad for another (Eyin and Eugênio 80). After the proper introduction of Eshù-Elegbá, the next section entitled “Justice Blues” opens in the midst of action, when Christine goes to seek help in Caribbean spiritual practices. The following excerpt depicts the novel’s opening scene at the babalawo’s house. Christine feels she is losing her head for her husband, whom she has been plotting to kill out of revenge. Thus she requests a healing ritual with the Babalawo Dada and his wife Akuji:



“Forgive me,” she cried into the silent room. “Please don’t take my children from me, please. I need them. I miss them desperately.” The silence mocked her plea, and her mind veered again to the murderous scheme emerging in her consciousness. She had been planning it in detail. From the semidarkness, as if reading her thoughts, a voice said, “Tonight. He’s in his office. Do it tonight.”

She rolled onto her back, placed her arms on her abdomen, and closed her eyes.

Some time later she nodded awake, alarmed and confused. Where was she? Lurching forward in the chair, she shook her head clear, then focused. She stared at Donald, his chin resting on his chest; eyes glazed, open, motionless. (*Adisa Painting 16*)

Above is a masterful evidence of how Adisa’s narration organizes the action (but does not divide it) in two levels of existence. Christine’s decision to turn to spiritual practices enables her to carry out her criminal plan in her own head, but so intensely that it seems like real life. She swifts from the room where she is being treated to Donald’s office and proceeds according to her intentions. For a while, through the first episode indeed, Christine is confused about her having really killed her husband, which will later make her reflect on its consequences. This experience works in a similar way as catharsis, and enables her to purge the destructive emotions that had been blindfolding her passionate actions.⁷⁶

The voice that impels Christine to go accomplish her murderous plan is likely to be Eshù-Elegbá’s. Following this Orisha’s non-binary epistemology, Adisa skillfully debunks Christian oppositional patterns through this character that welcomes both the good and the bad. In a later section entitled “Votary,” represented as the avatar of Eshù-Elegbá, an old drunk man called Baba Elegba is placed “in the middle of a busy street,” where he is seen just as another “old drunk” (*Painting 29*). This way Adisa portrays this deity’s affinity with the human condition. However, this half-human character feels like an alien not for his drunken condition, but for something else. He has been accused by the voice of the omniscient narration, that

⁷⁶If the ritual of healing is understood as an aesthetic experience, then it could be said that Christine is experiencing the psychological implications of catharsis understood as “the healing power of art.” See “Katharsis” in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*.



here adopts a collective chorus voice commenting upon the main action in the fashion of the Greek tragedies. The charges are that Baba Elegba has not perpetrated Christine's passionate actions during her intense session at the babalawo's house. Hence the chorus voice reprobates: "Baba Elegba, while you dreamed, Shango jumped over flames and seduced a mortal woman. She sits now, trying to entangle her dreams. Go peek in the window of that yellow house" (29).

As a matter of fact, after having killed her husband—imaginatively, during the spiritual session—she rushes to her car where Shango, the Orisha of passion and justice (*Painting* 360), is waiting for her and successfully seduces her:

Christine's g-string rubbed against her vulva. She felt Shango's hands on her thighs, stroking them up, down, around, and it took all her concentration to keep driving . . . She wanted to fling her legs wide and have him cool her heat, hose her down. She squirmed in the driver's seat . . . Safely inside the house . . . she pulled off the track suit, cap, sneakers and gloves and stood with her half-naked body pushed up against the door and used her right hand to stroke her nipples, rub her hands over and between her thighs, finger her clitoris through the g-string, feel her wetness . . . She heard Shango calling . . . She had never been able to persuade Donald to do it in the kitchen counter. Shango wasn't so prudish She . . . climbed on the kitchen counter and lay on her back. Shango mounted her . . . After he had sufficiently aroused and teased her, he entered her like a cannon. The kitchen was filled with the odour of sex. (24-25)

Adisa's exhibition of sexual scenes throughout the novel are not fortuitous but, rather, they have a healing intention. In fact, as Weir-Soley has remarked, "unlike some Caribbean women writers, Adisa does not shy away from dealing with adult female sexuality" (153). In an interview carried out by Erika J. Waters, she affirms:

my mother and my children are sometimes embarrassed by what I write, especially the sexual imagery, but I've always felt more comfortable naked and still do. I was in my mid-twenties when I realized that secrets can be used against you if you guard them, but if you fling them out at the world, you're free. I'm still working at being free, at not being held prisoner by my past. Through writing, I'm free and I'm healed. (16)



Adisa's detailed description of sexual scenes clearly underlines the importance she gives to acknowledging intimate actions in order to feel free, thus revealing the political implications of talking about sexuality. It also informs the readers of how sexual practices affect people's daily lives as well as the individual's position in the world. In the above scene, Christine is accomplishing her desires and fantasies. Although she seems to be focused on giving pleasure only to herself (by satisfying her sexual cravings, masturbating and letting him do), she, however, does not let him go the next day until she can thank him back for his passionate bestowal of selfless love. The following morning—still in the intangible space created during the healing session—she is determined to give him a second round:

She stepped into the tub and fitted her body perfectly between his open thighs. She felt his rod hardening against her bottom and settled back comfortably on his chest.

Shango was not a spirit to resist beauty. Christine had come to him in great pain. She had been wronged. She wanted justice. He offered to help, even before she offered him a piece, and what a piece it was . . . Then he had to return to cool Christine down, bestow his reward, especially after the night's bravery. (*Adisa Painting* 26)

Through this experience, Christine is indeed receiving sexual healing therapy from Shango. Their sexual intercourse becomes a space for sharing and enjoying, but it is also a way for her to reconnect to her sense of self and to let go of all the harmful thoughts she had been harboring. The fact that Adisa acknowledges sexuality as a healing practice—that she records it with the audacity of the eavesdropper, explores it through her characters' senses, and describes it literally (without figurations)—indicates that she does not look away from it, nor does she pretend to call it "something else." As Lorde stresses, "[i]n order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized." In consequence, Lorde stresses out that utilizing is not the same as abusing: The "abuse of feeling," expands Lorde, is a "misnaming" that leads to a "distortion" of sexuality "which results in pornography and obscenity" ("Uses" 58). Lorde's premises on the erotic as something different from the pornographic informs us that, as a consequence, there has been a systematic opposition between the spiritual and the political (the psychical and the emotional seems to be at odds



with politics), as well as between the spiritual and the erotic (the spiritual at odds with the sensual results into what she calls “a flattened affect” and “self-abnegation”). Adisa handles sexuality through beauty and union. Therefore, Adisa’s inscription of the sexual act reflects a shameless and generous shared joy. Sexuality is hereby seen in opposition to pornography, and is looked at through the broader lenses of the erotic. The erotic is, in sum, understood “as a source of power and information” that women must acknowledge and use in our lives (“Uses” 52). In the above sexual scenes, Adisa bridges the tangible and the intangible allowing a spiritual being and a human being to have intercourse in Christine’s transcendent experience. This link between the spiritual and the material makes of the transcendental experience a very practical one. The scene speaks by itself in terms of Adisa’s attempt to bring forward non-binary ways of knowing able to challenge the received versions of the world. She wants to make clear that the spiritual breathes through the body with such an intensity that the individual can know herself “through Spirit,” and that she has to surrender “to the movement of the Spirit in order to wrestle with the movement of history” (Alexander 294).

After Christine’s and Shango’s sexual intercourse, the chorus voice intervenes in a judgmental tone: it was not a good idea that a mortal woman with worldly problems has sexual intercourse with an Orisha. The chorus accuses Baba Elegba right away, but he simply regrets that humans cannot understand his language, and mutters to himself: “Seek solitude away from the entreaties of people who thought pain was a punishment for some sin they had committed. Bumbles! The ignorance was astounding. They were getting a chance to make life; it couldn’t all be made in pleasure” (30). His response once again gives evidence of his dismissal of apparently unresolvable conflicts or contradictions. He also adopts a non-judgmental position towards people’s actions, exercising a certain degree of sympathy towards humans. Baba Elegba’s sensibility towards the worldly seems to reflect the way Adisa perceives herself as a writer: she observes her characters and lets them make the choices that will lead them to their own destinies, without judging or condemning them morally; and so does the orisha Eshù-Elegbá with regard to humans. As commented in the previous chapter, this distancing from her characters constitutes a central element in Adisa’s writing. As she admits in an interview, “a writer is always at the center of every work she produces, but she must get out of her own way, and the way of the characters and stories, in order for the work to really live and have impact on readers” (interview with Calderaro n.p.). To confirm this



parallelism between this Orisha's attitude to human life and Adisa's position in writing, it is revealing to embrace Heather Russell's reflections in *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic*, where Eshù-Elegbá is described as "the divine linguist" who governs "over hermeneutic and heuristic processes," reminding us "that power is derived from a simultaneous affirmation and subversion of discursive codes" (9).

The subsequent episodes—in third person narration, like the rest of the novel—trace back to Christine's college days when she met her husband. Episode II establishes the connections between Christine's present situation and her memories. This episode is presided by Ase, the Yoruba "force that makes things happen" and that "represents both the past and the present." The regular, repeating motion of Ase can be enough to lead you to trance (Adisa *Painting* 36-38). After introducing the features of Ase, the following sub-part—entitled "Nyabingi Rhythm"—starts by depicting the morning after Christine has left the babalawo's house. After having recognized that "she could not remember *any* good times between Donald and herself," it is the presence of the sea what finally pushes her to remember "the good times with him, alongside the awful times" (39-40). Before the narration turns to Christine's past, "[t]he salty smell of the sea sprayed her nostrils, her senses were awakened" (*Painting* 40). This moment reminds us of what happens in the above-mentioned reading of *It Begins With Tears*, when Arnella and Valrie go back to the river after making up matters, and the presence of the ocean becomes tangible, revealing the characters' intention to let themselves go with the "tidal way of the Ocean in search of a place to settle." This merging with the ocean can be understood as "a practice of alignment with the Divine" (Alexander *Pedagogies* 321). According to Alexander's interpretation, it is Yemoja's materialization through the ocean—since Yemoja is the Yoruba deity of all bodies of water—what comes to dismiss "modernity's mode of reason" and "to accept, to cleanse, to bless, to remind us that in the same way the breaking of waves does not compromise the integrity of the Ocean, so too anything broken in our lives cannot compromise that cosmic flow to wholeness." Nonetheless, as Alexander points out, it needs practice for the body to learn to surrender and be taken by "this tidal flow" (322).

It is in episode II, assisted by the alluring rhythms of Ase, as indicated above, that Christine starts to remember the summer when she and Donald met. She had been working hard during the course to complete her law degree; now that the summer arrived, she was determined to welcome some romance into her life, but



nothing too serious. She just meant to enjoy a summer fling, because she still had “definite plans for her career and her life” and she was not interested in a “long-term relationship” (Adisa *Painting* 40). Christine seems to be trapped between romantic commitment and professional achievement. She is inclined to choose the second option; hence her resistance to occupy the space usually allotted to women “in any given society,” which is, as stressed by Boyce Davies, the domestic space where wives are expected to serve “the male” (*Black* 68). As a matter of fact, by eluding commitment in her relationships she rejects to embark on a path to stability, eventual marriage and female domesticity. As a migrant middle-class Caribbean woman, Christine wants to secure a professional job in the US, where she certainly will have more opportunities than she would in Jamaica. Thus her preference to accomplish professional productive labor rather than exploiting her sexual and prospective reproductive capacities within a domestic space. In accordance with her plans, Christine had been flirting with Okello, an Ugandan student and a great dancer too who was decided to have her (46-47), but then she met Donald—a Black American who was about to finish his doctorate in law—and she suddenly and completely fell in love with him, discarding Okello right away (48). Christine is portrayed at this stage of her life as Oshun's daughter and devotee. Strongly driven by Oshun's qualities, she seduces Donald, and they find themselves being sexually drawn to each other in such a way that everything around disappears (57, 66, 69).

Episode III is governed by Oshun, the female Orisha of love and sensuality. It describes the moment when Christine irresistibly gives in and blindly falls for Donald. In this episode Christine performs rituals that reconnect her with the energies of this Orisha. On her way to a priestess' house where she is to take part in a bimbe ritual, Christine “stopped at the store and bought some yellow chrysanthemums for Oshun's altar”(77). Yellow and golden colors are attributed to this Orisha, as we have seen also in the above description of Arnella, the sensual, creative and nurturing figure in Adisa's first novel (*Begins* 12). During the ritual she attends, Christine experiences “complete abandonment of self-control”:

She danced and danced until she fell. The room was crowded and stuffy, . . . one minute she was dancing and the next minute hands were pulling her up off the floor and taking her outside. A priestess sat her on a low stool, covered her hair with a golden cloth, . . . she threw up and was given



honeyed warm water to drink. . . . Oshun had claimed her head and was riding her. (*Adisa Painting* 78)

During the bimbe for Oshum, Christine has led the drums and the rhythmic movement of the dance carry her into trance. The golden cloth represents the color that is characteristic of Oshun (Eyin and Eugênio 155) and the honey is one of Oshun's attributes, as it "has the ability to soothe and heal." In rituals, honey is directly applied to Orishas "after blood sacrifices to balance the hot, vital life force and to channel the ashé released to produce action and positive change" (Otero and Falola 126). After recovering from the trance, Christine returns home feeling sick; Donald phones to check in on her, and goes to her place right away. Christine is, however, conscious of the dangers of such sexual allurements. Carried away by her passionate feelings, she overlooks some other important factors in a relationship, like responsibility and planning ahead. In a moment of self-disclosure, Christine declares to Donald that he is making her "foolish and neglectful" and that she cannot lose sight of her goals, nor has any plans to follow him if he found a job somewhere else. Donald does not seem to be so worried and responds that he is willing to adapt to her life, and that he has no big plans, except enjoying his time with her: "For now I'm just happy to spend time with you" (*Adisa Painting* 80). Although Christine insists that she will not have much time to dedicate to him when the semester begins, Donald just responds saying that he will miss her, and, as can be read in the following lines, he silences her concerns, cajoling her with promises of loyalty and giving her sexual pleasure (81):

"You know I'll do anything for you..."

"Anything?" [says Christine]

"Yes, including eating your dirty underwear." And he tongued her through her panties until she was wet and squirming with desire. (81)

In this and other passages from the novel (70, 132, 150) it can be deduced that Christine, a courageous and self-confident woman, has been overlooking Donald's pusillanimous attitude—under Oshun's influence—for the sake of her own sexual pleasure. In the same way—later on, when it is the Orisha Yemoja who rules her life—she would also overlook Donald's flaws so that their children could have their father at home. Christine's failure to notice these negative aspects in Donald are



signs of a growing split between the spiritual and the erotic that eventually occurs throughout Christine's relationship. As will be examined further on, married to Donald and with four children, Christine "felt disgusted, stifled with her life and a job for which she had lost the taste, and was sure that the constant pain in her lower back and neck was from carrying Donald" (193). Christine eventually recovers from her dissatisfaction in work and her unbalanced marriage, which gives clues about the author's intention to integrate the spiritual and the erotic as indivisible parts of life. Lorde's words can help understand this perspective when she claims:

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd. ("Uses" 59)

Taking up Lorde's words, it could be said that Christine, certainly misguided by a sexual intimacy that lacked spirituality, had unrealistic expectations from Donald. The lack of spirituality translates into the fact that there was no real exchange of feelings between them. In Lorde's texts the erotic must be understood as sexuality (or any other human activity) that is spirituality charged, that is intimate and deep. Christine's feelings were not being used but abused by Donald, because—as Lorde would put it—"in order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized" ("Uses" 58). Donald did not fully recognize Christine's deepest feelings; he looked away, pretending it was about something else. Eventually, when she resumes her painting activity and her religious practices, she feels more empowered and gains confidence of her erotic capability. As clearly summarized by Weir-Soley, "Lorde's definition of the erotic hinges on the self-conscious awareness that to truly effect transformation one must be spiritually and sexually in balance" (4). Therefore, the erotic is expressed in Christine's art as much as in her realization that her sexual life needs to be intimate and deep. In fact, according to Lorde, the erotic has been separated not only from the spiritual—as in pornography—but also from many other vital areas of our life. In Lorde's words, the erotic is "in our language, our



history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (“Uses” 55). Similarly, Alexander argues that “the Sacred” is to be found everywhere: in everyday incidents, in what we frequently attribute to coincidence, “those moments of synchronicity, the apparently disparate” that can only be given meaning under a different schema (322). The sacred, Alexander affirms, can also be found where the erotic, the imaginative and the creative meet. This is what Akasha Glorial Hull would call the “union of politics, spiritual consciousness, and creativity that gave rise to a new spirituality among progressive African-American women at the turn of the 21st century” (Hull *Soul Talk* 1-23; qtd. in Alexander *Pedagogies* 322). Furthermore, as outlined by Alexander, it has been found that “many Santeria practitioners in the Bay Area were artists” and that this may be due to the fact that all dimensions of the sacred “yearn for the making of beauty;” therefore, this critic concludes, one cannot conceive the sacred without an aesthetic (*Pedagogies* 323). These theories are relevant for understanding Christine’s performance of her Caribbean folk culture—like the rituals of healing, or her reliance on family and a supporting community— as a means to create a safe space from where she can fully be herself. In order to heal from the imbalance between her eroticism and her spirituality, Christine’s creative forces, namely her sexuality and her art, play a key role in her construction of Caribbean—and thus homely—safe spaces.

In *Caribbean Spaces*, Boyce Davies underlines how many Caribbean women settled in the US whose children have been born there, and who are “centered on educational and professional advancement,” find it complicated to make a physical return to their Caribbean homelands. As a result, she states, many of them “have decided to make Caribbean space wherever they are” (113). This Caribbean space is precisely what Christine creates around herself: her family from the Caribbean who comes to visit her, her children who are the product of her sexual reproductive powers, her friends, her healing rituals from Afro-Caribbean traditions, and her house, bought in the US. The latter is the only material space that she can shape in her own way. It is the place where she has conceived and raised her children, where she has cooked her Caribbean food to share with family and friends, where she has carried out healing rituals, and where she has painted her art. The house and its rooms, Boyce Davies outlines, become “metaphors of self” for Afro-Caribbean women writers (*Black* 126). It is therefore no wonder that, after her divorce, Christine becomes so determined to keep the house for her children. For her it is the place where they can locate their memories, and thus where they can find a



sense of belonging to a culture that is rooted in places as far away as Africa and the Caribbean. On the other hand, she arranges a studio in her house for her painting activity. Christine's studio represents an individual space within the household that is not so commonly accepted in the Caribbean culture (Boyce Davies *Black* 120). In her struggle to define herself, Christine is demanding her right to have a space of her own, following the steps initiated by Virginia Woolf in her famous essay *A Room of One's Own*. The studio represents in Adisa's novel not only the physical place where Christine can develop her artistic activity, but also, her necessity to escape the domestic space.

Bearing in mind Lorde's reflections commented above about the importance of being mindful to achieve erotic empowerment ("Uses" 59), Oshun—Aphrodite's counterpart in Yoruba mythology—is endowed with erotic forces whose negative aspects must not be overlooked. In a prayer that resembles the chorus in a Greek tragedy, during the narrator's introduction of Oshun, a set of verses anticipate the dramatic consequences that Christine and Donald will have to endure throughout their maddening relationship:

Oh river woman
I pray you, caution must be the word
You know better than I
that such love is madness
You know she will make a fool of herself
losing herself in the arms of love

Oh river queen
I beg you, let not the dazzle of your dress
blind her eyes
she is woman, yet full of herself
as is the habit of your daughters
but passionate women are apt to be reckless (Adisa *Painting* 75)

As pointed out before, by the time Christine realizes the consequences of her passionate choices, she has for long been married to Donald with whom she is to have four children. As the narrative voice warns, "Oshun had captured Christine for Donald, now Yemoja was going to bind her to him" (107). In effect, if Oshun has



played her role to make them passionately fall in love, Yemoja—the Orisha that represents motherhood and family and that Adisa depicts as “sometimes reckless in her determination to create family” (105)—will also play an important role in Christine’s destiny. When she first gets pregnant, she loves the experiences and feels “the sex between them was better than ever.” However, she did not succeed at getting “him to articulate more precisely how he felt about things . . . But he did talk to her growing stomach, caressed it gently, and treated her as if she was a fragile egg” (118). Donald seems to value more Christine when she is performing her role as a mother and nurturer. However, he treats her as if she were sick. Her body is marked, to borrow Boyce Davies’s observation on Sherley Anne Williams’ novel *Dessa Rose*, as if “a pregnant woman could not lead a slave rebellion” (*Black* 141).⁷⁷ Donald likes her being pregnant but he does not contribute much. For instance, although he “kept wanting to take risks during lovemaking,” he would not send a monthly support to his two daughters from two previous relationships, nor did he agree with Christine’s decision to work “doing law research at a government agency.” At the same time “he refused to stay home and take care of their son” (122). In the case of Christine, her own rebellion as a woman marked by motherhood and its accompanying expectations consists of being able to escape the domestic space, if not completely, at least during the time she is working outside the home. In the face of her husband’s reluctance to do domestic work, Christine’s choice to enter the job market soon after childbirth implies her having to hire a caregiver.

Two months after Christine gave birth to her second child, she finds a job and starts working, and places her baby in daycare. As a middle-class Jamaican, she has been educated with helpers, but Donald disapproves of her decision by scolding her: “We have two children who you refuse to stay home and care for” (126). Such reproach—that could be considered a form of domestic violence—is an indicator of Donald’s endorsement of the patriarchal gender division of labor that confines women to the domestic space.⁷⁸ However, Donald’s carefree attitude towards both

⁷⁷Sherley Anne Williams was an American novelist, poet and professor of literature. She was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In her novel *Dessa Rose*, Williams depicts a slave woman who defies all expectations by escaping her own death “on the verge of childbirth,” thus articulating “the subversive potential in each oppressive situation” (Boyce Davies *Black* 141).

⁷⁸See Alexander’s comments on domestic violence as “psychic harm” and “fear of threat” (*Pedagogies* 35). O’Leary’s article “Psychological Abuse: A Variable Deserving Critical Attention in Domestic Violence,” establishes connections between verbal abuse and physical abuse, on the grounds



his reproductive activity and Christine's expectations of him as a father depict him not as the family provider that he is supposed to be according to standards, but as a man with a childish attitude in search of a mother. Another passage that illustrates this point is when Donald berates her: "You're already working twelve hours a day, even going in on some Saturdays. The children and I are at the bottom of your list." A couple of weeks later, "Donald informed her that next semester, he would only be teaching part-time. He wouldn't be able to contribute as much to the household pot" (150). Donald's premeditated speech and actions are enacted to threaten Christine's attempts to escape the domestic space. These violent episodes illustrate how the "micropolitics of intimacy" (Francis *Fictions* 97) work in order to perpetuate the patriarchal structures that sustain male power in the public sphere of the state. Thus from the lower levels of embodied citizenship, a male figure feels entitled to punish the female body who dares to trespass the borders and to threaten his ubiquitous superiority. His punishment is his rejection to occupy the public space as the breadwinner. Donald, however, is not interested in doing housework, probably because, as Pérez Fernandez would describe it, this task pertains to the domestic space, a workplace that is very different from the private space of his house where he goes to rest (568). Thus his irruption in the domestic space would offer him no compensation whatsoever. On that account, the domestic space can be translated as a female space of servility where the man is to be gratified according to his demands. It could hence be said that Donald's zone of comfort is unsettled because he cannot be the only provider of the family. Therefore it would be pointless for his wife to gratify him with domestic servility as a compensation of his economic contribution. As a matter of fact, Christine is not economically dependable, nor she would have to be grateful and servile with domestic work. When Christine insists Donald that she wants them to meet her "half way" (Adisa *Painting* 198), she would like him to do both domestic and public labor as she does. However, Donald is reluctant to be on equal terms with her.

The above passages illustrate very well how the personal can indeed reflect political issues. In this particular case, Adisa addresses the question of the gender division of labor that dictates that men are the providers and women must stay at home taking care of the offspring. The writer directs her attention to the fact that single mothers find themselves to be both the providers and the caregivers for their children. The fact that Christine's workload is at least triple as much as her

of the similar effects they have on victims or how one may lead to the other.



husband's is also significant. Here, Adisa is denouncing the fact that the father is not either providing nor taking care of the children, in spite of the fact that he is inscribed within a biparental household. The portrayal of Christine as a strong woman who is at the same time income producer and caretaker can be aligned with the historical facts that sociologist Mimi Sheller underlines in *Citizenship from Below*, when discussing the notorious political leadership among Afro-Caribbean women after emancipation. Sheller observes, although she is not fully convinced, that such remarkable leadership among Black women could be due to the facts that there was "a disproportionate share of the field labor force on sugar estates" (Holt 1992: 64; qtd. in Sheller *Citizenship* 56) and that "freed women were able to exploit politically their dual roles—and identities—as agricultural workers and mothers." Indeed, "it was their conscious awareness and strategic exploitation of this duality that enabled them to become mainsprings of collective action in the post-emancipation era" (Sheller 56-57). In the same way, it seems that Christine was able to keep on struggling to provide for her family and take care of her children. In this case, Adisa is clearly disrupting the traditional connections between "ownership and maleness" that Alexander describes in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, as it is the woman who stands as the "owner of wealth" (35-36).

Christine's determination to support, as a working mother, her family of four children and a husband,⁷⁹ restates the appropriation of Black women's bodies during slavery "as laboring bodies, serving bodies, reproductive bodies, and punished bodies" (Sheller *Citizenship* 57). Thus it is not unpredictable that their resistance to slavery and oppression was also performed from the body. However, in order to avoid the exploitation of their bodies, they would not only run away or steal the products of their work. They would also revert to self-mutilation, abortion, suicide, and infanticide, or even to more existential forms of transcending the body such as the exploration into "music, dance and the spiritual realm" (57). Because women have in their bodies the ability to procreate, it is therefore necessary that public politics account for their crucial role as nurturers and caregivers. Sheller also pays attention to the empowering potential that women's "double burden" entails, and strengthens the fact that during the "transition from slavery to freedom" in Jamaica, "female field laborers made claims for improved working conditions not simply as

⁷⁹What in my view sounds like a pleonasm, "working mother" is the name given to mothers whose labor force also serves the public sphere.



free workers, but specifically as mothers who were struggling to support their families” (58).

In Adisa’s novel, the figure of the Orisha Yemoja, embodied in Christine, represents the mother who will do anything to protect her family. As indicated by Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, this deity is also worshiped for being the sacred force that helped slaves to survive the Middle Passage (Alexander 292). In this study, Alexander argues that if sacred practices were taken seriously, empowerment would not need to be done from the epistemological structures of the dominant group. In her own words, if the belief structures of their practitioners were taken “as having effects that are real,” then, fields such as transnational feminism “would propel us to take the lives of primarily working-class women and men seriously, and it would move us away from theorizing primarily from the point of marginalization.” To illustrate to which extent spirituality is undervalued within patriarchal/Westernized structures, we could look at Donald, who is described as someone who “would not have nothing to do with her backward West Indian superstitions.” As a result, maybe in order to feel accepted in her marriage, Christine eventually realizes how she had given up her “Orisha rituals, . . . but she was not prepared to do that anymore” (Adisa *Painting* 259).

Having argued that Christine’s empowerment rests upon her recognition of Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices as a central part of her identity, I would like to underline what is perhaps my most controversial claim, that spiritual knowledge (self-critical knowledge from within) is imperative in feminist practices. To quote Alexander’s words, “the praxis of the Sacred involves the rewiring of the senses,” whereas “the praxis for secular feminism would involve a rewiring of its most inherited concepts of home and formulations of domesticity” (*Pedagogies* 328). This means that sacred practices would connect the individual to their original needs, whereas secular practices—spiritually flattened and devoid of feelings—would only educate the individual to repeat a given pattern. Sacred practices are thus part of the domestic, intimate space. If we understand home as “a set of practices,” then we can say that it is also the place where the objects of one’s spiritual belief, whether they are Orisha, Lwa or Spirit, “live and manifest” (328). Therefore, it is necessary that feminism understands “embodiment and body praxis” as the practices that contribute to position “the body as a source of knowledge within terms differently modulated than the materiality of the body and its entanglement in the struggle against commodification, as it continues to be summoned in the service of capital” (329).



Thus in spite of the fact that materialism has traditionally neglected the existence of the spirit, it cannot be denied that in Adisa's novel the spirit breathes and manifests through the body.

Likewise, Alexander argues that "the contemporaneous task of a theory of the flesh . . . is to transmute this body and the pain of its dismemberment to a remembering of the body to its existential purpose" (329). This task to make the body remember its meaning in life can be achieved through spiritual practices. For example, the rememorization which, I argue, takes place in the body and activates the imaginary spaces, can make one's body feel at home when home is far away, when it is no longer the physical place this body occupies. There is a crossing, a movement that brings the body and the mind closer together. This is what the first African diasporic subjects did during the original traumatic experience of the Middle Passage: they brought across the Atlantic their immaterial traditions, namely, their African cosmology and spiritual practices, as their only baggage. This embodied knowledge, like personal belongings arranged in suitcases, manifested in their everyday practices, and helped the African diasporic subjects remember where they came from. Their stories, their myths, their science, and their music—all embodied in rituals and religious practices—told them that they had not always been slaves, and that human dignity and freedom was rightful to them. One of the most revealing myths of the Middle Passage that has survived to our days is that they were assisted by Yemoja, the divine female force that "assumed the task of transforming what we most need to learn from the Crossing into what we most need to learn about ourselves" (329). Thus the knowledge of their own histories of "uprootings and regroundings" (Ahmed et al. *Uprootings* 1-19), of "migration and relocation," of "disconnection and dispossession" (Donnell "Here" 73, 76), are key to understand the meaning and purpose of many Black people in the world today. This is why Alexander insists that the "pedagogies of the Sacred are pedagogies of Crossing" (*Pedagogies* 329).

Bearing in mind all this, it could then be said that learning from the African narratives, their humanity, their symbology and their epistemology, is what helps Christine to escape from her unbalanced marriage, where both "her productive and reproductive capacities [have been] exploited" (Boyce Davies *Black* 79). Her reconnection with the Sacred knowledge of her people reminds her that she is free, blameless, and that she does not have to carry the burden of colonialist history. In other words: by looking back at her own history, she realizes that she does not have



to reproduce the patterns of behavior (at the micropolitical level of the intimacies) that keep Black women enslaved. Christine's return to her roots is attached to the realization that slavery is about cutting people off from their culture. This thought is connected to the Sankofa principle from the Akan cultures of West Africa. The word Sankofa literally means "go back to fetch it," seek and claim your roots. This phrase makes reference to the proverb "it is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget." This statement establishes connections "between the spirit world and this world." In fact, Sankofa is one of the symbols used today to stamp "Akan mourning garments."⁸⁰ The cloth used in these garments is known as "*adinkra*," which means "a message one gives to another when departing" (Seeman "Reassessing" 109). Thus Sankofa is one of the messages passed on by the ancestors in Akan cultures to ensure that the knowledge of the community is not forgotten. Likewise, Christine's recovery of her African Caribbean folk traditions helps her to unearth her roots in order to get knowledge from her past. Her story represents the Sankofa message, affirming that it is not wrong to return to her African past and to claim that piece of herself that will help her move forward and progress positively through self-knowledge.

Episode IX is presided by the Yoruba deity Obatalá, embodied in the novel by the Babalawo Dada—who is related to the head and represents peace, wisdom and purity (Adisa *Painting* 361). The narration in this last episode resumes where Christine had just left the babalawo's house in episode I, after her first healing session. She is right in front of the sea, which is the fluid element that brings her back to the present, just as it took her back to the past: "The salty smell of the sea remembered her where she was" (343). As explained before, the narration is arranged in a cyclical structure: it starts *in medias res*, right at the turning point of the story; then gradually chronicles the events that led to the opening situation, and finishes returning to the point where the narrative began. The episodes in between help to fill in Christine's story, describing prior plot events that will unveil the reasons that made her lose her head and plan to kill her husband. Throughout the central body of the novel Christine's destiny is conducted to the point when she seeks spiritual guidance. Approaching the end of the novel, we run up to the immediate results of the climactic moment that opened the narration, thus closing the storyline in a circular manner.

⁸⁰There are two symbols that represent Sankofa. One of them is a bird with its feet facing forward and its head turned backwards, picking an egg with its beak.



Spiritual wisdom assists Christine's healing in her desperate marital situation at the end of episode VIII. The protagonist is persistent on her desire to kill her husband, but the spirit of her dead grandmother, Nannie, appears to her warning: "Yu best tek care of yu head or yu gwane lose more dan yusef" (337).⁸¹ Although Christine tries to abandon her husband in several occasions throughout their fifteen-year marriage, she is unsuccessful, because she is either still sexually attracted to him, or he manages to talk her into staying. On the other hand, she eventually realizes divorce was not something that had entered her plans: "It had been foolish of hers to try to hang on; she had known that all along. She had been brought up with the idea of marriage as a lifelong union, a stable umbrella under which to raise children" (Adisa *Painting* 348). Christine's inability to consider divorce resonates with Sheller's "everyday politics". This sociologist argues that citizenship is not only about discursive practices embedded in the public sphere, but it is also reflected in "sexual, sensual and erotic" agency. Sheller calls the private places where sexuality is expressed "interactional spaces." These are the sites where "everyday politics" take place. The practices of "family formation", for instance, are a part of this *routine* interaction. The idea of a "lifelong union" is included in the marriage and parenthood package that promotes stability through "landholding" (*Citizenship* 17).⁸² Through divorce, it is as though the places where Christine negotiates her position in the world through embodied actions disappeared. Divorce thus becomes Christine's zone of discomfort, because it implies getting rid of things as they are (things established through *routine* interactions) and embrace instead new possibilities of being (a Black mother) in the world. For Sheller, and I believe for Adisa too, these bodily "practices are relevant to erotic agency and embodied freedom, and thus to citizenship from below" (*Citizenship* 17). This is so because her bodily practices reveal what Francis calls the "micropolitics of intimacy," which unveils the structures of power behind everyday interactions (*Fictions* 97). Christine's realization that she had been a fool to be stuck in an unequal marriage can therefore be translated as a step forward towards her political freedom.

One day, after each one has had an extramarital relationship—Donald with a white woman, and Christine with Okello, the Ugandan fling from college times, about whom I will discuss further below—Donald announces that he is leaving the

⁸¹"You better take care of your head or you are going to lose more than yourself."

⁸² See also Lauren Berlant's discussions on "the traditional promise of intimate happiness" ("Intimacy" 282), and the intimate inscription of the public sphere, which I address in chapter 3.



house. Although this is what she had been wanting all along, Christine is unable to cope with her husband's unaffected ways:

"I just want you to know I've found a place and will be moving out at the end of the month."

"Fine," she said, not quite registering this.

"We'll need to work out a schedule for me to see the children."

"Like fucking hell we will. Have you told the children you're moving? Or is that left to me like everything else?"

"Well, you are better at those sort of things."

"You are such a motherfucking prick. From under what shit heap did you crawl? I'm not going to do your dirty work for you."

"You know, Christine, is so unbecoming for a woman to swear, but that's what I get for marrying a black woman. Well I'm through with you all."

"Donald, you better get the fuck out of my face and out of my studio, before I go crazy and do something I might regret." (268)

As a response to Christine's furious reaction, Donald uses the stereotype of the angry Black woman against her, in an attempt to make her feel racially and sexually inferior. Donald is also implying that Black women do not respond to the universal expectations of how a woman should behave. Indeed such universalizing standards of femaleness are built around the Eurocentric affirmation that womanhood is everything that the white woman is, and hence Black women cannot fit into the mold. A good example of how universal expectations of womanhood exclude the Black woman in Eurocentric cultural production is provided by Jamaican writer and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter in her essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings," where she explores the absence of Caliban's woman in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. This racially marked female figure from the New World, she observes, is not included as "an alternative sexual-erotic model of desire." In fact, Caliban desires not a "physiognomically complementary mate", but Miranda, the physically idealized white woman "canonized as the 'rational' object of desire." By opposing Miranda's superior qualities to those of Caliban's mate—the "ontologically absent potential genitrix . . . of another population" that is racially vilified—this narrative is foregrounding how Western discourses empower "the 'race' of Miranda to expropriate the island, and to reduce Caliban to a labor machine" (360).



Wynter draws attention to how silencing the racialized woman in canonical literature produces Western discourses of racial superiority. Furthermore, she observes how this racial superiority has led white and non-white men alike to desire the white woman and to discard the racially marked one. Taking these premises into account, Christine's anger against Donald could be translated into what Rich calls the woman's "furious awareness of the Man's power over her" (Rich "Dead" 19), and therefore, her anger could be understood as a way to express her right to speak, to condemn racial prejudices in society and to resist gender inequalities within the domestic space. In addition, the Black women's paradigmatic opposition to womanhood underlined in the above conversation comes to reinforce the patriarchal "cult of true womanhood" that asserts that women's virtue resides in "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter "Cult" 152), whereas at the same time asserting that men's power is "to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman" (Rich "Dead" 19). In another occasion, after divorce, Donald uses Christine's racial, sexual and age condition against her, this time with the intention to make her need him and value herself through him:

You ought to take a good look at yourself. You ought to look around at all the Black women your age without a man. Who do you think is going to want you? No one wants to be bothered with Black women, with their mouth and attitude and defiance. You're going to be alone. You've given up a good thing in me. (336)

This marital scene reflecting gender and race oppression is also addressed in two earlier novels by African American women writers Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. In *The Color Purple* (1982), Walker portrays Black women's oppression within marriage. Celie, the main character, writes a letter describing the moment when she was about to leave her husband. She had dared to defy him, cursing him, and she reports his response as follows: "He laugh. Who you think you is? He say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (176). A similar strategy can be found in Hurston's pioneering novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). When Janie menaces to leave her first husband, he answers back: "Shucks! 'Tain't no mo' folks like me. A whole lot of mens will grin in yo' face, but dey ain't gwine tuh work and feed yuh. You won't git far and you won't be long, . . . you'll be too glad to come



back here” (51). Essentially, Black men in Adisa’s, Walker’s and Hurston’s novels believe that Black women are worthless, and therefore they regard them as the logical recipients of their abuse, vituperation and also, of their merciful love. Nonetheless, in Adisa’s novel, social class oppression is not used against the wife, primarily because she is an economically independent woman.

On top of Adisa’s discussion on divorce—a topic rarely covered in Caribbean writing—a broader question stems from Christine’s story: the risks of individual material progress without a spiritual and communal life. First, it is made explicit in the novel that divorce counseling and psychological therapy does not work for them. It is thanks to Christine’s family and friends (her connections to community and ancestors), to painting and Afro-Caribbean spiritual practices, that Christine rebuilds her lost erotic agency. The protagonist then grows stronger and succeeds to inhabit spaces of belonging that help her carry on with her divorce in a less traumatic manner. Christine’s trauma stems—like in most divorce processes—from the couple’s incompatibility and their inability to come to terms with the children’s custody and the appointment of property. However, in this case, it is Christine—the mother—who is the family provider. Besides, she is in charge of the traditionally domestic roles of child rearer, and of the household financial management. Meanwhile Donald—who does not approve of Christine’s intrusion into the public space—represents the antithesis of the expected responsible father and breadwinner. If read through Sheller’s assumptions in *Citizenship from Below*, divorce (the dissolution of the patriarchal nuclear family) could be understood here as a failure of the patriarchal system to secure land ownership (Donald’s case illustrates this point). On the other hand, the latency of “matrifocal households” challenge the phallogentric family and male dominance within society, as can be identified in Christine’s performance of motherhood.

Throughout the novel, Donald is shown to be less spiritually oriented and more intellectually driven. As a result, it is Christine who gives in to Donald’s greedy demands, when right after the divorce is pronounced, they meet with the clerk to solve financial matters and Donald sharply requests: “You can have the house as long as I get half of your IRA,⁸³ which is my entitlement” (331). The clerk consents to it, although Donald had not contributed a penny for her IRA, and Christine’s fierce opposition is challenged by the clerk, who prompts them to come to an agreement right then unless they want to go to court once more. Christine,

⁸³US Individual Retirement Account.



distrustful of how the law works, beaten and willing to lose sight—once and for all — of her rapacious ex-husband, responds: “I’m never coming back here again to be subjected to this bizarre ‘justice.’ Donald can have the house, he can have my IRA, and he already has my children. . . . Give it all to him, and just let me sign” (322). Christine’s unexpected response reveals that, for her, material progress cannot stand above the spiritual and communal well being. She knows he won’t still be happy with all the material things he is demanding, because he has not spent time to recover from his trauma, which stems from his relationship with an absent mother and his successive resentment of Black women, including herself.

When Okello—who had vanished from her life—unexpectedly reappears as the co-owner of an African restaurant in Ohio, where she spends two months away from Donald and her children, both he and Christine are married, but old feelings and passions awoken between them. Okello proposes her as his second wife, as he knows his community would not accept his abandoning his Ugandan wife and children. However, they would happily welcome Christine as a second wife. Christine objects. However, she adds, “I will go for polyandry. I’ll follow in the footsteps of my African sisters who had more than one husband, although you men have done everything to erase that system (208).⁸⁴ Some time later, Okello’s sister herself, worried about his passion for Christine, writes her to announce that if she wants to be with Okello, she will be able to do so, but as a second wife:

“I am very fond of his wife, . . . [and] my nieces and nephews too, and I do not want them to be damaged by this American disease known as divorce. . . . My brother has confessed to me, our mother and the women’s council that

⁸⁴Of course the marriage system of polyandry is not necessarily a symptom of women’s agency. In *Tradition, Culture and Development in Africa*, the reasons given by Ambe J. Njoh for polyandry in Africa locate women as objects of exchange to solve problems of infertility in neighboring households, or to secure their family’s economic stability. Also fraternal polyandry (two or more brothers marrying the same woman) is a strategy to keep together the husbands’ family’s wealth (64). In *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China*, Sommer observes that many women were essentially pragmatic and used “sex in a strategic, unsentimental way to secure their family’s subsistence.” On the other hand, there were also those women who entertained “passionate extramarital affairs” in agreement with their husbands, as long as their sexual partners provided “material aid” to the woman’s household (56). In any case, those systems of polyandry whereby women use their sexuality as currency do not seem to fit in Christine’s economically independent profile, nor in her vision of sacred sexuality. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Christine, or any woman in her place, would not be able to explore into new ways of polyandry, given the circumstances.



he loves you. . . . One loves one's children and parents, and while one may love a partner, it is never at the expense of the family" (316-317; emphasis in the original).

Clearly, a matrifocal community is foregrounded in Okello's family. His is a community that puts mothers and children in the first place. Not only do women act as counselors, but they also take measures to protect a community that is founded on love and care for those who are to continue the group's worldview and knowledge: their children. With regard to the importance of motherhood and children, Adisa herself has claimed in an interview: "It is motherhood and not a husband or a lover that has made me understood unconditional love, which I have from my children and which I know I can apply to the world" (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martinez "Rewriting" 212). In this novel, Adisa explores African structures of kinship. Thus when the father figure, which is also a necessary model for children's growth, wants to initiate another sexual relationship, a second wife is preferable to a divorce, thus embracing the possibility of consensual polygamy. The love triangle as a kinship structure is already contemplated in Adisa's first novel, as explored earlier in this chapter. This reflection is interesting because, although it does not contemplate women's right to practice polygamy and, hence, it may seem unfair and oppressive for women, it does offer a solution to the problems encountered by the Christian imposition of monogamy upon the colonized African people. Indeed, Africans in the New World would bring with them their own kinship structures among which polygamy, and thus fathering children from different mothers, was a common, accepted practice. However, with the imposition of the Christian moral, creole societies in the Caribbean have ended up establishing monogamy as the accepted norm, together with the notion of legitimate and illegitimate children that such family order implies. It is a fact that, in practice, monogamous family systems are not sustainable in Afro-Caribbean communities. As a result, these fathers have to choose one of their families, leaving the other one, usually the outside family, in a position of either illegitimacy or child abandonment. As a result, "the responsibility for the children's care and maintenance [is left] to the mothers" (Arnold *Working* 31-33).

In conclusion, it could be affirmed that Adisa's fiction revisits creolization, understood as the result of the imposition of Western culture on African epistemologies. This writer examines how the disruption of the colonizers' laws and



morals is accomplished not by rejecting them, but by using them in agreement with the purposes of the colonized. This appropriation requires a translation of Western worldviews which are taken as they already exist in Europe and adjusted into the New World. Such is the case of the author's own recreation of Judeo-Christian codes in *It Begins With Tears*. In the same way as other Black diasporic female writers appropriate aspects of the Judeo-Christian mythology in their novels.⁸⁵ Adisa in *Painting Away Regrets* adapts and transforms Afro-Caribbean mythologies based on the Yoruba cosmologies from West Africa in order to bring forward important aspects of the cultural imagination of the Black diasporic communities. As already explored, she reappropriates representations of the syncretized religion of Santería in order to create the cultural landscape of the novel. Adisa's repeated theme of the love triangle also embraces the polygamous traditions that the African slaves took with them during colonization. With regard to the achievement of female agency from below, Christine, depicted as the breadwinner, and as a happily divorced woman ready for a new relationship, unsettles the structures of the heteronormative patriarchal nuclear family that fosters "sexual restraint and responsible parenting within a normalized domestic sphere consisting of a male breadwinner and his domestically oriented wife" (Sheller *Citizenship* 74).

If we consider Ahmed's approach to wonder in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (178-183), as that which enables gender discourses to distance themselves from the most ordinary, intimate practices, we could affirm that Adisa's ability to 'wonder' encourages the formation of a critical opinion of taken-for-granted activities in Afro-Caribbean domestic spaces. The domestic is understood in Adisa's narratives, not only as that which happens in the private sphere of family, but also as a set of assimilated practices which are the product of unconscious behavior. This means that the individual is disciplined through a mindless, habitual training, that is to say, that he/she is domesticated by the larger spiritual, sexual, social and political systems that benefit only those who fit in the prescribed patterns. The evaluation of society from below—triggered by the ability to wonder, to question—enables the experience of unfit (subaltern) individuals to effectively impact and transform the public institutions that subjugate them. Adisa's writing, in her recreation of existent African epistemologies and myths in the private sphere, serves to create a different opinion on how the world should be inhabited. The two novels examined above are,

⁸⁵ A case in point is Paule Marshall, who, in *The Fisher King*, rewrites and appropriates the myths that justified and maintained colonial control (Wallhead "Myth" 207)



in sum, cultural products that bring apparently innocuous elements of the private sphere into public recognition. In other words, the spiritual and sexual practices carried on within the domestic realm turn to be a legitimate field from where to take civil action. This transcendence of the private into the public is what Adisa does by revisiting the domestic spaces in her literary work from a place of what Ahmed calls 'wonder'.

Chapter 5.2

Sexual and Reproductive Impositions from the Plantation to the Tourist Space

“A carne mais barata do mercado é minha carne negra.”⁸⁶

—Elza Soares, “A Carne”



In the previous subchapter, Adisa’s two novels—*It Begins With Tears*, and *Painting Away Regrets*—have been introduced to explain some mechanisms of female Caribbean resistance, both at home in the Caribbean and in the diaspora in the US. So far, I have studied how Afro-Caribbean epistemologies situate sexuality and spirituality at the crossroads, right where Adisa’s female characters achieve erotic agency and embodied freedom. These locations, I want to argue, interact and complement each other to enable a “reintegration of the meaning of heritage” (Boyce Davies *Black* 117), bringing back the African past so that it can be claimed and used advantageously. But there are many other locations where Caribbean female identity can be negotiated. As Boyce Davies puts it, the determiners of “the meaning of personal geography and the politics of location” are also to be found in spaces where “Caribbean women have to confront “racial discrimination and foreign bias” (*Black* 116). The resulting oppressive practices performed against the female body in the Caribbean—notably involving sexual violence and sexual reproduction—have been noted to be pervasive in the background of plantation economies and in Caribbean regions occupied by military US forces (Sheller *Consuming* 163). Thus in this chapter, I argue consistently that, stemming from the plantation system and the US military occupation, there are new spaces in the Caribbean where the violent and/or illegitimate occupation of the female body is being performed. Such bodily invasion is a sign of the racist and sexist extant ideologies that have come to determine the world economies. It is therefore a fact that imperialist/colonialist practices are an issue of current interest. Adisa realizes this postcolonial fallacy, and offers in her work sharp criticism on the *neocolonial* realities.

⁸⁶ “The cheapest meat in the market is my black meat”



So far I have focused on the importance of spirituality and sexuality in Adisa's work, and the presence of myths and religious traditions that have developed in the New World since the Middle Passage. These spiritual iterations are reflected in Adisa's novels' rituals of healing, for instance, in the river and at the babalawo's house in her first and second novel respectively. Now I intend to explore these novels, and also one poem, in order to focus on Adisa's affective responses to sexual violence and domination.⁸⁷ Throughout the present analysis, I intend to explore, on the one hand, how Adisa represents the subjugation of female sexual powers to imperial economic interests; and on the other, how this author negotiates her characters' position between the domestic and the public spaces. Deepening my analysis in the previous section, I also foreground how Adisa relates sexual self-determination to female economic independence.

In this chapter I am going to examine how, after the abolition of slavery, the interest of the racist Western economies was no longer to produce more slaves, but to reduce the number of the emancipated Black population of the Third World. Consequently, the space where the female reproductive powers were subjugated switched from the extinct plantation to the poorest areas of the population. This continuum reflects that, in spite of the abolition of slavery, former slaves and slave descendants (particularly women) still struggled to be rightful citizens both in the American South and in the Caribbean. Another form of sexual exploitation that is reflected in Adisa's work can be found in the tradition of sex tourism that emerged in the Caribbean regions occupied by US forces (Sheller *Consuming* 163). This fact highlights how these military occupations that were to ensure US domination over both the Caribbean territory and the Caribbean female body have encouraged gender and racial bias in the American population, leading to further cases of sexual abuse.

I will begin by exploring two important passages from *It Begins With Tears* where two female characters—first, a slave ancestor, second, Beryl, in the context of post-independence Jamaica—are faced up with an unwanted pregnancy as a result of rape. In the first place, I will scrutinize the story the elder women in the novel tell about the slave ancestor who died *accidentally* during childbirth. In connection with this, I will analyze the poem “PMS and PMDD Symptoms” that will serve to complete Adisa's explorations on Black women's reproductive rights in the

⁸⁷In “Scratching the Surface,” Audre Lorde underlines the sexual politics behind Black women oppression by affirming that “[e]nforced sterilizations and unavailable abortions are tools of oppression against Black Women, as is rape” (46).



Caribbean. I also want to look over the fine line that has separated the birth control movement in white middle-class America from its eugenic version, namely the massive sterilization policies that have served “the racist strategy of *population control*” (Davis “Racism” 215). Secondly, I will analyze the story of Beryl’s rape, set against the background of emancipated Jamaica. This will help me to illustrate the exploitation of the native female body within tourist spaces. Likewise, I am bringing forward the imperialist connections behind the presence of tourists in the Caribbean territory, thus establishing a “link between tourism and invasion” (Boyce Davies *Black* 26). Lastly, I will briefly explore how Adisa’s female characters—Beryl and Monica, from *It Begins With Tears*, and Christine, from *Painting Away Regrets*—negotiate between the domestic and the public spaces. My aim here is to demonstrate how their choice to abandon the domestic space—or their own native homes—, carries and economic and sexual independence that is to defy a number of patriarchal expectations. As a consequence, I conclude, Adisa’s female characters will have to pay dearly for their *audacity* to flee the domestic space.

As I have noted before, reproductive labor is closely connected to colonialist and nationalist agendas. In connection to the control over sexual reproduction, this chapter addresses questions on Afro-Caribbean women’s insubordinate response to the gender reconstruction mission of the colonial and post-independence governments. In effect, through education and religion, these governments attempted “to domesticate women and to recast men as responsible, productive workers and household heads” (Barrow “Caribbean” 342-343 qtd. in Sheller *Citizenship* 74). The narratives that favor the patriarchal nuclear family—and therefore encourage the split between the domestic and the public spaces—are contested in postcolonial feminist writings such as Adisa’s.⁸⁸ Following Sheller’s theories of embodied freedom in *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*, this chapter explores how questions of sexual citizenship and erotic agency in the Caribbean give way to a new field of analysis that emerges “at the intersection of Caribbean studies, Black studies, women’s studies, and queer studies” (16). The main focus hereby turns around the fact that Black Caribbean women’s bodies have traditionally been the object to be used and abused by imperial first, then by capitalist forces.⁸⁹ Audre Lorde observes in “Sexism: An American Disease in

⁸⁸See chapter 3 for discussions on the split of the private/public as explained by Irene Pérez Fernández in “La codificación del espacio en clave de género” (“Encoding the space in terms of gender”).

⁸⁹ Audre Lorde observes in “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface” that sexism and racism are not exclusive features of capitalist structures, for she has detected both “diseases” in socialist

Blackface” that sexism and racism are not exclusive features of capitalist structures, for she has detected both “diseases” in socialist governments. She thus underlines that abolishing capitalism would not solve the problem of sexism and racism, and that other factors should also be considered (64). It is my contention that racism and sexism are political ideologies by themselves. Therefore they must be addressed as such, even when they appear as the fabric of which many public and private institutions are made. Therefore, this chapter brings to the fore histories of Black women, especially with regard to their degree of control over their reproductive powers; but also with regard to the gender division of labor and the domestic space traditionally allotted to women.

Additionally, I will take into account the differential fact—as opposed to white middle-class women—that Black women in the Caribbean, both during slavery and following emancipation, have traditionally worked in market places, as well as outside their own homes as domestics. This feature, as Weir-Soley points out, caused the categorization of Black women in the Caribbean as “fallen women”, along with the myths of “black female hypersexuality” that spread in nineteenth-century public discourses, and that had been used to justify Black women’s sexual subjugation during slavery (15-16). According to the Western “cult of true womanhood,” women were expected to be “pious, (sexually) pure, submissive, and domestic” (15). Although neither the sexual abuse they endured, nor their working conditions “in someone else’s field or house” made them fit to be “true women” (16), the fact is that this social reality has eventually endowed Black working-class women with a

special economic and social position as a link between town and country, between markets and fields, and between the state and the families it tried to control, all of which enabled networks of women to facilitate crucial flows of information and to orchestrate collective action through the female-dominated public spaces of the market. (Sheller *Citizenship* 75-76)

The ability of these women to cross from the private to the public spheres, and negotiate between both realities, represents a disruption of the patriarchal imperialist

governments. She thus underlines that abolishing capitalism would not solve the problem of sexism and racism, and that other factors should also be considered (64). It is my contention that racism and sexism are political ideologies by themselves. Therefore they must be addressed as such, even when they appear as the fabric of which many public and private institutions are made.



prescriptions that attempted to oppose and even contradict men's and women's lives, by confining them into either public or private spaces.⁹⁰ Black working-class women have enjoyed an unusual economic independence that has enabled them to choose their sexual partners and to enjoy a less restricted sexual activity than the so-called 'true women', as it has been examined in the reading of Adisa's poem "Market Woman" in chapter 4.2. If, as stated by Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing*, the colonial system made of "ownership of property, wealth, whiteness, and masculinity the primary conditions of citizenship" (29), then Black women—whose working-class position and sexual self-determination has always been problematic for the colonial status quo—"pose a challenge to the ideology of an originary nuclear heterosexual family that perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society" (22). In effect, by claiming erotic autonomy, Black women's feminism in the Caribbean calls into question the heteropatriarchal family and the nation. Thus, as a Caribbean feminist, Adisa's decolonizing strategy (in her bringing to the fore the sexual realities of her characters) suggests new ways of attaining citizenship—in its strict sense as accountable membership within a community. In Alexander's words, "because loyalty to the nation as citizen is perennially colonized within reproduction and heterosexuality, erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely," but it also entails "a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship, or no responsibility at all" (23). To illustrate this point, it is not uncommon that women who refuse to be confined in the domestic space be stigmatized one way or another with such connotative labels as 'public woman', 'spinster' or 'womanish'.⁹¹

Body politics and reproductive rights

The domestic, intimate practices of reproductive labor and birth control have been determinant in the history of the Caribbean, and in the world history at large. They were meant to increase the population in the plantation in the colonial period, or to control the increasing growth of the poor population in postcolonial times. It is therefore easy to see why sexual practices are at the center of capitalist and neoimperialist agendas worldwide. In *It Begins With Tears*, a number of stories

⁹⁰See the implications of the private/public split in chapter 3.

⁹¹In a personal email conversation from July 2016, Adisa explained to me that "a girl child who is womanish is often perceived as a threat not necessarily because of sexual impropriety or explicit behavior, but more often for her aggressive independent ways, to define her own boundaries, and listen to her own inner calling." For a further discussion on the term 'womanish' see chapter 4.1.



illustrate this fact. Thus when Adisa recreates histories of birth, she is bringing forward the political implications of birth control and the right to motherhood.

I will introduce my analysis with the story of delivery of Arnella, the sensual and independent priest-in-training. Her labor is depicted as a welcoming, celebratory event. She gives birth to her Baby-Girl side by side with her most proximate women in what turns to be an intimate and erotic, yet communal, ritual of birth:

Arnella was partially naked . . . and her loose shift was open all the way down front. Her stomach was shiny and pointed, and her navel protruded . . . Now Valrie was massaging her nipples. Angel felt herself sweating from the intensity of it, and when Arnella suddenly jumped up in pain, hopping from one leg to the next . . . Angel too began breathing hard, pacing and rubbing below her stomach. Velma and Dahlia started singing then, really humming, a slow tune that felt heavy with water. Beryl and Olive took off their slippers and joined Valrie and Arnella on the sheet, and the four seemed engaged in a private dance of breathing and stooping and healing hands. Angel found herself dancing around the sheet . . . while Velma and Dahlia hummed and softly clapped their hands to a one, pause, one-two-clap, then snap fingers beat. Monica and Miss Cotton stood to one side, their arms folded; but their bodies swayed to a tune Angel did not hear, and this is the story Velma and Dahlia told about the breadfruit tree. (85-86)

In the middle of the delivery, Velma and Dahlia, Arnella's mother and Baby-Girl's grandmother respectively, start to tell the other women the story "about the breadfruit tree" (86). If the dancing ritual serves to soothe Arnella's pain, it also creates a space from which to memorize a traditional story of labor and birth. This story—passed down to them in a matrilineal storytelling tradition—embodies the memories of other women, their ancestors. On the importance of storytelling within matrilineal traditions I will speak further on chapter 4.3. What matters for the present reading is that this story within the story tells what happened to a woman slave whose pregnancy was forced, certainly as part of a slave breeding program by which the slaveholders planned to increase their labor force in the plantation. Slave breeding practices have been a profitable business in the colonial system, and it expanded in the 19th century British colonies after transatlantic slave trade became illegal in 1807



(Mair *Historical* 197, 220). As it can be seen in the following passage from the bread-fruit story, women who refused to bring their children into the plantation system desperately looked for ways to interrupt their pregnancy:

There was a period when most of the slave women refused to give birth. They knew what bush to drink or what to do if they were too far gone and the bush tea did not produce blood. They refused to bring their tomorrow into the fields – because that’s what a child was to them, their tomorrow. But those who failed to drink the bush tea or visit the old aunt who knew great secrets had no choice. They watched their stomachs grow in front of them and waited. (Adisa *Begins* 86)

Because of the traumatic experience of bringing an unwanted child into the plantation system, it was very common for women to interrupt their pregnancies. In a journal written in Jamaica in the early decades of the 19th century by a plantation owner, it was notified that, in spite of the fact that Black women were “rewarded for bringing children, and therefore anxious to have them,” they managed to get so sick that no children were produced (Lewis *Journal* 381 qtd. in Mair *Historical* 242). Similarly, in America by the middle of the 19th century, a doctor wrote: “the blacks are possessed of a secret by which they destroy the fetus at an early stage of gestation . . . All country practitioners are aware of the frequent complaints of planters (about the) . . . unnatural tendency in the African female to destroy her offspring” (Gutman *Black* 80-81 qtd. in Davis “Racism” 205). Nonetheless, as political activist Angela Davis points out, neither the planter nor the physician seemed to wonder why these women would possibly want to bring their children into slavery, “into a world of interminable force labor, where chains and floggings and sexual abuse for women were the everyday conditions of life” (“Racism” 205, 204).

Historian Mimi Sheller has underlined that, in fact, because these women’s bodies were appropriated in so many ways, “as laboring bodies, serving bodies, reproductive bodies, and punished bodies,” it was normal that resistance to such oppression was to be performed from the body too, the place where existence and procreation take place. Therefore, among the options female slaves had to leave behind the abuse and suffering of their bodies, “self-mutilation, abortion, suicide and infanticide” were the most extreme practices (Sheller *Citizenship* 57). These women



had to go the hard way if they wanted to have control over their babies. Another historian of slavery, Kamau Brathwaite, has indicated that Black women's "reluctance to bear children" was one of the many "ways of reacting against the [slavery] system and the stereotype" (*Development* 206). Indeed, Brathwaite further explains, what was interpreted by British slaveholders as cases of infertility, mainly attributed to barren women being like "hens" that "will frequently not lay eggs on shipboard, because they do not like the situation" (Lewis *Journal* 111 qtd. in Brathwaite *Development* 206-207), or "to polygamy, sexual promiscuity and disease, much of it venereal" (Brathwaite *Development* 206), was in reality the product of quite differently interpreted factors. In fact, he continues, "there was evidence of deliberate and widespread abortion practices, and it was believed that some slave women practised infanticide," although "[l]ock-jaw, pneumonia, malnutrition, . . . as well as male/female imbalance, and the living and medical conditions generally, must also have been the factors" (206).

However, these underground birth control practices were not carried out by Black women as a thoughtful solution to their oppressive condition, but rather as "acts of desperation" (Davis "Racism" 205). In fact, as Davis points out, "[m]ost of these women . . . would have expressed their deepest resentment had someone hailed their abortions as a stepping stone toward freedom" ("Racism" 205). The dehumanizing practices of forced procreation caused a traumatic disconnection between these women and their bodies, because while they were sure they did not want their children to be raised in slavery, they certainly were aware that they were compromising their bodies, and by extension their lives and the lives of their potential offspring. Boyce Davies observes that the historical construct of the Black woman as the selfless "great mother" that is "negatively embedded in the 'mammy' figure of Euro-American imagination" is complicated by "deliberate self-constructions by Black women" who address "practical realities of mothering." Thus Black women writers examine the "twin imperatives" of, on the one hand, rejecting "exclusive mother-love" and, on the other, asserting "the necessity for Black women to claim something as theirs." In effect, the desire to claim their children was obscured by their certainty that they would not be allowed to raise their children as they wished. The reason why many Black women writers have engaged in the construction of their own discourses on motherhood is mainly because Black women's experiences of motherhood differ from that of white women. Boyce Davies discusses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to address the question of infanticide among



slave mothers, and quotes Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman?" (1852) in order to bring an example of "motherhood as loss." This last author and others are discussed in chapter 2. See *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (135-137).

What is made clear in the remembering of the slave ancestors' story in Adisa's text, is that the experience of being raped first, and then of choosing to destroy the product of one's own reproductive system, translates into a physical dismemberment that turns into self-alienation with one's sexuality and body. In the story of the bread-fruit tree, the slave ancestor was so disgusted at the idea of her pregnancy that "[t]he larger the woman's stomach rose, the more foul her breath became, until she was unbearable." Her physical responses seem to somatize her psychic condition: "She stunk, seeing no way out of her life, and knowing she was to bring her tomorrow to a hopeless future." When the time to give birth comes, she is on her own, and she has delivery complications:

Her time approached and one bright full-moon night she took in. She didn't tell anyone; just hauled herself off yonder, but couldn't make it further than the bread-fruit tree. She felt wetness, and when she touched herself and brought her hand to her face she saw blood. She embraced the bread-fruit tree and laughed, pain and joy. When they found her, laughter was still written on her face, even her open eyes were merry. They had to use a knife and pry her hands from the bread-fruit tree, and there they buried her with the triplets she was carrying. That year the bread-fruit tree bore until its branches broke. It was said that every child-bearing woman who ate its sweet yellow fruit conceived a child, and their stomach and breasts were full like ripe bread-fruits, and all the women who laboured under the tree brought forth healthy sons and daughters. (Adisa *Begins* 86-87)

This female enslaved ancestor, having chosen not to seek assistance, was desperately and deliberately plotting her own suicide, along with the blameless killing of her unborn babies, caused by an unattended hemorrhage. In the story, the mother-to-be prefers death over a life of slavery for her and her progeny. As pointed out earlier, the only way out that many women slaves found to transcend the body and stop the continuous aggressions was death, the most extreme and definite way of leaving/transcending one's own body. The women of Kristoff Village rememberize



this story in order to explore their history and to know where they come from. By recovering female Caribbean ancestry through oral traditions, Adisa is subscribing to Boyce Davies's call "for feminists to racialize and historicize their definitions of motherhood" (*Black* 137). With stories like this one, women preserve the collective memory inscribed in their bodies. The storytellers themselves and those who hear their stories are the tomorrow of those who were able to bring life forward in spite of the hate, the terror and the violence endured under the plantation system. The story of survival of the bread-fruit tree concludes affirming that "[n]o one of those many who were born the following year became slave to the fields; they were of the tomorrow who forged ahead, creating waves and sounding changes" (Adisa *Begins* 87). Arnella is connected to this story. She also goes out of her house to deliver her baby in the open air, and just like the women who took courage to keep procreating after the desperate defeat/success of this Caribbean ancestor, she has had the opportunity to choose to be a mother. Furthermore, she has been able to choose and love Godfree, the father of her baby, which makes her willing and ready for a consciously chosen motherhood and for mothering, gaining full control over her reproductive powers.

The story of this slave ancestor is clearly connected to the post-independence period where Black women continue to be sexualized and abused. From a historical point of view, gender issues—specifically with regard to the performance of sexuality and motherhood—come to represent a different kind of experience for Black women in the diaspora. If compared to white middle-class feminists of the late 19th century, who demanded their rights to plan and limit their pregnancies so that they could develop a professional career; working-class women, and by extension the majority of Black women in the diaspora, would find it difficult to identify with the Western advocacy of "voluntary motherhood," immersed as they were in a "far more fundamental fight for economic survival" (Davis "Racism" 207-208). Feminist and Christian scholar Barbara Omolade argues in "Hearts of Darkness" that due to the historical use and abuse of Black women's bodies, having procreational sex within marriage is seen as a privilege rather than as something oppressive in Black feminist surroundings. For the Black woman, she continues, motherhood and sex serve as "literal and symbolic weapons she could utilize to assure the biological and social production of black people," and therefore "[m]arriage and motherhood were humanizing experiences that gave her life meaning, purpose, and choice." As Omolade explains, the denial of



marital/legitimate sex and motherhood imposed upon the Black woman in the backdrop of a racist system questioned her humanity as well as “her human rights and privileges to love and be loved” (Omolade 371 qtd. in Narain *Contemporary* 149). Arnella’s unconventional preferences and freedom of choice can be interpreted from this perspective, as an Afro-Caribbean feminist attitude inasmuch as she reclaims her right to mothering, loving and being loved. But at the same time, and foregrounding Adisa’s further decolonizing intentions, Arnella rejects marriage, a preeminently Christian and patriarchal institution. As already commented in chapter 4.1.3, not only does Arnella reject marrying Godfree, but she offers him to marry her sister Valrie. At the same time, she manages to keep a close, loving relationship with the two of them, and to have a baby to Godfree. Arnella’s ability to reproduce unconventional kinship ties with the people she loves indicates a relentless determination on the author’s side to challenge traditional worldviews and behaviors inherited from the colonial system.

Since the urge for sexual self-determination has been a constant concern for all women throughout history, it is no wonder that unwanted pregnancies among slave women, most of which were forced, were faced with a strong “desire to control their reproductive system.” Thus the necessity to decide when, how and with whom they want their children to be conceived and born, has led women to learn and keep recipes that would interrupt their pregnancy clandestinely. Indeed it was not until the Women’s Rights Movement was recognized that the call for reproductive rights would become legally visible (Davies “Racism” 206-207). However, whereas the right of birth control is fundamental for women’s emancipation, it has historically favored middle-class white women only. If birth control—a term coined and popularized in early 20th century America by nurse and activist Margaret Sanger (210)—appeared to claim “individual choice,” access to “safe contraceptive methods,” and laws that regulate “easily accessible abortions” (202), it was nonetheless soon influenced by eugenics and racist ideologies. Consequently, birth control was misused as an instrument to reduce childbirth through “compulsory sterilization” of “unfit” women, among which, as reported by Sanger, not only “[m]orons, mental defectives, epileptics, illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes and dope fiends” were included, (Corea 149 qtd. in Davies “Racism” 214) but eventually also immigrants and Black people, as dictated Sanger’s “Negro Project” implemented by the Birth Control Federation of America in 1939 (Davis “Racism” 210, 214).



Adisa shows her concern about the imperialist politics of birth control in her poem “PMS and PMDD Symptoms,” from the collection *4-Headed-Woman*, where she denounces the racist forms of mass birth control that have been applied to the poorest sectors of the Caribbean society. In the following excerpt from the poem, Adisa provides documentation to give credit for the massive field trials practiced upon poor Black women in Puerto Rico and Haiti in the 1950s. These trials were carried out to test what was to be the first contraceptive pill:

1950 drs. gregory pincus and john rock
commissioned by
planned parenthood federation of america
goal develop simple and reliable form of contraception
worcester foundation for experimental biology
their lab
6,000 women in puerto rico and haiti
their guinea pigs
their invention enovid-10
marketed in the usa 1960
 emphasis in the original) (52-53)

The 1950s was a period when new birth control techniques were being investigated in the USA with a view to find alternatives to permanent sterilization. The birth control movement, strongly influenced by eugenics, was especially interested in providing its contraceptive services to the impoverished Southern communities. Clarence Gamble, an eugenicist and a wealthy physician, heir to soap company Procter & Gamble, “wanted to be known as a working *philanthropist*” (Reed 257, my emphasis), and thus he funded and supervised birth control projects in the American South in the 1930s (Briggs 103). Puerto Rico was densely populated and there was a high demand for alternatives to permanent sterilization, which was widespread on the island thanks to funding from Gamble, who advocated sterilization for the world’s poor (C. “History” n. p.). Indeed, Gamble and other eugenicists of the time believed that poverty was caused by reproduction. Their plan to stop overpopulation through family planning programs directly involved “the relentlessly fertile Puerto Rican mother,” and served to justify “(post)colonial poverty, communism, and the role of the United States in the Third World.” It was



the interpretation of the Third World “as victimized by poverty and as endangering U.S. interests through its actual or potential relationship to communism” what served to endorse U.S. intervention in the colonized and formerly colonized communities (Briggs 110).

The concept of ‘race suicide’ excited in the minds of the middle-class whites of the early 20th century, warned that—as a result of the success of the “voluntary motherhood” campaign of the late 19th century by which the white birth rate declined significantly—the Black population could easily outnumber the white community, which caused a racist alarm (Davis “Racism” 208-210). Similarly, Gamble also showed his concern about what he viewed as “the abuse of birth control by ‘the fittest’ and the danger that they would be outproduced by lower types” (Gamble “Deficit” qtd. in Briggs 103). Contrary to Gamble’s and the North American funders’ “specific meanings and desired outcomes” about birth control methods, “feminists, social workers and *independentistas*” from Puerto Rican “*asociaciones*,” like Carmen Rivera de Alvarado and Celestina Zalduondo, demanded the right to birth control for individual cases, but worked relentlessly to resist the eugenicist ideologies that aimed at the extermination of the poorest sections of society (Briggs 125-127). However, Gamble, who had been coordinating grants for the pharmaceutical companies that provided birth control in Puerto Rico (Briggs 103), instigated by eugenics alone, helped to implement the first two “larger-scale trials of steroid oral contraceptives” that would be conducted in 1956 and 1957 in Puerto Rico (Briggs 124).

The Worcester Foundation for Experimental Biology (WFEB) that Adisa mentions in this poem was a nonprofit corporation founded in Massachusetts in 1944 by Gregory Pincus and Hudson Hoagland, two precarious but well-grounded scientists who thought they would be better off if they could escape from academia and get fundings to develop their own research (Reed 329-330). The WFEB was financially supported by different donors and organizations, such as the euphemistically called Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), formerly the Birth Control Federation of America, led by Sanger (Reed 265, Briggs 132). Through PPFA, Pincus contacted Dr. John Rock, “who was working with progesterone on human subjects” and who (against all odds, as he was a devout Catholic) became involved in the project, and was also an ardent defender of contraception, mainly because he was also worried about “the threat of overpopulation” (Briggs 133). Pincus was also convinced that the pill could be a



solution against the “population explosion” that occurred after World War II, and for this reason his team was awarded a grant by the PPFA (Briggs 132). Sanger, behind the PPFA, the drug company Searle, and Gamble, amongst others, wanted the pill, and gave fundings to WFEB. Pincus, Rock and Chang were the physicians/researchers responsible for the first large-scale clinical trial conducted in Puerto Rico in 1956 to reach that aim. Pincus and his team initiated their first and second trials in two Puerto Rican communities, and they established a third location in Port au Prince, Haiti. Gamble, who was the funder of the second trial, hired a woman to take a census of the urban slum of La Vega in Puerto Rico. She collected information about the women’s number of children, the number of sterilizations made, and the types of birth control they used; she then offered the new COC pill (Combined Oral Contraceptive containing estrogen and progestin), called Enovid, to the women who had been denied sterilization at the hospital. Many patients willingly took the pill, but side effects such as “bleeding, nausea and headaches” complicated the work. Nevertheless, many “women desperate to avoid pregnancy continued to enroll in the studies” (Eig n. p.). Doctors did not give up the trials because they doubted that the “side effects reported by women were real and significant.” After a placebo trial, Dr. Pincus confirmed that “the suggestion of the possibility of side effects was what was causing them” due to “the emotional super-activity of Puerto Rican women.” As a result, “potential participants simply were not warned” of the side effects (Briggs 139). What is significant behind these placebo trials—which proves nothing but the power of suggestion through language—is that doctors and scientists were misusing their authority by naming the results as they wanted them to be.⁹² Namely, that *their* pill had no side effects. This scientific imposture bolstered by eugenics enabled the team to continue with their narcissistic plan, disregarding the health conditions of the women who were (supposed) to *benefit* from them.

In the introduction to the poem, the layout is arranged in two visual columns that can be read either separately, or alternating from one column to the other, following a kind of spaced linearity. On the left column, Adisa inventories a series of PMS (premenstrual syndrome) and PMDD (premenstrual dysphoric disorder) symptoms, using medical terms such as “edema” (a swelling caused by fluid

⁹²In Miller and Colloco’s “Semiotics and the Placebo Effect,” the semiotic theory developed by American pragmatist philosopher Charles Peirce is applied to understand “the placebo apprehension and response to signs” (509).



retention) or “decreased balance” (52). Meanwhile on the right column, the poetic female voice seems to be answering someone else’s questions such as ‘Are you fine?’ The spaces in between the columns serve as representations of the gap between the subjectivity of the poetic voice’s menstrual pain and the dispassionate medical nomenclature. As an answer to the “**cramps**” and the “**cravings of salt & sweet**” (emphasis in the original), the female voice repeats several times “iamfine,” as if something was agglomerating within, or “really / fine,” in a withheld, monosyllabic tone that seems to hold back a doleful dirge. The poetic voice’s attempt to conceal such emotional and physical effects is broken in the uppercase verses below:

edema

fatigue

headaches

FINE
FUCKED UP
IRRATIONAL
NEUROTIC
EMOTIONAL

just fine

thank you

(52 emphasis in the original)

The invisible pain that beats between the columns serve, as Ahmed would put it, to remind the woman of her “[b]odily surfaces.” These, in the case of the “period pain,” are inner body surfaces. The woman feels the blood pressing against her body. In “*seeking to move away from the pain*,” she moves towards her own body, curling up and hugging herself. It is as though she wanted to get rid of something that is not hers, that is not “what is lived as ordinary,” but that exists within her, demanding her to “attend to [her] embodied existence” (*Cultural* 26, emphasis in the original). The emphasis in bold fonts throughout the left column directly connects with the emphasis also added in the final verses on the development of the pill that I have quoted and analyzed earlier. On the right column, the poetic voice eventually mentions her irregular menstrual cycle: “**tearfulness**” describes the medical voice on the left column, while the phrase “my period again / the second time this month” is uttered by the female voice. These verses serve to unclothe what causes her



unbearable emotional and physical situation. Ironically, she concludes: “how special / I have enough blood to do anything,” while deep inside she is blaming such biological irregularity (Adisa *4-Headed* 52). The blood, Ahmed states, becomes an “imagined object” during menstrual pain; and the trauma of the period pain, which reappears every month, triggers a “too familiar” knowledge of pain. This familiarity with pain creates anticipation, which may affect negatively the way in which menstrual pain is felt (*Cultural* 27). In other words, her awareness of the blood flooding within herself “affects [her] pain.” Therefore, such *invasion* of blood becomes an “alien within” (27). According to the way in which this poem is presented, the pain may also be intensified by the knowledge of scientific, impersonal names given to period symptoms, such as PMS, PMDD, edema, bloating, and so on, which are simple external descriptors, and therefore may also cause strangeness.

The link between the first part and the latter part of the poem can be easily explained. Recent research has proved that the COC pills with the hormones progestin and estrogen may prevent irregular periods with associated PMDD and PMS symptoms (Lopez et al. 2), and are sometimes prescribed by doctors to treat women with such irregularities. In this poem, the poetic voice shows herself skeptical about the whole scientific method that studies and controls women’s sexuality. Although taking the pill seems to be an acceptable prescribed method to prevent the premenstrual symptoms, the poetic voice seems not thoroughly convinced. In fact, the same study mentioned above also confirms that the placebo pills used during testings also “had a large effect” releasing the pain of the patients with PMS and PMDD (2). Borrowing Ahmed’s assumptions, the poetic voice’s “cramps return [her] to [her] body” and connect her to the world she inhabits. From that place of mindfulness, she is open to question the place of her body in the world (*Cultural* 27). By recalling the trials carried out in the Caribbean for the development of the oral contraceptives, Adisa, the knee scraper, is questioning the ethics of such testings and their political significance.⁹³ Her inquiry is geared not only to uncover the eugenicist/imperialist reasons behind the birth control campaigns that supported the development of the pill, but also to dismantle the unscrupulous use of Caribbean women as “guinea pigs,” who were recklessly administered the pill *for free* before its marketing approval in the US. Although

⁹³See chapter 4.1 with regard to the nonconformity of the figure of the knee scraper that Adisa creates and adopts for decolonizing purposes.



many women and feminists at the time both in the mainland and in Puerto Rico advocated for its development and actively participated in its promotion, the pill, as well as the trials, have been reprobated “as an example of male and masculinist science being callous about women’s bodies” (Briggs 138). What comes to the surface in Adisa’s bodily political (and poetical) reflections is that the first contraception pill was nothing but the “product of postcolonial development” (Briggs 130). This is clearly manifest in the US successful neocolonial subjugation of the Third World by means of body politics such as birth control.

Sexual oppression in the tourist space

The question of the US imperial invasion of the Caribbean can also be acknowledged in the context of tourism, and specifically in sex tourism. In *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, Boyce Davies observes how constructions of the Caribbean “as a ‘prostitute’, as a source of pleasure and relaxation” are linked to “economic and political domination and exploitation.” Such connections, she points out, have been raised by Caribbean women writers such as Audre Lorde or Paule Marshall (*Black* 24-25). Likewise, Adisa’s poem “Dear Audre” (*Name* 51) makes connections between racism and sexism, claiming that both “america’s invasion of Grenada in 1983” and rape are political forms of oppression that need to be denounced in equal terms.⁹⁴ Boyce Davies’ critical insights on the matter are helpful when approaching Adisa’s poem. In the same line of thought, Boyce Davies describes the “Grenada invasion” as a “tourist trip.” Thus she describes tourism as the exploitation of local resources by “multinational corporations” that do not reinvest their gains in the country. She also underlines the foreign occupation of the local environment, and the subsequent displacement of the locals from the best areas of the country. Finally, she addresses “the position of service” in which local people find themselves. Hence, as Boyce Davies concludes, tourism does not bring any “economic prosperity” (*Black* 26). In this respect, she stresses how the US has taken over colonial power from Europe (25), becoming what Aimé Césaire called the “new barbarian” (Césaire *Discourse* 59 qtd. in Boyce Davies *Black* 172).⁹⁵

⁹⁴See Lorde’s essay “Grenada Revisited” for further information about the racist implications of this “undeclared war” that kept Grenada—then under Maurice Bishop’s revolutionary government—from achieving self-determination and progress (185).

⁹⁵In a parallel reading of US invasion of the Bahamas through tourist practices, M. Jaqui Alexander reminds how Hemingway’s discovery of Bimini contributed to subsequent US imperial narratives of “serviceability of black people” and “predatory . . . masculinity” (*Pedagogies* 56-57). Alexander makes allusion here to Ernest Hemingway’s *Islands in the Stream*. Her latter comments are based on the

In *It Begins With Tears*, Beryl's rape is placed in the context of tourism in Jamaica, suggesting the fact that invasion and tourism are not but two sides of the same coin: imperialist expansion. The story of Beryl, the mysterious and tormented female character in *It Begins With Tears*, is told by herself in a kind of redemptive confession during the healing rituals performed in the river. Prompted by her female friends, Beryl discloses for the first time in her life the details of her forced pregnancy and subsequent undesired motherhood. One summer, she got a job as a chambermaid in Montego Bay because she needed to save for her first year at the teacher's college there. While working in the hotel, a white American tourist raped her. She tried to abort without success. Finally, Beryl had a baby girl, but she was unable to love it and gave it away for adoption (Adisa *Begins* 222-226).

Beryl tells her friends that one of the senior chambermaids suggested her the possibility to earn more money by prostituting herself, claiming that "[m]uch foreign man like black woman" (223). In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Alexander reflects on the colonial implications of the "commodification of sexual pleasure" in tourist spaces. She notes that, in these spaces, the Caribbean people are disciplined to be "loyal sexualized citizens who service heterosexuality, tourism and the nation simultaneously" (54). Beryl declined the offer to be a sex worker, but nonetheless, she would soon be trapped in what Sheller calls the "embodied encounter between foreign travellers and local people [that] involves corporeal relations of unequal power" (*Citizenship* 210). Every morning, Beryl's manager warned her not to steal anything from guests. She remembers how it vexed her to "hear him say that," she argues, "cause me wasn't no thief" (Adisa *Begins* 222). The implications of this prejudiced warning can be explained through Ahmed's notion of the "performativity of disgust" (*Cultural* 82-100). The possibility that Beryl, a chambermaid, may steal things from guests indicates that the "proximity" between the consumer and the worker might be "risky" (88). What is felt as an offense by Beryl—she is disgusted by her manager's preconception—is felt as a certainty by her manager, accompanied with a menace of punishment: if she steals, the guest will be offended, and she will be dismissed. The manager, Beryl recalls, also advised the staff "not to fraternise wid de guests, or we could lose we work, and me really need de work to help pay me college fees" (Adisa *Begins* 224). The fear instilled in the chambermaids is directly related to the discourses about the criminalization of prostitution. In effect,

observations made by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (12).



Alexander observes that the state of the Bahamas has laws to punish the prostitutes for doing their job. However, the tourists who pay for the services are seen as the victims of these sexual transactions. As Alexander puts it, the structures of tourism are organized in a way such that it “erase[s] the role of the tourist in the production of tourism itself.” The tourist thus remains invisible in front of the law. Likewise, this reliance of the state “on silence and invisibility,” it needs to be noted, also “tends to erase the work that women do to make it better for tourists and worst for themselves” (*Pedagogies* 59). To put it otherwise, as I said, women’s labor providing sexual pleasure to tourists is not recognized as a positive contribution to the national economy, but rather as an activity that is legally punishable, just like stealing.

Ahmed notes that disgust is about attributing a feeling to an object. Disgust is subject to the way in which “the object of disgust impresses upon us.” It is thus necessary some kind of “contact,” some degree of “proximity,” for this impression to take place (*Cultural* 85). Likewise, Beryl’s proximity to the intimate space of a guest’s room may be felt as offensive by the guest. She may do something that makes him or her feel disgusted, in this case, stealing. In effect, the fact that the manager suspects that Beryl may be in the necessity to steal something from a guest places the suspected native girl in a lower position with respect to the potential victim of the theft, namely the tourist.⁹⁶ On the other hand, Rozin and Fallon affirm that “[d]isgust is manifested as a distancing from some object, event or situation, and can be characterized as a rejection” (“Perspective” 577 qtd. in Ahmed *Cultural* 85). This rejection from the part of the disgusted guest could be translated into Beryl’s risk of losing her summer job, and by extension the risk of not being able to cover the expense of her studies. It was a great pressure put on her, and one that was funded on what Ahmed calls “the recognition of likeness” (*Cultural* 88). That is to say, that the object of disgust (the possible theft) may be “dependent on past associations, in this case evoked through negation:” By warning her *not* to steal anything, her manager is already associating her “native body” with the act of stealing (88). When explaining the two-folded experience of “tourist harassment,”

⁹⁶Here, two notions come into play that explain this uneven relationship. In the first place, Ahmed’s conceptualization of “the spatial distinction of ‘above’ and ‘below’” that serve to separate bodies and differentiate their status as high and low bodies (*Cultural* 89). On the other hand, Sheller’s observation, borrowing Ahmed’s metaphors of “belowness” and “aboveness,” that the white man becomes sexually vulnerable “to those who are ‘below’ him.” Historically, this fact has enabled Caribbean women “to manipulate and play off the tourist gaze,” hence the presupposed victim status of the tourist (*Citizenship* 221).



Economics Professor Jerome L. McElroy explains that both guests and hosts are susceptible to feel harassed within the tourist space. Such “ambiguous status,” he asserts, may cause tourists to “find their comfort levels transgressed and their freedom circumscribed.” McElroy suggests that one of the causes for “service bias” (preconceptions about the local labor force in the tourist industry) might be rooted in the dependability of the tourist industry on “close personal host-guest interaction,” which may lead to “potential misunderstanding and harassment” (179). In the case of the rape which Adisa depicts here, it is Beryl’s vulnerability that is at stake, as she is the one who will feel harassed by the tourist against all odds.

This daily conversation between Beryl and her manager clearly indicates the “division of labour and leisure,” which not only alienates the disciplined other in her own land, but also “functions as an instrument of power between and within nation states” (Ahmed *Cultural* 166). Ahmed also asserts in this respect that “this distancing requires proximity” (85), the proximity that Beryl needs to enact in order to keep clean the tourists’ private rooms. This movement towards and away between Beryl and the tourist body proves the existence of imaginary borders between the local public space and the tourist privatized space. This keeps both subjects divided within the same national territory. What is of interest here is that in conversations such as that between Beryl and her manager, it seems that the tourist’s invasion of the local space is very welcome, whereas the native body’s occupation of the tourist’s private room is suspected and doomed to condemnation. Thus, Beryl’s vulnerable situation as a worker within the tourist business depicts how Caribbean citizens are being socialized as “native” instead of being socialized as free citizens with an attitude for self-determination (Alexander *Pedagogies* 54).

Interestingly enough, it turns that it is not the tourist who is to fear Beryl, but Beryl herself who becomes fearful. The first time Beryl’s assaulter, a white American tourist, appears in front of her in his hotel room, he does so in his underpants. Beryl recounts: “Me so frighten me scream. Den me tink. ‘Lawd God, look how dis man gwane let me lose me work’, so me start apologising, telling how me knock and me neva know him was in de room” (Adisa *Begins* 223).⁹⁷ These lines indicate that the colonial mechanism of the state has successfully disciplined

⁹⁷“I was so frightened I screamed. Then I thought. ‘Lord God, look how this man is going to let me lose my job’, so I started to apologize, telling how I knocked and I never knew he was in the room.”



Beryl into “availability and serviceability” through discourses such as her manager’s warnings (Alexander *Pedagogies* 59).

In order to fully understand this story of abuse, one cannot forget the mechanisms through which “the imperial tourist psyche” is produced. Like cultural colonialism, imperial tourism, in Alexander’s words, is based on “an ideology that summons an entire population (particularly women) into service.” This ideology makes the tourist believe that the foreign money spent there is “vital for the local population” (59). Knowing this, Beryl’s rapist-to-be initially hands her an envelope with money and a note suggesting Beryl that he would like her to talk to him about Jamaica. But she refuses, alleging her manager’s warnings about not being too close with guests. Ignoring this, the tourist keeps leaving her envelopes with money every day, which she takes. Beryl still remains elusive. After two weeks of playing “cat and mouse” with her, he awaits her in his room, “naked as the day him born,” pulls her against the door, covers her mouth and says: “Beryl I’ve decided today is the day I’ll have some Jamaican meat. You’ve teased me long enough. I know about you black women; I’ve had plenty where I come from” (Adisa *Begins* 224). His words seem to suggest that Black women are sexually immoral. In his view, Beryl is black, and thus racially inferior. Furthermore, she is depicted as animal-like (a piece of meat), and thus subject to his domination and *consumption*.⁹⁸ Weir-Soley explains that the stereotype of the Black woman as sexually deviant has its origins in the male Western narratives of the 19th century (*Eroticism* 13).⁹⁹ Nonetheless, Weir-Soley points out that the white male’s sexual deviance, by all means an unscrupulous observer, was overlooked. This portrayal of the Black woman as different and deviant was received in Europe as both repulsive” and “compelling.” This ambiguity, Weir-Soley further observes, encouraged white males to go beyond the lines of their “visual objectification” and to proceed to have sexual intercourse with Black women, often by means of “violent rape and sexual coercion” (14).

⁹⁸In *Consuming the Caribbean*, Mimi Sheller shows how American imperialism has dehumanized West Indians through the tourist’s shameless gaze. Thus the tourists look at the local people “as if they were animals” (141).

⁹⁹Weir-Soley discusses the white male gaze over the anatomy of Black women, such as the well-known case of Sara Baartman. Popularly known as the Hottentont Venus, Sara, or Saartjie Baartman, this figure was an enslaved woman who worked in Cape Town in the early 19th century. She caught the attention of a British doctor, William Dunlop, who took her to London and Paris where her “buttocks and genitalia, considered abnormally large,” were exhibited “as a scientific curiosity” (Weir-Soley *Eroticism* 13).



In the following lines, Beryl recounts the fears that kept her from revealing what her sexual assaulter was doing. Along with the manager's discourse discussed above, the story that comes to Beryl's mind, before she decides to keep silent, contributes to the production of the female native psyche in imperial/tourist contexts:

Me want scream out but me memba how a girl who used to clean rooms like me was fire when she accuse a guest of freshing wid her. De man seh she was hallucinating and de manager fire her right dere, not even giving her de pay she did due. Ah tink is dat why I did keep quiet, whispering to de man to let me go. Den him throw me pan de bed, pull off me uniform and rudeness me. (*Adisa Begins* 224-225)¹⁰⁰

Beryl is fully aware of her vulnerable position. Her knowledge of how power is distributed certainly influences her decision not to scream. She knows that she can be rejected by the tourist, and that she might lose her job if she does not keep the white man happy. Her fear leads her to subordination, it silences her, but this is the high price she has to pay for her economic independence. In her reflections on tourism in the Bahamas, Alexander points out how "the state disciplines the population to ensure that it works to make things 'better in the Bahamas' *for tourists*, and not for [the country] itself." Therefore, if locals are friendly to tourists, it is mainly due to questions of "asymmetry and survival," like the necessity to keep a job (*Pedagogies* 59 my emphasis). In Beryl's case, her desire to study leads her to get a remunerated job to help with the expenses. Although historically the Black female's incursion in the public space is more common in the Caribbean than it is in other Western countries, Beryl's interaction with the American tourist problematizes her status as a free citizen.

The American tourist, in his certainty that he has rights over the country and its women, rapes Beryl. She screams at the sight of her own blood, spread on the sheets. He slaps her and tells her to shut up; then he exclaims: "Ah, a Jamaican virgin. A dying breed." (*Adisa Begins* 225). His comments indicate his knowledge about the history of prostitution in the Caribbean, and the subsequent bias that all

¹⁰⁰I wanted to scream out but I remembered how a girl . . . was fired when she accused a guest of taking liberties with her. The man said she was hallucinating and the manager fired her right there, not even giving her the pay due to her. I think that is why I kept quiet. . . . Then he threw me upon the bed, pulled off my uniform and did rude things to me.



Caribbean women are willing to trade with their own bodies. By acknowledging the oddity of being a “Jamaican virgin,” he is conveying a sarcasm that implicitly uses what in his imperial psyche could pass as an oxymoron: Jamaicans are not virgins, just like a mischief cannot be good. Interestingly enough, this figurative construction implies a way of understanding the world in terms of binary oppositions, which are the norm in the politics of cultural essentialism and racial subordination. On the other hand, the word “breeding” he uses to describe Jamaican virgins objectifies Beryl as a farm animal, an object of ownership, domestication and exploitation. Clearly, the occupation and objectification of Beryl’s female body through the rapist’s utterances are not but a perpetuation of the imperialist discourses. The nation, taken as the masculine subject, uses the woman, who is associated to “beauty and appearance,” in order to show others an ideal national image based on physical attributes (Ahmed *Cultural* 136). Therefore it could be argued that, by positing Beryl, the denigrated woman, as a symbol of Jamaica, the white man is also implying that the so-called independent nation of Jamaica has not yet conquered independence. In a similar context from colonial times, Simone J. Alexander claims that Sara Baartman, used by the “white colonial masters” as a circus animal to be exhibited and exploited, could be seen as “metonymically representative of the motherland,” insofar as the abuses she endured “mirror the exploitation, the plundering, and the rape of the motherland” (*African*35).¹⁰¹

In the river, Beryl’s friends help her put her painful story into words. Angel repeats between sobs: “He raped you, Beryl, he raped you.” On her part, Miss Cotton, the elder priestess, reflects: “There was too much evil in the world. Too many pains that could never be eased, too many memories for tears to erase.” Beryl dried her tears and—realizing that “all the women, her sisters . . . didn’t fault her”—proceeded to “tell the entire story.” She had been returning to “dat room” for the next four days but she cannot explain why she did. Then she tells her friends how he

¹⁰¹Simone J. Alexander observes that the racially constructed physical anomaly of the Black woman body marked Sara Baartman as subhuman, a status that subjected her to exploitation, and to being denied citizenship. Nearly two centuries after the forced migration and commodification of her body, Sara Baartman has been granted South African citizenship posthumously. This recognition, Alexander asserts, has served not only to debunk “hierarchical structures,” but also to insert the figure of “the woman in the national discourse.” Alexander also concludes that “Baartman’s being granted citizenship provides a discursive and political space, an invaluable framework for women not only to articulate resistance but also to ascertain their role in nation-building. Woman becomes ‘nation and narration,’ to borrow Homi Bhabha’s famous phrase” (S. J. Alexander *African* 13). This affirmation also serves to endorse my contention that Adisa’s narratives of intimacy involve a remapping of Caribbean women’s spaces of belonging, and the subsequent deconstruction of the nation.



“did all kind of rudeness” to her (*Adisa Begins* 225). When he was gone, she could not stop crying, and she felt so “dirty” that she did not want to return home to her parents. Then she went to college, where she found out she was pregnant. A friend found her “a woman who seh she know what herb fi gi me fi wash weh whatever in me stomach,”¹⁰² but her attempt to abort did not work. Then she had a baby girl for whom she was unable to feel love: “Every time me look pan her, me memba how me get her, and me heart just turn sour” (226).¹⁰³ Then she decides to give it away for adoption. It turns that the rapist himself returns to the island with his wife and Beryl’s friends threaten to “obeah him and mek him nasty hood drop off” unless he pays for his dreadful actions and takes his baby for adoption.¹⁰⁴ The American man and his wife accept and formally adopt Angela, as this is how Beryl named her, giving her in exchange an amount of money that Beryl claims never having used. However Beryl’s decision to get rid of her daughter traumatizes her for life. She did not complete college, as she could not concentrate after giving her baby girl away; as she confesses: “Me would hear her calling me.” Furthermore, feelings of shame would keep her away from other men too. She claims “no decent Jamaican man gwan wan marry me afta dem know dat a whiteman mash me up” (227).¹⁰⁵ As Ahmed explains, the mechanisms of shame work first as “an exposure” in front of others of an action that is considered “bad and hence shameful;” and secondly as “an attempt to hide,” causing the shameful subject to “turn away from the other and towards itself” (*Cultural* 103). In shame, the “bad feeling is attributed to oneself” and it is not easy to attribute it to someone else (104). Drawing upon Ahmed’s reflections, Beryl’s feelings of shame did not enable her to attribute any responsibility to the white man. Furthermore, in turning towards herself, Beryl’s sense of self also intensifies. She becomes more aware of how others may perceive her, of “how the subject appears before and to others” (205). In that sense, I argue, shame has to do with Beryl’s feelings about her being the object of someone else’s gaze. In observing herself through the gaze of “decent Jamaican men,” Beryl is giving up the autonomy of seeing herself through her own eyes, and thus she is

¹⁰²“a woman who said she knew what herb to give me to wash away whatever was in my stomach.”

¹⁰³“Every time I looked upon her, I remembered how I got her, and my heart just turned sour.” *Adisa’s* poem “Cut from the Same Cloth” also speaks about the fact that “not every woman / can love a daughter / when she seldom / experienced love” (*Name* 66).

¹⁰⁴In Caribbean culture obeah is used to cast spells on people in order to make them do what others request them. Hood is Jamaican slang for penis.

¹⁰⁵“no decent Jamaican man is going to want to marry me after they know that a white man mashed me up.”



living according to the expectations of others. Beryl's secretly concealed pain can only be guessed throughout the novel behind her tears, which become increasingly frequent as she cannot stop hearing "a child calling out to her" (Adisa *Begins* 35). Although she tries to repress her traumatic story, tears appear in her face whenever some experience reconnects her to her lost baby girl, reclaiming that her story be told:

Beryl . . . stood looking at Arnella cradling the child. Tears filled her eyes and silently rolled down her cheeks on to her dress, but no one suspected that her tears were not for Arnella's baby, but her own, forever lost to her. (88)

The way in which Adisa arranges for Beryl's character to heal from the trauma is, just like in Monica's case, through naming the origin of her pain. The gathering in the river, as we have seen in the previous chapter, enables a space for the women from Kristoff to share their stories and heal from them. Naming for Adisa is important because it helps to break the silence. From the moment when Beryl speaks, the story is made available to her community, and it can be passed on so that others whose experiences may be similar can understand how it works and be able to change it. Healing from unwanted pregnancy is also symbolized in the novel by Beryl's recovery of her lost baby child, who turns to be Angel, the Afro-American woman whose traumatic experience with her step-mother is worth further research.

At this point, it can be confirmed that a considerable number of Adisa's female characters are confronted to some kind of sexual violence whenever they decide to step into the public sphere and reach economic independence. Beryl's case is quite revealing: as a young woman her plan to become a teacher was cut short when a tourist rapes her. Her trauma is heightened by her pregnancy and subsequent adoption of her baby. Many years later, when she is healing through her own confession, she declares: "But ah didn't complete dat next year of teacha's college . . . Afta me gi weh me baby girl just cause dat whiteman did rape me, me couldn't concentrate. Me would hear her calling me" (227).¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, in *It Begins With Tears*, Monica's violation by female actors—mentioned in previous chapter 5.1—has called the critics' attention (Valovirta, Spencer). In her accurate reading of this

¹⁰⁶ "But I didn't complete that next year of teacher's college . . . After I gave away my baby girl just because that white man raped me, I couldn't concentrate. I would hear her calling me."



“ritual of violation,” Spencer notes that the pepper seeds introduced in Monica’s womb symbolize the sperm. Indeed, it is not out of jealousy that these women assault Monica, but rather because they are internalizing “a profoundly misogynist desire” to subjugate the female body (111). These women, the assaulters, have been disciplined by the heteronormative state. Heterosexual imperatives educate women to love men, and hence to consider other women their enemies (Ahmed 127, Butler *Psychic* 25). The three female assaulters in the novel are a clear embodiment of patriarchal values. They punish Monica because she is both economically and sexually autonomous, and this destabilizes the structure of their monogamous relationships. Another instance of sexual violence occurs in the character of Christine from *Painting Away Regrets*. Christine’s focus on her professional career and artistic drives entails a marital conflict (See section 5.1). Feeling threatened, her husband Donald will not only abuse her verbally, but also sexually. One night, after having been painting in her studio, she gets to bed to find Donald in the middle of a terrifying setting, lying in bed and surrounded by all his seven swords. Frightened, Christine unsuccessfully tries to escape with her two children. That night she is raped by her husband in a scene that could be contrasted with their first sexual encounter examined in the previous section:

She lay like a statue but he kept kissing her. . . . He roughly pushed her on her stomach, straddled her upper thighs, and forced his way into her anus. She felt the dagger by her mouth and bit into it, the pain was so excruciating. She focused on Donald's panting, counting his breaths in her head and waiting for it to be over. (Adisa *Painting* 154)

Overall, Adisa has written insightfully on rape and abortion throughout her work. In *4-Headed-Woman* (2013), for instance, a number of female voices discuss on these topics, notably in “Bathroom Graffiti VI,” on abortion (106-108), and “Bathroom Graffiti IX,” on rape (111-112). In the poetry volume *Traveling Women* (1989) that she published in conjunction with poet devorah major, Adisa also explores the theme of birth rights in “Womb Renting” (37-38), where she addresses the story of Mary Whitehead, a poor, white American woman who in 1986 regretted her decision to become a surrogate mother, and tried to keep her baby unsuccessfully. This case sparked new debates within society about motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth. In the same volume, Adisa also denounces rape against



Black women in “Black Woman I” (76-80), where she denounces how Black women are still today to blame and punished in cases of sexual abuse, while the perpetrators go free. Adisa has also written and directed a play on domestic violence, *Out of Control*, premiered in St. Croix (US Virgin Islands) in August 2014. In connection with Sheller’s and Alexander’s meditations on sexual politics as practices for Caribbean women to attain citizenship from below, the work of Adisa analyzed hereby questions the mechanisms that have for long used and abused Black women’s bodies for sexual exploitation and reproduction, revealing how these traditionally manipulated bodies have surreptitiously pursued practices to advance their erotic autonomy and civic freedom.

Chapter 6

Embodied Writing and Womb-Identity

Chapter 6.1

Pleasure and Emotional Literacy



In this chapter, I focus on the use of language, literature and knowledge as embodied and pleasurable decolonizing practices. My intention is to foreground how the presence of sensuality in Adisa's writings set up an accessible language to explore emotions. The emotional literacy that is gained in the reading of her work provides further knowledge of the decolonizing and feminist strategies that can be used in the spaces of human everyday practices. These strategies render more visible the mechanisms to attain what Sheller would call "embodied citizenship" (*Citizenship* 26), which is in close connection to Foucault's notion of "biopolitics" ("Birth" 73-79) as reflected in the processes of "racialization, sexual normalization, and national procreation" that have marked the history of the Caribbean (Sheller *Citizenship* 26). We have seen in the previous chapter how the act of naming traumatic experiences can be a powerful tool to heal from past painful events—like the trauma of the Middle Passage or that of rape—and claim a Caribbean ethos. In the present section, I am going to examine how the desire to know about the trauma is what prompts the author to use language, naming what she feels and therefore discovering the nature of that trauma. In her essay "I Must Write What I Know So I'll Know That I've Known It All Along," Adisa affirms that, "[a]s an African woman from the Caribbean and a former colonial subject," she was supposed to be ignorant, because the white colonial canon despises Black people's right to individuality. She was just "a mass of Black bother to be contained or put to work." However, she claims, "[i]t is this knowing of myself that led me to save and later share my writings" (55). As Adisa states, "[k]nowing then, for some of us Caribbean women, is writing the memories, not necessarily of the individuals, but of the collective dance of our people" (55). Her claims in this early essay are important to understand Adisa's embodied writing as a source of knowledge and empowerment.

Adisa contends that both writing and making love are creative forces that enable transformation and healing. In order to study this connection, I will examine two pieces included in *Eros Muse* (2006), "The Orgasmic Rupture of Writing" and "When the Poem Kisses You." As an example of how Adisa's writing attempts to



rediscover the past and challenge oppressive epistemologies, I end this chapter reviewing her poems on menstruation, which support her own theories for erotic empowerment. Since her early collections, Adisa has unabashedly shown her own concerns on the experience of menstruation in the Caribbean context. In chapter 5.2, I have examined closely one of the poems from her most recent poetry volume *4-headed-woman* (2013), to show how intimate aspects of female sexuality have great political relevance. Here I offer a revision of Adisa's growing concern on the female period, a topic that still remains a discredited aspect of women's sexuality in the Caribbean context, where it is markedly eschewed. My analysis in this last part offers a chronological reading of some of her most relevant poems on the subject, namely "We Bleed," from *Traveling Women* (1989), and "Bumbu Clat," from *Caribbean Passion* (2004). In order to do so, I mainly draw upon/on the work of Plato, Nietzsche, Freud and Marcuse to offer a general overview of how the notion of Eros has evolved in Western morals, and how it has been utilized for purposes that vary between the principles of life and death. In connection with the Erotic, I will draw upon Lacan and Derrida to discuss the principle of *jouissance* and its deconstructivist implications; the French poststructuralist feminists Kristeva and Irigaray are also key to understand the principle of *jouissance*, especially in connection with the maternal. Their work also helps to explain topics related to embodied writing and the connections between poesis and Eros. I also take up feminist theories by Trinh, with regard to the sensuality of female speech and its capacity to regenerate through its fluidity. Ahmed is also mentioned in the context of how pleasure can intensify perceptions of body and help locate its place in the world. Finally, I address Lorde's contentions on poetry, in order to better understand Adisa's reservations about her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," included in *Sister Outsider*.

On Eros, Poiesis, and Mimesis

In my reading of a selection of texts from Adisa's collection *Eros Muse*, I want to examine the process of embodied cognition through the concepts of 'Eros', 'poiesis' and 'mimesis'. It is interesting to remind that for Plato, the most rational of all philosophers, first there was dance, then logos, and finally rationality (*Republic* Book VII).¹⁰⁷ Inasmuch as dance implies movement, rhythm, music and by large

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poetry, it resonates with Plato's postulations that rationality emerges from observing the dance of the heavenly bodies (Pont 268, 275). As a matter of fact, in ancient Greece the art of *mousike*—"the arts of the Muses"—comprised "song, poetry, drama, declamation and instrumental music" (Pont 268). Therefore dance—as an embodied practice—and poetry—as a linguistic representation of such rhythmical arrangements—can both be used to attain and express knowledge in postcolonial writing. When there is movement, there is change and dislocation, and the whole idea of body cognition comes into play. Dance is indeed a key concept in Adisa's collection *Eros Muse*, and I think in all her work and in the work of many Caribbean writers.¹⁰⁸ Thus for Adisa—as "for the Greeks and most other early societies" (267)—dance is knowledge, wisdom and understanding of the world. In close connection with Adisa's aesthetic statement that knowledge emerges from the bodies in movement, Anna-Lena Renqvist explains in her essay "Eros and Poiesis," that Eros is the half-God (or *daimon*) responsible for "the becoming of life" as well as for "its spiritual counterpart"—that is to say "knowledge and wisdom"—and "every kind of artistic production" (63). Furthermore, Eros acts as a messenger that operates between the finite world and the infinite realm of the beyond; thanks to Eros it was possible for humans to communicate with gods (Plato *Symposium* 197a in Renqvist 63). It needs to be said, however, that already in Plato's time, the conception of culture "as the free self-development of Eros," was "an archaic-mythical residue." Although Plato's early work (i.e. *Symposium*) studied Eros and sexuality as the main and more powerful life instinct, soon Logos (reason) took over (Marcuse *Eros* 114). It was indeed Plato who "introduced the repressive definition of Eros into the household of Western culture" (Marcuse *Eros* 192). Since Plato, the dominant Western reality principle rests upon rationality, and "supersedes the metaphysical speculation of Eros" (Marcuse *Eros* 114).

____ In *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'logos' is explained as "account, relation, ratio, reason(ing), argument, discourse, saying, speech, word." It is related to the Greek word "*legein*," which means "choose, collect, gather, say." The word is also interpreted as "[a] pervading cosmic idea or spirit of creativity or rationality" (1621).

¹⁰⁸ Historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite, for instance, explains his notion of 'tidalectics' through a movement that breaks with linearity, and therefore with European forms of dialectical thought. See Brathwaite's *Third World Poems* (42). In Mackey's "An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite," the Caribbean author describes his tidal dialectic as "the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic . . . motion, rather than linear" (14). Chapter 1 offers an introduction to Brathwaite's main contributions to Caribbean literature and postcolonial theory.



In relation to Eros as the source of knowledge, the terms mimesis and poiesis need to be explained in this section, as they are the forms in which the embodied knowledge of Eros materializes into theory. Whereas for the French feminists (Cixous “Laugh” 879-80, Kristeva “Revolution” 89-136) the repressive symbolic order is better disrupted through poetry in its non-mimetic essence (poiesis), specially when there are things we know physically but we cannot quite articulate with words; transnational feminist Susan Stanford Friedman acknowledges the transgressive capability of the narrative mode (mimesis) in Black oral traditions.¹⁰⁹ In fact, Friedman claims that, for writers whose traditions are rooted in oral modes of discourse, storytelling is considered a source of knowledge and empowerment, and by no means it is regarded as a force to be resisted (*Mappings* posit. 3659-90). As such, postcolonial narratives, like those inscribed in the oral tradition of storytelling, are instruments that enhance the writer’s decolonizing potential. As we have seen in chapter 4.1, Adisa uses both the lyric and the prosaic modes as postcolonial strategies, often mixing them in the same text, which challenges established polarities between literary genres.

Throughout her work, Adisa demonstrates that writing is a sensual experience that can be as painful as it can be pleasurable. The life principle of Eros, as I scrutinize in this section, explores further the associations between difference and harmony, separation and reunification, and pain and pleasure. In her collection of poems and essays *Eros Muse*, the creative force of Eros enables a back and forth movement between prose and poetry. Eros is found resting—as Renqvist would put it—at “the border between mythology and philosophy” (62). Interestingly enough, as this author recounts, Eros is the divine force that is able to tear apart everything—whereby difference, separation and pain come into place—and to later restore what he has previously divided into different parts—whereby harmony, reunification and pleasure take over. As such, Eros represents the life instinct as opposed to the death instinct, because it has “the power of difference” and “the power of reunification” (61-62), which are the forces that regulate the life cycle. In order to explain Adisa’s negotiation between pain and pleasure, philosophy and mythology, poetry and prose, the notion of the double power of Eros seems a suitable approach. On the one hand, there is philosophy, the practice that may separate people for their different epistemologies/worldviews; philosophy corresponds to Adisa’s critical thinking and ideas expressed individually through her poetic voice. On the other hand, there is

¹⁰⁹See chapter 4.1 for further details on Lorde’s and hook’s position about poetry, as well as Friedman’s comments on the racial implications of the split between poetry and narrative in feminist writings.



mythology, the narratives composed of human archetypes, which have the ability to bring us together in our similarities as human beings.¹¹⁰ Adisa's recreation of African and Judeo-Christian cosmologies serve as the expression of the mythological side of Eros's power, or erotic agency (see chapter 5). Mythology enables the communion of human beings by seeking similarities among them.

Eros and knowledge: The pleasure of writing intimacies

It may be said that writing for Adisa is not only an act of intimacy, as many times it is also an act of impudence. Writing is about feeling no shame or embarrassment about oneself. It presupposes sharing something that is subjective, mainly an emotion or thought that is rooted in personal experience. In fact, feelings of shame or embarrassment emerge when one challenges a pre-established moral paradigm. On the contrary, pleasure, which may also be inscribed as an act of intimacy, is a fundamental value in the construction of the individual's personality. Therefore shame, as imposed from above (i.e. from the higher levels of social institutions, such as religion) produces what I would call the 'banalization of pleasure.'¹¹¹ From a political point of view, pleasure is trivialized when the state relegates pleasure to the intimate space, affirming in its mainstream narratives that pleasure is not a value; because if pleasure were a value, it would not be pushed into a corner as something that is secret and cannot be shared. Pleasure, thus, is denied access to the public sphere, and if it is voiced, it emerges in the form of transgression. It becomes a taboo, and performing the taboo leads to shameful feelings. It is precisely these shameful feelings what Adisa attempts to explore and transgress in her writing of female sexuality.

This is where a series of contestations over Freud's phobic rapport with pleasure in psychoanalysis enters the equation (Green, Kohut et al., Newirth). In Joseph Newirth's recent study "Pleasure in the Transitional Space: Intersubjectivity

¹¹⁰In "On Creativity, Autarchy and Memory," Beryl Gilroy borrows Jungian psychology to describe archetypes as "psychic structures" that "are not formed by individual experiences like the ideas of Plato," but that "are impersonal and participate organically and even historically in the life of the species" (117).

¹¹¹Trying to find other authors who might have arrived at a similar conclusion, I found Michel Maffessoli's use of the terminology "banalization of pleasure" in *L'Ombra di Dionisio: Una Sociologia delle Passioni* (47), as quoted and translated by Chiara Baldini in her essay "Dionysius Returns: Contemporary Tuscan Trancers and Euripides' *The Bacchae*." Apparently, Maffessoli refers to the "banalization of pleasure" as "the abuse of alcohol and other substances" (Baldini 183). In my dissertation I try to extend its meaning with regard to sexual and creative (literary) pleasure, that is to say, when pleasure is no longer perceived as a value that assists self-knowledge.



and Transformation,” the author claims that “[i]n Freud’s early writing, pleasure was viewed as one side of the central conflict human beings faced and needed to protect themselves from” (251). Newirth observes, for instance, that Freud interpreted his patients’ “repetition compulsion” (i.e. their necessity to repeat unpleasant experiences) with his “theory of the death instinct.” According to Freud, human beings choose to repeat the unhappy experiences and relationships lived in the past just because they represent “safety,” rather than to opt for new pleasurable experiences, because the latter imply a “fearful and threatening possibility” (252-253). In this regard, Adisa’s endorsement of writing as healing could be understood as a contradiction to Freud’s theory of repetition compulsion. I think that Adisa’s endorsement of the writer’s power to heal—by integrating the traumatic past experiences—resonates with the discourses of those who counteract Freud’s theory of the death instinct. In “A Writer/Healer: Literature, A Blueprint for Healing,” a hybrid piece that combines theory, prose and poetry, Adisa gives voice to a singer and reports: “As a word-smith, I believe in the magic and healing power of words. I know and understand miracles. I know literature is a balm, poultice, medicine, and cure” (180 emphasis in the original). In this essay, Adisa analyzes three novels by Erna Brodber, Paule Marshall and Alice Walker, and yet, she is not using standard academic writing, but intersects her hermeneutic practice with verses. A few lines below the previous passage the writer/literary critic adds:

.....
 the writer grasped until her hands held them
 held them and wouldn’t let go
 words as curing as baking soda on sore gums

Healing is the art of transforming our lived reality to be in harmony with our needs. Healing means living free from pain, is saying no to pain, is forgiving the past and learning from it. Healing is about the act: breathing in the moment to experience enjoyment. Healing implies connecting to your purpose, joining force with the social, physical, and spiritual worlds to find your path and be at peace with yourself. I heard the words and came to know where I must go. When I saw the words on the page, I felt as if a lump what had been restricting my breath dissolved, and I found I could sing again. I found my voice” (180 emphasis in the original).



We have seen in chapter 5 how trauma is overcome by naming the stories that caused it. In the same way—and countering Freud—Adisa’s promptings to name what has been silenced is not because she thinks that speaking of the unpleasant or shameful past experiences is a way of being stuck in the past, of being afraid of living other pleasurable experiences; but because the human being needs to know the roots of the traumatic or the shameful event in order to identify it and move forward. Once the individuals who release their stories discover the origin of the given painful/shameful situation, then they find pleasure in the very act of discovering/knowning and will be able to move on. Adisa’s work seems to defend the psychoanalyst view that the constant repetition of past traumatic experiences (through naming them) does not keep the patients (i.e. anyone going through self-analysis) isolated in their own fears and regrets, but rather that it helps them to have control over their own experience by naming it. These speech acts eventually become a realization. The subject realizes the root of the problem and this knowledge gives her/him control over the past unpleasant event. Hence repetition (in this case through language) may become a pleasurable, and healing, act.

There is something else that Freud affirmed in *Beyond the Pleasure* principle that Adisa clearly challenges in her writing. According to Freud, although women have the same sexual urges as men, their feelings of shame, fear and guilt are greater than those felt by men (1). In the works analyzed hereby, Adisa looks into what is shameful in the collective psyche—namely, female sexual pleasure and the menstrual period—and explores the reasons that lie behind the general shame of acknowledging/sharing such experiences. To borrow Attridge’s contentions, in the act of confessing the emotions related to shameful facts, Adisa “discovers in language a truth of [herself] that had eluded [her], that [she] did not know, and did not know [she] did not know” (Coetzee 147). Furthermore, there is a significant differentiation between pleasure and what is known in poststructuralist thought as *jouissance*, or “total enjoyment” (Derrida *Acts* 94). Derrida confirms that “[e]very time there is ‘*jouissance*’ . . . there is ‘deconstruction’,” and he explains that “[d]econstruction perhaps has the effect, if not the mission, of liberating forbidden *jouissance*” (*Acts* 56 emphasis in the original). In a study on maternity and femininity, Rodríguez-Salas resignifies *jouissance* as the

destructive drive that leads to feminine hysteria and the disobedient figure of the *femme fatale*, while “pleasure” involves the mediation of the runaway force of the *jouissance* through the symbolic order of patriarchy, which ends



up limiting feminine expectations to avoid a female rebellion against the system. (Rodríguez-Salas “Beyond” 102 emphasis in the original)¹¹²

In relation to the notion of *jouissance*, Adisa also experiences this total liberating and unsettling enjoyment through her insistence on pleasure. It is in both love making and writing where she finds her unique decolonizing voice, deconstructing and resignifying received epistemologies. This aspect of her work is addressed in detail in her essay “The Organismic Rupture of Writing (*Eros* 145-150). Here, Adisa coins the phrase “orgasmic rupture” to describe her notion of the creative forces that she finds both in love making and in writing. As she claims, the orgasmic ruptures she experiences enables her to transcend the sexual pleasures and to enter the mystical, erotic and political levels (*Eros* 145). With relation to language, Adisa specifies: “My language craves intimate connections” (149). In this piece of prose, the author explores how her sensuality and her sexuality are deeply connected. She affirms that it is through writing that she has been able to claim and affirm her own sexuality. Both in making love and in writing she engages her senses by either stimulating them or putting them on alert. The joy of discovery is what impels her to write or to get involved in “sexual intimacy.” Thus her true motivation for engaging in these sensual activities are either her “insatiable desire to know” in the case of writing, or her “irresistible need to feel” when it comes to sex (145). The presence of *Eros* is palpable in her desire to write and to have sex; in both cases, she claims, her senses are at work, showing that there is a “deep involvement in all aspects of [her] life” (145). Therefore, it could be argued that Adisa’s writing itself is an act of intimacy, which is unapologetically shared with her readership in order to make available a decolonizing voice that gives others the courage to overcome repressed desires.

French feminists Kristeva and Irigaray use the term *jouissance* to describe the female experience of extreme pleasure in connection to the mother and to the female body. For Kristeva, *jouissance* is connected with the maternal and thus with the semiotic chora. Art (that is, the creative force) is understood in her theories as

¹¹²Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas’s essay examines Katherine Mansfield’s autobiographical writings, where she identifies her writing as a form of mothering. Rodríguez-Salas probes into the metaphorical maternity that Mansfield, a barren woman, aimed to perform in order to live a meaningful life (107). Thus, Rodríguez-Salas uncovers the patriarchal mechanisms that shape maternity and femininity as the cause of Mansfield’s frustration. Also in this essay, Rodríguez-Salas makes reference to literary and cultural theorist Charles Shepherdson’s conceptualization of “*jouissance*” as the maternal, and “pleasure” as the imaginary (*Vital* 71-71 in Rodríguez-Salas “Beyond” 102).



“the flow of *jouissance* into language” (“Revolution” 79). Similarly, Adisa expresses this fluidity between body and writing as an intense sensual experience. As she claims,

I find now when I write, I often caress myself. . . . My body stores memories, feelings, vibrations. After a while images emerge by my being turned inwards, focusing on the pleasure of my body. . . . At these moments when my focus is on the pleasure of my body, the thoughts and ideas flow, interrupting my self-absorption—mental masturbation. And dare I say the ideas that sneak and make themselves known to me during the physical act of lovemaking, the plot and developments that are written after orgasm while I cuddle? Should I confess to the clarification of specific sensations when my body is pressed against another, and passion flows freely? (*Eros* 147-148)

It is significant to note the sexual self-absorption of Adisa’s thoughts. Her thoughts, inasmuch as they provide pleasure, are not only thought but also sensed. The experiences of orgasm both in sexual intercourse and in masturbation are also revealing in terms of the female attention given to her own body, which implies a personal quest for fulfillment. In this sense, Irigaray, under the influence of Lacan,¹¹³ differentiates between two types of feminine *jouissance*, one that is phallic and another one that is concerned “more in keeping with [women’s] bodies and their sex” (“Bodily” 45). In her decision to share her vision of sexual empowerment with her readership, Adisa presents a model of female sexuality that is transforming. Once again, the ideas flowing after the orgasmic rupture symbolize a kind of intellectual birth that is born from the sensual experience.

Adisa’s comments in “The Orgasmic Rupture of Writing” could also be explained through Ahmed’s discussions on pain and pleasure. Ahmed contends that the experiences of sexual pleasure can be used to “challenge social norms.” In the same way as Ahmed argues in her “phenomenology of pain” (which I address in chapter 4.1), that the realization of pain can bring a body closer to the world, the realization of pleasure can also bring attention to body surfaces. However, Ahmed

¹¹³Lacan offers three paradigms of feminine desire: One that is “the desire of the phallic mother,” what Kristeva calls the “archaic mother as a source of plenitude and power.” A second one adopts a “masculine paradigm” and is identified with “the possession of the phallus.” This one is articulated by Lacan as “the real woman.” The third type of desire “is related to the feminine *jouissance* that operates outside the phallic economy” (Azari *Lacan* 98-99).



observes that the intensification of pleasure has different effects from the experiences of intense pain. While in painful experiences “the body turns in on itself,” the joy felt when being touched causes the body to open up. Thus pleasure is experienced “in and from the world” and not just “in relation to one’s own body.” From this perspective, the bodies that open up to other bodies are also opening up to the world. Pleasure, Ahmed observes, is expansive, and as such it allows “bodies to take up more space” (*Cultural* 164). The relationship between pleasure and power can be identified in Adisa’s writing. In fact, writing about her sexual emotions and how they influence her creative work enables this Caribbean woman writer to occupy a space generally banned to women both in everyday life and in literature. This sensual occupation of the intimate space represents a transgression in itself. Furthermore, Adisa’s decolonizing agenda also takes up this opportunity to explore into female sexuality and its role both in Caribbean society and the globalized world.

The relation between erotic feelings and writing can also be observed in another essay from *Eros Muse* entitled “When the Poem Kisses You,” (*Eros* 129-133) a letter to an “Emergent Poet.” In this letter Adisa confesses to her young recipient having yearned “ardently for the poem’s kiss in utter desperation” (*Eros* 131). Adisa believes that the passion with which one writes is directly related to what the artist reveals about her own identity: “our writings offer their own revelation about how ardently and passionately we have pursued the kiss and have been kissed.” Then she affirms, “I know what the kiss feels like, I know how to seek out a kiss, and most importantly, I know what to do with a kiss. Poetry is my kiss” (132). In Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” included in *Sister Outsider*, she affirms that society is not only patriarchal and racist, but also anti-erotic. According to Lorde, patriarchal structures of power have made us believe that women’s eroticism must be suppressed from women’s lives and consciousness if we do not want to be weakened. The power of the erotic is understood as the power of creativity, the power of what Lorde calls “nonrational knowledge” (53). Similarly, Adisa claims her own creative powers and embraces the erotic in her writing, thus stimulating her body and sharing with her readership the most intimate experiences/thoughts. As she claims, “sex was a sacred act, and writing was a luxury—both were self-absorption” (*Eros* 148-149).

Although Adisa does agree with Audre Lorde’s statement in “Poetry is not a Luxury” that poetry is “a vehicle of transformation, or an organ of change, an art form that can and should be fashioned into weapons with which to kill our enemies, real or imaginary,” she, nonetheless, states: “I want to offer another dictum” (Adisa



Eros 132). In fact, Adisa shows her disagreement in what seems to be Lorde's (and the mainstream) interpretation of luxury. Lorde's understanding of luxury seems to be "the condition of abundance or great ease and comfort," or further, it seems to relate to "something adding to pleasure and comfort but not absolutely necessary" (Merriam-Webster), and hence, perhaps trivial, and consequently meant to be used and thrown away. Adisa, on her side, interprets luxury from a different point of view. She believes that luxury is fundamental, and that abundance and pleasure are attitudes that she rightfully needs to embrace. She asserts,

I am at a stage in my life where I insist on luxury. Pleasure is luxury, time to write is luxury, and seeking out and being kissed is definitely a delicious luxury. I insist that luxury is what I insist and make space and time to write daily, and I will never allow myself to be denied this luxury ever again. I will never be denied or cheated out of that kiss. I want, crave and need that kiss that bruises my body which I nurse with absent-minded bliss throughout the day. I've got to have, must have, will have to have me that kiss. Poetry is a decadent sweet, nease-berry kiss, my dear. (Adisa *Eros* 132)

Adisa's will to enjoy the luxury of the poem's kiss, like Nietzsche's "eternal return," that is to say, like "the will and vision of an *erotic* attitude toward being for which necessity and fulfillment coincide" (Marcuse *Eros* 111 emphasis in the original), remains in opposition to the dominant reality principle.¹¹⁴ This reality principle, that, as I explained earlier in this chapter, was inaugurated by Plato in his later works and has been embraced by Christianity and even by Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, maintains that "striving for gratification" is considered "concupiscence," and therefore, it causes a sentiment of guilt. In Nietzsche, and I would like to add Adisa as well, "[t]he traditional form of reason is rejected on the basis of the experience of being-as-end-in-itself—as joy (Lust) and enjoyment" (Marcuse *Eros* 110).

As a response to the "tyranny of becoming over being" that the dominant reality principle proclaims, both Adisa and Nietzsche seem to envisage what Nietzsche called the "eternal return" and what for Adisa is the "poem's kiss," whereby being and enjoying enable eternity to "become present in the here and

¹¹⁴In his comments on Nietzsche appearing in *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse draws upon Nietzsche's works *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "Rhum und Ewigkeit" (Glory and Eternity) and *The Genealogy of Morals*.



now,” to borrow Marcuse’s words (Marcuse *Eros* 110). The perception of time as something that passes, and therefore is lost, is at the center of the distinction between ‘becoming’ and ‘being’. The perception of the flux of time implies a division of time into past, present and future. Therefore, pain arises in the individual due to the separation from the past that will never come back. The implication is that, if everything passes, the human being is in essence a finite being. Thus death enters the game to represent this finitude in which one cannot fully be, but simply become while everything around (basically time and matter) changes and finally dies. As a consequence, the “gigantic fallacy . . . of Western philosophy and morality” uses the concept of eternity—that is to say, of transcendence into being only in the present, or rather, into being in all time perceptions at the same time —“as an instrument of repression by its relegation to a transcendental world.” The promise of an “unreal reward” after death is paid with “real suffering” and self-abnegation in the material world (Marcuse *Eros* 109-111). With the concept of the “eternal return,” explains Marcuse, “eternity is reclaimed for the fair earth—as the eternal return of its children, of the lily and the rose, of the sun on the mountains and lakes, of the lover and the beloved, of the fear for their life, of pain and happiness.” Therefore, death can only be conquered “if it is followed by the real rebirth of everything . . . not as a mere repetition but as a will and wanted re-creation” (111-112). This affirmation is in agreement with Adisa’s will and effort to explore the luxury of the kiss. As Marcuse concludes, “[t]he eternal return . . . includes the return of suffering, but suffering as a means for more gratification, for the aggrandizement of joy” (112). The ultimate meaning of the eternal return, or of the poem’s kiss for this matter, resides in the recognition that “joy wants eternity” (Marcuse *Eros* 112). Thus, Adisa’s desire to indulge in this decadent kiss of the poem indicates her desire for lust to last. Kissing the poem will then enable her to grasp eternity, and free herself of the sense of guilt. By rejecting Lorde’s perception of luxury as something that represents an unnecessary overindulgence (as opposed to what is reasonable and productive in the dominant reality principle), Adisa, like Nietzsche, is reversing “the sense of guilt.” As Marcuse explains, “bad conscience” has been usually associated with the “affirmation” of Eros, or “the life instincts” (*Eros* 112). Instead, Adisa, in agreement with the German philosopher, reads bad conscience as the rejection of the life instincts and the blind “acceptance of the repressive ideals.” In other words, there is a conscious transition from Thanatos—the desire of death—to Eros—the desire of life—that is connected with the creative force of her poetry. I would like to argue that in the erotics of creation,



Adisa experiences immortality. Inasmuch as she experiences eternity, she becomes godlike, and therefore empowered. When she experiences a desire of life—namely, unity with other bodies, or love—time disappears and Adisa moves into the realm of the divine. This affirmation is in close connection to Adisa’s deep involvement in the here and now developed in her writing. In spite of connecting with the divine experience of creation, Adisa is well rooted in earthly activities. Thus her sense of eternity is fully embodied and sensual. In fact, she asserts that she cannot imagine her life without writing or having sex:

I can’t imagine that I am writing, when I am not, and feel any satisfaction from the imagining nor is there any satisfying pleasure when I am horny and only have my imagination on which to rely. . . . There is nothing like the real thing. My writer’s imagination offers very little solace if I don’t make time to write or if I don’t have anyone in my life to pleasure me. (*Eros* 149)

Rewriting Menstruation

We have seen so far how Adisa claims the necessity of worldly experiences of creativity and eternity through *Eros* and the pleasure principle. In the present section, I will go further by demonstrating that not only sexual pleasure is regulated from the public sphere (i.e. the institutions that prescribe morality), but also other biological aspects of sexuality and procreation. This last part explores specifically the treatment of female menstruation within the dominant patriarchal structures. In particular, I am interested to read how Adisa realizes the mechanisms that have turned the menstruation into something shameful. There are a number of poems where Adisa unearths the taboo of female period blood, thus demanding female reproductive powers to be respected. Her numerous poems dealing with menstruation are revealing. One of her earlier poems on the period is “We Bleed.” This poem may be read as Adisa’s first attempt to break the silence on the topic of menses and to activate solidarity among female readers (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 216). The poetic voice in this poem seems to hurl with contempt about her menstrual flow. The refrain reads:

i want to
get rid of
this blood



every month (Adisa and Major *Traveling* 31)

Some verses later, the speaker speculates about the relationship of power and the body:

that's how they caught us
tripped us up
took our power
they smelled
the blood oozing
out of us
with no soil
to catch it
and fear
was fixed in their eyes (31)

On the act of speaking as a “regenerating force,” Trinh T. Minha (*Woman* 125-128) argues that “the interrelation of woman, water and word pervades African cosmogonies.” Indeed, Trinh addresses this connection to explain “the fertilizing power of words and their transmissions through women” by quoting French anthropologist Marcel Griaule, who observed that among the Dogon in Africa it was believed that “the first Word had been pronounced in front of the genitalia of a woman” (127). In “We Bleed,” the poetic voice states that ‘they’, presumably men, were fearful of women’s menses “oozing out” of them because they were incapable of handling it: symbolically, there was “no soil to catch it” or any receiving container to shape this blood (31). In an interview, Adisa explains that men in Jamaica, particularly Rastafarians, keep away from women when they are on their menses. As she concludes, “I think part of it comes from men understanding how powerful a woman’s blood could be and how much they could influence what they do or not do” (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 217). It is this fearful, and at the same time transgressive, aspect of women’s sexuality that Adisa addresses in this poem. Later on, we witness a litany of painful feelings of strangeness, as if of having been slaughtered:

i want to stop
the bleeding
the bloated feeling



the swings in mood
the lost of myself
that drips away
with only compact tissue
to catch me

The last two verses seem to resume the above-mentioned inability to manage the menstruation flow. Compact tissue could be either the external part of the bones—by extension the skeleton—or sanitary napkins. Both interpretations can be used to interpret the poem and I find the double meaning quite interesting. However, I prefer to consider the allusion to sanitary napkins. This piece of cloth seems to be the only external element available to collect the speaker's menstruation, or to read it literally, to welcome her. Actually, her entire body ("me," "myself") is used as a metonymy of her period. On the other hand, the change of mood mentioned in the above stanza could not be possibly explained in terms of rationality, but rather in terms of the mystic, irrational experience, which is also addressed in the poem when the narrator says she does not want to be "tripped up by the moon" (Adisa and Major, *Traveling* 32). As Irigaray affirms, the pleasure that women experience out of their sexual specificities influences their discourse and makes it irrational (*Sex* 28-29). In the same manner, I contend that the menstrual pain originating in the same place articulates a speech beyond reason. Indeed, the very tone of the poem reveals a desperate urge to get rid of the pain, of the changes of mood and of men's resulting incomprehension. This poem succeeds to convey the connection of bodily feelings and fluids with the shaping of female identity. In close relationship with this topic is Irigaray's view of the "female imaginary", which requires from women to learn how to discover their own sexuality with a focus on their own fluids (Irigaray *Reader* 151). Consequently, "We Bleed" stands out in the poetry of Opal Palmer Adisa as an illustrative discourse of a Black woman writer's disobedience to male-centered topics in her quest of self-representation.

If Adisa's "We Bleed" represents a manifestation of female rage and a call for differentiation, her later poem "Bumbu Clat," appearing in *Caribbean Passion* (78), not only puts difference into light, but it appears resolute to change the abusive representation of the female body in language. In "We Bleed" solidarity was demanded, whereas in "Bumbu Clat" consciousness is raised. Indeed, as Adisa claims in the interview she granted me, the former poem is a precursor of the latter (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez "Conversation" 215-216). In a previous study



where I have offered a detailed revision of this poem, I examine Adisa's achievement of the "ontological deconstruction of *bumbu clat*,"¹¹⁵ a phrase that originally meant *sisterhood* and today has become one of the most coarse and misogynist expressions in Jamaican society" (Serna-Martínez, "Sexuality" 25). The two-voiced poem "Bumbu Clat" is written both in nation language and standard English in order to picture the tension between these two opposing forces:

gu weh yu ugly
like bumba clat

as a derivative
bomba means to be wet or soaked
in lingala
bomba connotes hiding
before pads and tampons
women used cloth napkins
left them soaking in basins
(covered and concealed)
to bleach out the blood (Caribbean 78)

"Bumbu clat" is a hybrid word composed by "bumbu," which originates in West African languages and refers mainly to the female genitalia, and "clat," which is Jamaican patois for "cloth." Accordingly, "*bumbu clat* makes allusion to sanitary napkins and, as an extension, to the menstruation, an essential part of women's sexuality" (Serna-Martínez, "Sexuality" 27). In order to subvert the traditional meaning of the swear word, Adisa's displacement of the "political anatomy of the body" is crucial (25). The female body shifts from a position where it is looked at—from the outside to the inside—into a space where the personal experience of the body makes public (through writing) the female most intimate individuality:

Yu is nutten but
a little bumbu clat

as a teenager

¹¹⁵This word can be written with different spellings; in the present dissertation the following are found: 'bumbu clat', 'bumba clat', 'bumbo klaat', 'bumbo claat' and 'bumboclat'.



whenever i had to purchase
pads i waited
until no one else
was in line
then i made sure they
were carefully wrapped
tucked under my arm

(*Caribbean* 78)

There are two main features which in my view make of this poem a subversive piece of writing. First there is a code-switching between two languages by which the postcolonial strategies of the ‘abrogation’ and ‘appropriation’ of language take place (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 72). This technique reveals the syncretic nature of the society it portrays, and particularly in this poem it conveys the alterity of two voices in the negotiation of a controversial meaning:

what a bumbu clat

a male word
that wets the tongue
denouncing and advertising
the taboo and craving (*Caribbean* 79)

The second aspect is that—in the process of dismantling the rude meaning of bumbu clat, which carries within a transgression of the social taboo¹¹⁶—a second transgression is witnessed, which unsettles the assumption that a female voice should not use curse words in public. This subversive act of naming the unspeakable is a necessary step for renaming and reviving other historical connotations of the word, which have been distorted in the very processes of creolization. Adisa admits this subversive attitude in the enclosed interview: “it is still a risky poem, but a necessary, essential poem” (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 216).

¹¹⁶In “Sexuality and Identity in the Caribbean Poetry of Opal Palmer Adisa,” I explain that when rejecting women’s differences, Caribbean male-centred society has distorted the image of the female body, thus marginalising women and having them (and everybody else) wanting to hide their sexual features, and treating them as something forbidden and thus shameful (27).



Last but not least, a factor that could perfectly illustrate the processes of hybridization is the realization that, even though the utterances carrying ‘bumbu clat’ are articulated in nation language—the alternative language in the decolonising process of abrogation—the meaning they convey is related to the civilizing influences of the Christian morality that caused the separation between the erotic (sexual and spiritual) and the public lives in the Caribbean creole societies (Weir-Soley *Eroticism* 21-22). As I explain in my above mentioned study, “because women’s sexuality was bound to be denied during colonization, words that originally related to female bodies, such as ‘bumbu’ . . . were automatically forbidden” (27).

What is interesting in Adisa’s writing is how by naming the taboo, whether it is the sexual experience of the fluids or her sexual organs, the author is transgressing the established moral expectations of how a woman should behave. For Adisa, getting rid of shameful feelings acts as a decolonizing strategy that serves to explore further political implications as found in the Black Caribbean female body. Adisa’s desire in her writing is clearly similar to that of Eros: to bring together the pieces of that which has been dismembered (in this case, the female body). Through sensual self-exploration, thus, Adisa brings forward the importance of emotions in the process of expressing her knowledge of the Caribbean postcolonial realities.

Chapter 6.2

A Caribbean Writing Mother: Autobiography as Decolonizing Tool

*I am the daughter of generations of hurt island women,
harnessing terrible seeds inside my womb.
There is deadly history hidden in my depths, hungry ghosts
seeking vengeance for past wrongs.*
—Donna Aza Weir-Soley, “Let the Dead Stay buried”



The autobiographical modes have been traditionally described in connection with the Western individualist romance. Hence, autobiographies “have been recognized (and misrecognized) as western cartographies of the subject” (Smith “Memory” 37). However, the decolonizing potential of autobiographical modes has been recognized as a political gesture in postcolonial discussions for their ability to transcend the individualities of female and male figures alike (Smith and Watson, Spivak “Three”). Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite reflects very well in his poetry trilogies the decolonizing forces found at the intersection between the historical and the autobiographical. While his first trilogy *The Arrivants* is mainly about the historical and spiritual relevance of the Middle Passage for Caribbean history (Infante 162), his second trilogy *Ancestors* represents, in the author’s words, “the grounding of that whole thing [the history of the Middle Passage] into person. It’s about my mother, it’s about Barbados, it’s about myself within the family context” (Brathwaite interviewed by Mackey 14 qtd. in Infante 162). This personal ‘grounding’—as Brathwaite calls it—of large-scale history into small-scale history can also be observed in Adisa’s case, as we have seen in chapter 4. Similarly to Brathwaite, the exploration of the colonial past is also meaningful for the poet’s quest of a legitimate Caribbean identity.

Bearing in mind the strong influence that Brathwaite’s work and persona exert upon Adisa’s writing (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 206), I want to discuss in this section how Adisa’s poetic project is also a “personal ‘grounding’ of Caribbean experience” (Infante 162). Her poetic voice, however, significantly differs from Brathwaite’s at one point: The poet in question is a woman



and a mother. As such, she embodies a different relationship with her cultural and political environment. I thus intend to explore the connections that Adisa makes with her African ancestors, the family and the motherland from her initial position as a mother/writer. I also draw upon Smith, who contends that occupying the “I” in the narrative practice “can become a means to interrogate, from within and without, history, memory, culture and power” (40). In order to bring forward the impact of motherwork in Adisa’s writing, I will consider Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison’s identification of the four responsibilities of a mother, namely, preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing and healing.¹¹⁷

Morrison coined the phrase ‘cultural bearing’ to refer to the investment of African American mothers in ensuring the “physical and psychological well-being and empowerment” of their community. In close relation to the implications of cultural bearing, the term ‘motherline’ was coined by Jungian psychologist Naomi Lowinsky to name an “embodied knowledge of mothering” that “connects mothers to their female ancestors and helps them understand how their life stories are linked with previous generations of women in their families and cultures” (Green “Cultural” 260).

Like many other women writers from the Caribbean, such as Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, and Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Adisa writes about the experiences of motherhood and the oral tradition of storytelling as instruments to make sense of the postcolonial reality, and to rescue the African past that has been silenced by the colonial history. The African Caribbean motherline is explored meaningfully throughout Adisa’s literary production. Significantly in the collection of essays and poems *I Name Me Name*, Adisa gives voice to many women both from her family and from the Caribbean and the African diaspora. Additionally, she has written other poems about the first African American women writers (i.e. “Understanding My Story: Phylis Wheatley” (20-22)), or about Afro-Caribbean writers and freedom fighters (i.e. “Foremother I: Mary Prince” (27-28) and “Foremother II: Mary Seacole” (29); or “Me” (92-94), analyzed in chapter 4.2.). These works could be addressed in further research on Black women writers’ claims of ancestral histories, but I am not going to cover them here for matters of space. Also in her two novels, *It Begins With Tears* and *Painting Away Regrets*—that I have

¹¹⁷In *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, Andrea O’Reilly defines Morrison’s theory of motherwork as a political and public enterprise within the experience of motherhood which, far from being oppressive, enables Black women to empower their children so that they can deal with the racism and sexism of the world.



analyzed in depth in chapter 5—as well as in her two volumes of short stories, *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (1986) and *Until Judgement Comes* (2007), Adisa develops in depth the issue of motherhood. Whereas the former collection focuses on experiences of maternity, home and homeland; the latter is dedicated to Jamaican men and their place in society in terms of sexuality, parenting and how they relate to the women in their lives. Although I have only included in this dissertation one of the stories from her second short story collection entitled “Trying Words” (see chapter 4.1), I consider her first two short-story collections of great import for further research on gender roles and parenting practices in the Caribbean. On top of the literary works mentioned above, Adisa, a mother of three children of 32, 28 and 26 years old, has committed much of her work to address issues on parenting. She is the former parenting editor and host of the KPFA Radio Parenting Show in Berkeley California. Most recently, she has been a columnist for the “Healthy You” website on parenting, and is now working on a book entitled *The Graduate Parent*. This section scrutinizes a selection of Adisa’s autobiographical prose, where she recounts her personal experiences of mothering and writing. I will draw upon a selection of texts from *Eros Muse*, mainly “The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother: The Waves That Connect Them, The Shore Where They Meet,” and “The Swelling of the Womb.” In order to illustrate better some of my points, her essay “I Became the Stories My Mother Told About Me,” included in *I Name Me Name*, and her poem “Held and Let Go” from *Leaf of Life* will also be discussed.

For the present reading, I will take up Carole Boyce Davies’ *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, and Trinh T. Minha’s *Woman, Native, Other*, because their perspectives on women’s writing resonate intimately with Adisa’s own aesthetic theorizations on motherhood. In order to examine Adisa’s revision of the mothering experience, I will also rely on the critical work on the relationship between mothering and writing as developed by Alice Walker in “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children,” Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Gloria Wade-Gayles in “The Truths of Our Mothers’ Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Fiction,” and Luce Irigaray in “Body Against Body in Relation to the Mother.” On the importance of writing from the body, and their ideas on poetry in the context of female and Black female writing respectively, I will also draw upon Hélène Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa,” and Audre Lorde’s “Poetry is not a Luxury,” and “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” included in her collection of essays *Sister Outsider*. In order to read these texts from a decolonizing perspective of in-betweenness, I am interested in Foucault’s theories



about anato-mo-politics (the politics of the human body), and more specifically with regard to his reflections on the “politics of the secret” (Foucault *Language* 214). Questions on the political implications of the secret are further discussed in Smith’s essay “Memory, Narrative and the Discourses of Identity in *Abeng* and *Not Telephone to Heaven*” on Michelle Cliff’s novels, where she insists on “the politics of the secret” as a way by which the postcolonial subject embodies the colonial past (44). Finally, I also draw upon Lucy Collins’ essay “A Way of Going Back: Memory and Estrangement in the Poetry of Paula Meehan,” to discuss how “the incorporation of the stranger within the self” can help shape more legitimate identities by bridging together the experiences of belonging and estrangement (129).¹¹⁸

Bearing in mind Adisa’s autobiographical reflections, I would like to start with her statement that her creative work is not only compatible with her teaching, but also her highest priority. Then I will continue with her reflections on how she balances her domestic labor as a mother of three children with her writing production. As Adisa has stated in her essay “The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother,” she did not want to be “a teacher who writes,” but a writer (*Eros* 46). Indeed, in “The Poet’s Ten Commandments” Adisa claims

Thou shalt have
no other profession
above or before
that of being a wordsmith (Eros 155)

I am not sure if it should be right to refer to writing simply as Adisa’s profession—in the sense of a remunerated job—because, as she has suggested in an interview, she does not earn a living with her writing (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 207). Therefore, it could be said that in the case of Adisa, her writing is not only a profession, but a passion; she does it in spite of the little economic retribution. In her unpublished interview with Brathwaite,¹¹⁹ Adisa asks him what he means by calling himself a poet who is “willing to die” for it; to which

¹¹⁸In this passage, Collins reflects on Julia Kristeva’s notion of strangeness as it appears in *Strangers to Ourselves*, where the French feminist states: “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (1).

¹¹⁹Adisa has kindly shared with me this valuable two-hour “conVERSation” she had with Kamau Brathwaite on April 18 2006 in New York City. The title of the interview is “Walking on Water.”



the distinguished Bajan author answers that being a poet is a “calling” and a “commitment.” Then Brathwaite expands on this comment by saying: “it means that you are sacrificing a lot of material benefits and a lot of material gloss; and you are willing to invest, at whatever personal or social, economic or political cost, your own time and attention to the art” (Brathwaite interviewed by Adisa “Walking” 8). Both Adisa and Brathwaite teach at the university level on top of writing, and make efforts to dedicate time to their art, by taking unpaid leaves, for instance. As Adisa affirms (and I comment in chapter 6.1 above), for her “[p]leasure is luxury, time to write is a luxury, and seeking out and being kissed [by the poem] is definitely a delicious luxury” (*Eros* 132). In addition to Brathwaite’s reflection about what it means dying for the poem, and drawing upon Adisa’s scale of values deduced from her writing, I want to argue that, for her, the poem is something she would be ready to ‘live passionately’ for, whatever the external conditions/obstacles are. There is a strong desire to live, not in her writing, nor in spite of her writing, but rather *by* her writing. In sum, Adisa’s priority of writing is a case of what I would call “living by the word,” to borrow Alice Walker’s title of her collection of essays, letters and journal extracts. Living by the word for Adisa, implies the existence not of an external imposed God—as the biblical saying goes (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Genesis 15:1-21)—who makes a call to give up everything in order to live by His Word; but rather the existence of a living subject who does give up everything in order to trust reality as produced through her physical and intellectual investment. Once again, with Adisa’s writing as a form of sensuality, the body appears as a means to achieve and produce knowledge. Her embodied writing, I want to argue, challenges the traditional philosophical mechanisms that persist in refusing the body. In the same line of thought, Foucault argues that “it should not surprise us that Nietzsche occasionally employs the phrase ‘historically and physiologically’, since among the philosopher’s idiosyncrasies is a complete denial of the body” (Foucault *Language* 144). Furthermore, Nietzsche’s anti-Epicurean interpretation of the relation between pleasure and pain—i.e. that pleasure is the result of overcoming pain, or a series of small pains—could be further discussed in relation to Adisa’s postulations of sensuality as theory in her volume *Eros Muse*, especially with regard to the power relations implied in the experiences of pain and pleasure (Nietzsche *Spake* 20).¹²⁰ For instance, Adisa claims in “The Swelling of the Womb/The Forging

¹²⁰To know more about the influence of Epicurus in Nietzsche’s thought, and how the German philosopher eventually ruptured with Epicurean philosophy, see Kamaran Aziz’s *From Epicurean Delight to Dionysian Joy: Nietzsche’s Understanding of the Tragic*.



of a Writer:” “because I want my children to avoid some of my pit-falls, I don’t shy away from the painful, no more than I abandon all of myself in the joyous. I allow myself to experience both, and then my writer self takes over” (*Eros* 108).

In her essay “The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother,” Adisa also recognizes that it took her long to understand that she is “a writer who is a mother” (*Eros* 46). This has meant to her that, on top of her teaching work and her domestic work, she has found the time and space to develop her writing necessities. By describing herself as a “writing mother” (47), Adisa blurs the borders between the domestic space and the public space, thus embracing what for some could be a contradiction. As she declares, “I still regard my children as the best poems I have written” (48). In this essay, Adisa defies racial and gender disparities in the areas of reproduction, domestic work, professional career and artistic endeavor. She is also conscious that by sharing with her children the importance of her creative work, they become more respectful towards her, and also are provided with a model to inspire their own art (49). In this essay, Adisa includes entries from her personal diary. In this respect, Smith observes how “diary keeping” has traditionally promoted “the privatization of experience,” (“Memory” 51). I want to argue that the fact that the writer shares publicly with her readership this intimate part of her writing, which is usually kept secret in a locked space, makes the text transcend the “individualist practice of identity” (51). Foucault argues that the form of confession and the “examination of the conscience” represents an “insistence on the important secrets of the flesh.” He observes that, in the Christian tradition, sexuality has been considered both a form of salvation, and a prohibitive factor that represses the conscience. The form of confession brings to the surface the subject’s secretly kept sexuality, and it connects “salvation with the mastery of these obscure movements.” It is therefore no wonder that, as Foucault indicates, in “Christian societies, sex has been the central object of examination, surveillance, avowal and transformation into discourse” (*Politics* 111).

Aware of the power that has been exercised on the body of the colonial subjects, I think what Adisa does in her writing is to transform her own experiences of sexuality and motherhood into discourses that she skillfully shapes. A kind of salvation and healing through this author’s embodied writing is made possible. Adisa’s investment in the narratives of intimacy aims to influence and empower her children in the face of racism and sexism. It also aims to affect potential readers. Cixous’s statement in “The Laugh of the Medusa” when encouraging women to write— “[a] woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter”



(880)—could help clarify the connections I intend to make in Adisa’s poetry. As we have seen in the figure of Maroon Nanny in chapter 4.2, the body of the woman is the central place where empowerment occurs. I would like to emphasize this connection between the female body and the written language, as both instances incarnate the act of creation/creativity in their own right. These two spaces, indeed, seem to be the most effective means through which the latent fertility/creativity of the poet becomes manifest for the sake of self representation.

As a writing mother who teaches, Adisa occupies two traditionally opposed locations, the domestic and the public. This makes of literature also a perfect instrument to bring closer the spaces of the imagination to the material locations where the writing is produced, which enables a connection between the individual’s personal perceptions and the vast reality of her community (ranging from the domestic to the public space). This is probably the reason why, when Adisa writes in the first person, she does it by using the personal pronoun ‘i’ in lowercase. She is conscious that her individuality is not necessarily the individuality of others, but, at the same time, she humbles herself to share it with others, maybe with the expectation that it might arise some kind of self-reflection in others about their own idiosyncrasies. In this regard, Smith observes how “dominant discourses of identity” can be criticized through autobiographical practices “by rendering the ‘I’ unstable, shifting, provisional, troubled by and in its identifications.” As a matter of fact, she continues, the “autobiographical ‘I’ as a marker of the subject is neither fully rational, unified in a coherent identity, nor transparent to itself; its recitations are multiply productive of identifications or disidentifications, riven by suturings and fracturings” (40). Indeed, Adisa’s autobiographical form is a way of acknowledging the incommensurability of history. Therefore, in order to grasp the vastness of history, human beings need to “create sites of memory—such as museums, festivals, anniversaries” as well as other imaginary spaces, which Smith calls “artificial rememberings” (Smith “Memory” 44). This point is significant when it comes to understanding Adisa’s perception of the matrilineal tradition of storytelling. However, I should like to make a few introductory remarks on mothering and writing before moving on to the substance of Adisa’s own perceptions on the matter.

In her seminal study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) Adrienne Rich attempts to reframe motherhood as a cultural convention. Rich labels her critique of white, middle-class motherhood as “institutionalized motherhood,” and explores how patriarchal structures have “minimized and trivialized” the role of motherhood in society. Thus, she attempts to



scrutinize the mother-daughter relationship that has for long been silenced, and therefore, needs to be rewritten by women (226). Rich claims that a woman might fear to become her own mother, a feeling she calls “matrophobia”; this desire to detach from one’s mother is aggravated by the fact that “[t]he mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr” (236). However, she notes that this “essential female tragedy” that is embodied in the mother-daughter relationship must be studied in depth because it is a core part of women’s lives (237). Similarly to Rich, in 1984 feminist scholar Gloria Wade-Gayles observed that historical constructions of Black abnegated mothers have generally left unexamined the relationship existing between mothers and their daughters, and that it is in the works of literature where the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship is better reflected. Thus Black women writers, she argues, need to write about their relationship with their mothers from inside, addressing on the contradictory experiences of “anger and love, suspicion and trust, conflict and understanding, estrangement and bonding” (Wade-Gayles “Truths” 8-9).

Similarly, in a lecture Irigaray gave in 1980, later published as “Body Against Body in Relation to the Mother” a lecture she gave in 1980, this feminist critic compels women to remember that they are part of a matrilineal genealogy, and that women should not forget this fact if they desire to avoid self-destruction and envy among women. She denounces that the existence of patriarchal values in the Eucharist—where bread and wine are consumed in a communal rite to give thanks to the Lord for the sacrifice of His body and blood, so that all men and women could develop their own—problematize the existence of the woman/mother as the figure who gave her body and blood in order to offer both men and women “life, body, [and] spirit” (Irigaray *Sexes* 21). Irigaray emphasizes the importance of female biology, and hence of the “originary womb,” as the first place that the body inhabits (14). She also insists that women “need to discover a language that’s not a substitute for the corps-à-corps¹²¹ as the paternal language seeks to be, but which accompanies that bodily experience, clothing it in words that do not erase the body but speak the body.” She thus claims that “it is desirable that we should speak as we are making love . . . , as we feed a baby. . . . [W]e need above all . . . to discover our sexual identity (19).

¹²¹In English, ‘body against the body.’ With this terminology, Irigaray makes reference to the split that occurs between women and their mothers. According to analytic theory, women need to give up their love for the mother in order to “enter into desire for the father;” thus severing “women from the roots of their identity and their subjectivity” (*Sexes* 20).



In accordance to Rich's, Wade-Gayles's and Irigaray's theories on mothering and writing, many Caribbean women writers do not see their matrilineal heritage as a historical burden of economic marginality, but rather as a central space for research where they can connect with their silenced *herstory*.¹²² It is therefore a common feature to all postcolonial literatures to search in the "myths of identity and authenticity" the traces of self and place that have been lost as a result of displacement (Ashcroft et al., *Empire* 9). In response to Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), a feminist work where the author refers to non-European women as victims, in May 1979 Lorde wrote in an open letter to the author: "I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power" (*Sister* 67). In *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*, Denise DeCaires Narain contends that when Brathwaite retrieves the concept of nation language, it is not only to add value to the creole continuum as it is to "reclaim the lost continent of Africa," which in psychoanalysis translates into a loss of the "maternal body." In DeCaires Narain's view, Brathwaite seeks to find the "lost body of Mother Africa" in the traces materialized "in the rhythm of Creole speech and in the body language associated with it." DeCaires Narain also compares these traces with Kristeva's semiotic chora (91-92). Therefore, it seems natural to embrace the existing connection between language (the mother tongue) and the mother (the storyteller) as bearers of culture.

Having presented the existing connections between mothering and writing, I want to explore the theoretical implications of storytelling in matrilineal traditions, specifically with regard to the traditional structure of the story within the story that Adisa utilizes in *It Begins With Tears*. As we have seen in chapter 5.2, the oral tradition of storytelling remains a valuable feature for women in Kristoff Village to secure their matrilineal heritage (*Adisa Begins* 85-86). It is not capricious that the eldest women Velma and Dahlia transmit the story of the breadfruit tree—which is the history of their African Caribbean motherline—in the moment of birth, and through oral speech. As Trinh reminds us in *Woman Native Other*, "[m]other always has a mother," and "Great Mothers are recalled as the goddesses of all waters, the sources of diseases and of healing, the protectresses of women and of childbearing." Thus she brings forward the importance of the oral tradition as cultural bearer affirming that "[t]o listen carefully is to preserve" (121). Through storytelling women create links between them. In Adisa's portrayal of a communal and intimate

¹²²The term *herstory* refers to history written from a feminist perspective. See chapter 3 for further comments.



episode of bringing a new life into the world, she reminds her readers that Arnella's story is of course hers, but it is also, as Trinh would put it, older than her, and younger than her, "it is only a stream that flows into another stream" (123).

The metaphor of women's stories as a complex of streams—like a river with its affluents—brings forward a sense of fluidity that sabotages the linearity of time. By conflating all the stories from the past, the present and the future into one single body, the river becomes a symbol of unity and eternity, as in Nobel Prize-winning author Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, his famous fiction piece about Buddha's life, when the ferryman affirms that "the river is everywhere at the same time, at the source, at the mouth, at the waterfall, at the ferry, at the current, in the ocean and in the mountains, everywhere," to what Siddhartha delightfully agrees by envisaging that "[n]othing is, nothing will be, everything has reality and presence" (88). Thus the importance of storytelling resides in its very repetition, the result being an orchestra of voices flowing and reverberating all at once. In line with Trinh, for Adisa, the acts of memorizing, recognizing and naming the sources are necessary steps to preserve women's identity and spaces of belonging; that is to say, to secure a female epistemology. What her ancestors knew, they made sure their daughters also knew, so that these, on their turn, could transmit to their own daughters, have them hear their stories, and thus create a "bond between women and word" (Tringh *Woman* 122). It is relevant to underline the fact that the African singing traditions of the Akan communities of Ghana, from where many Jamaican people come from, are for the most part—with the exception of "work and digging songs"—performed by women (Brathwaite *Development* 225). It is therefore, not only a matter of what the story tells, but also of how the story is told. The music, and the rhythm given to the story, is connected to the pleasure found in the telling of the story itself. Adisa illustrates this aspect, for instance, in "I Became the Stories My Mother Told About Me," where depicts how her mother would behave when, as a child, she told her and whoever was visiting about Adisa's deeds: "My mother pulls me to her, and I hear the music but also the pride in her voice" (123). She also comments that, because her mother has always "forced [her] to sit through many retellings," the stories have remained "like a moving picture in [her] own head . . . with [her] mother as narrator, like a hypnotist" (124). Another passage of her mother's ritual of storytelling discloses the musicality and the pleasure her mother finds in the act: "My mother pauses and looks around. Making sure she has everyone's full attention. Her face is expressive, eyes dancing off the faces of those gathered, then on mine, making sure that, I too, am listening" (120).



Similarly, in *It Begins With Tears*, the sensorial acts of massaging, dancing, clapping hands, snapping fingers, and humming that are present during Arnella's childbearing are also part of the storytelling tradition (see chapter 5.1). Indeed, "speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination," as Trinh points out, insisting that "speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched" (*Woman* 121). The whole ritual of dancing around, humming and caressing could be considered the opening lines to the story that is about to be told. Thus the repetition of the story, the tradition of retelling stories over and over again, implies knowing that "no repetition can ever be identical." Then joy, experienced "through the process of transferring" itself, is in part due to the fact that the transmitter knows that she is but one link of the whole chain. Even though there is a sense of belonging to this continuum, a sense of responsibility for its transmission, there is also a sense of "irresponsibility" in the very pleasure that the act of transferring produces (122). In this sense, the act of transmitting the story through every embodied activity is certainly part of Black women's resistance to authoritative modes of literature. Speech, Trinh insists, has to be sensorial; it has to be pleasurable, because gestures and words carry with them the past, the present and the future, showing that "[t]he body never stops accumulating" (122-123). Hence, because the story of Arnella's childbirth carries within her ancestors' histories, the story from the past is brought by Velma and Dahlia to make sure that the story repeats itself endlessly. The story, their history, must not be forgotten. The act of storytelling, which Adisa locates within her own storytelling (the novel in this case), endorses the idea that today's present must be understood in connection to the past stories carried within every mother, an embodied history that has been passed on to make possible the birth and life of today, and the future. Indeed, if the story has changed, it is because it has been repeated, but never in the same way; always with a difference.

Trinh insightfully reflects on the incommensurability of history: "My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me. Younger than me, older than the humanized. . . . so immense that it exceeds all attempts at humanizing." Nonetheless, she observes, we try to humanize the stories with words—these stories that seem to have "no end, no middle, [and] no beginning"—in order to avoid madness. Indeed, "[t]ruth does not make sense," she insists. Because truth "exceeds meaning and . . . measure," it is necessary to tell the story repeated times. This way the story can be distributed "into smaller proportions that will correspond to the capacity of absorption of our mouths, the capacity of vision of our eyes, and the capacity of bearing of our bodies" (123). Adisa writes in the same line of thought,



insisting on the importance of repeating the stories, just like human life is repeated in procreation. In her characters' voices, every story told is like a new born baby, carrying one story line that is repeated endlessly, but always with a difference, and it adapts to the context, so that it cannot be forgotten.

Writing, as we have seen in the previous subsection, could be considered as a private/intimate act; however, the product of writing—i.e. the work of literature, inasmuch as it is published and made available to a wider readership—belongs to the public space. Therefore, my argument is that literature occupies both spaces. In the case of Adisa, writing also enters a third location: the domestic sphere. In the domestic location, the intimate acts of sexual reproduction and child rearing become an issue of public/political concern (we have seen in chapter 5 how the state attempts to control them). Therefore, women's private spaces—where they could otherwise fulfill their artistic interests—become usurped by the mandates of taken-for-granted unpaid housework. As a consequence, their private spaces become domestic spaces, as we have studied in chapter 5. In this regard, there is an imbalance with men, because in the male case, their intimacies are not disturbed by the domestic work. This is probably why Adisa—and many Caribbean female writers such as Marlene Nourbese Philip, Lorna Goodison or Grace Nichols—is concerned with writing from and about the female intimate spaces, which are usually complicated by either the public space or by the domestic space.

Adisa does not only endorse creative writing as an act intimately connected with the domestic space and the experience of motherhood. In "The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother" she also talks about the relationship between literature and sex. As she writes, "I am an adulteress, language my lover" (*Eros* 45), rendering the pleasure she finds in the act of writing comparable to the pleasure of an extramarital sexual encounter. Adisa's parallelism between writing and making love have been further studied in the previous subchapter. Here, as a follow-up to the previous discussion, I want to focus on the parallelism that Adisa establishes between writing and mothering—the latter being, in the case of biological motherhood, the product of the sexual intercourse. Thus poetry is not only the sensual experience that Adisa describes in chapter 6.1, but its contents (the product of the writing activity) incorporate a sense of commitment and obligation. As Lorde puts it, poetry is a "vital necessity of our existence" (*Sister* 37). It is important to note that, although Adisa contradicts Lorde in her point that poetry is not a luxury (see chapter 6.1), there is in both interpretations a sense of urgency. The difference lies in that Lorde opposes luxury to necessity, i.e. if something is a luxury, it means we can do without



it, and thus it is not necessary. On the contrary, Adisa believes that writing is a luxury that is necessary; what is necessary is not always easy to achieve, thus it becomes a luxury (writing, for instance, requires intention, formation and sacrifice). Lorde's urge for poetry resonates with Adisa's location of writing. For Adisa, writing is the continuation (and interrogation, because knowledge develops through change) of cultural epistemologies. Similarly, mothering is a condition for the perpetuation of life. Indeed, mothers as the bearers of culture play a significant role in selecting which knowledge they want to transfer to their progeny. Adisa reflects on this parallelism between writing and mothering as follows: "I have been a writer and a mother for almost my entire life; it is no different that being a woman and black just like gender and race, creativity and motherhood are intertwined. I am never one without the other" (*Eros* 41). For Adisa, then, writing and mothering coexist in a symbiotic association; none of them acts on its own; each complements the other. Adisa is aware, nonetheless, that for many women poets motherhood and writing have been contradictory areas of experience. Such is the case of Adrienne Rich, whose work has been mentioned above. This conflict similarly assails many Irish women poets, as Villar-Argáiz shows in her analysis of some representative poems on motherhood by contemporary women writers. While poets such as Eavan Boland usually celebrate mothering as a creative force that empowers their writing, there are others such as Paula Meehan, for instance, who seek in some poems to "escape from the traditional role of mothering" by choosing an artistic career which does not contemplate motherhood in any single way (Villar-Argáiz *Eavan* 116).

The question of motherhood and mothering as a burden is also addressed by Adisa, as I will explain in the following lines. It is true that, after becoming a mother, Adisa has deeply felt an urge for writing so that she could leave a kind of legacy to her children. For Adisa, mothering comes first, then writing, but not in a hierarchical manner but as part of a symbiotic relationship; indeed both actions come to her like a force that she attracts from within. As she claims in her mixed genre essay "The Swelling of the Womb/the Forging of a Writer,"

not true
that motherhood is choosing
not true
that this poetry is my choice

they come at me



as metal to magnet

(*Eros* 106)

This does not mean, however, that Adisa does not express discontent with the “notion that woman is constructed as living the gift or donation of *herself* to the fulfillment of all others’ desires and needs” (Boyce Davies, *Black* 28). In her poem “Held and Let Go” included in *Leaf of Life* (16-17), she writes:

let go
of the children
who want to posses me
for their own salvation (17)

In this stanza, the implication would be that the speaker is determined to set boundaries and limitations in her role as mother, not yielding to the expectations of women having to offer themselves unconditionally. Thus, Adisa clearly challenges those idealized conventions that nurture the dream of ‘institutional motherhood’, discussed by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*. Such idealization entails the transformation of motherhood from a merely physical perspective into a social institution (xxiv, 33).

In close relation with the experience of motherhood within the domestic space, it has been observed that many Caribbean women understand their household labor “as part of what it means to be woman, wife, mother and daughter,” in spite of the fact that these tasks have traditionally been described as little rewarding and exploitative (Barriteau *Confronting* 68). Furthermore, the image of the strong and relentless Black mother has traditionally dominated sociological constructions of the Black family (Wade-Gayles “Truths” 8-12). Certainly influenced by the “Euro-American imagination” of the “‘mammy’ figure” (Boyce Davies *Black* 135), these archetypes have led to the affirmation that mothering occupies a central place in the formation of Caribbean women’s identity (Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow “Social,” and Powell “Caribbean”). Thus descriptions of Black mothers as “devoted, self-sacrificing, understanding and wise” have shaped the assimilated stereotype (Wade-Gayles “Truths” 8). In the above passage from her poem “Held and Let Go,” Adisa questions the fact that both her two daughters and her son feel endowed to demand from her anything they want at any time. In texts such as this, the poet claims her own space as a writer. This also occurs in many other occasions throughout her work, as in “The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother”—an essay where she offers



an autobiographical narrative about her life as a writing mother and academic—where she states, “I insist that Tarik¹²³ keeps Shola and Jaja from Banging on the office door and interrupting me every few minutes. I rock Teju on my knees and type on the computer with one hand” (*Eros* 45).

Although the burden of motherhood and motherwork remains a constant presence in her creative work, in “The Swelling of the Womb/ The Forging of a Writer” (*Eros* 102-114), Adisa confirms that she has been more productive “since becoming a mother” than when she was single. As she assures, when at thirty she gave birth to her first daughter, she also gave birth to herself. This implies that she was “claiming more the calling of writer,” and that she was aware that her stories “were food that many craved.” The subsequent lines depict the nurturing qualities of writing and mothering:

when the first life
kicked inside my stomach

i fed her words
.....
stories were what
i had to bequeath her (102)

These verses represent “the connection between [Adisa’s] swelling womb and the rhythm of the idiom” (104). In a similar tone, in “The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother,” Adisa shares one of her diary entries as follows:

March 1985—I thought completing a poem and completing a collection was a miracle, but this child, my precious Shola, is my best poem yet. I must feed her words. I must bestow her a language with which to give voice to her hungriest fears and deepest desires. (*Eros* 43)

It is plausible to interpret Adisa’s writings from the perspective of Boyce Davies’ reflections on the connections between “the maternal and the speech,” a link that can be recognized in “the myth of birth, speech, language, and mother-daughter transferral of the power of speech” (*Black* 159). Boyce Davies discards the Lacanian

¹²³Tarik was her husband then, and the father of her three children. See Adisa’s biography in the introduction.



theory of language acquisition that privileges the phallus as a cultural model. She discusses how one can reject such theory by embracing “the multiplicity of languages” that exist in women’s traditions of “storytelling and performance” (162). She mentions the writings of Jamaica Kincaid, Grace Nichols and Marlene Nourbese Philip as examples of how these “various forms of language” and “presymbolic language” can be reproduced (163). As Boyce Davies claims, “the repositioning of women in language occurs when we reverse, interrupt or dismantle the cultural mythologies which position women in language in negative ways; when we challenge how the feminine in language is addressed” (163). Boyce Davies also discusses Paule Marshall’s short story “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” to show how this American author born to Barbadian parents recreates the labor of “[d]etermined, hard-working women” from the Caribbean living in New York. Thus, Marshall “makes explicit the relationship that these women had to American capitalism, on the one hand, and to their own creativity on the other.” Furthermore, Boyce Davies notes that these migrant workers “produced daughters caught . . . on the borders between two culture areas, and between exile and home, movement and fixity,” and that these daughters would nevertheless be able to listen to and “evoke the landscape, food, people, stories of the Caribbean” (*Black* 128-129). Interestingly enough, Adisa has also drawn on the example of writers such as Paule Marshall, whom she finds as highly inspiring in terms of the oral tradition. As she affirms in an interview:

Paule Marshall in “The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen” (1983) does it much more effectively when she talks about sitting around the kitchen table. I come to story-telling through my grandmother who died eight years ago at the age of a hundred and two. That’s my tradition. I come to story-telling through listening to my mother and the stories that she tells and she and her friends told. And that’s where the connection is with the griot tradition, because I was hearing these stories that I knew people would never write down, stories that really give a different face to the landscape of what and who Jamaica is. (Adisa interviewed by Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 205).

These mothers’ determination to nurture their children not only with food, but also with language, resonates with Toni Morrison’s depiction of motherwork as nurturing and cultural bearing (Green “Cultural” 260). Indeed, a key imperative for Adisa is to



defy the negative connotations that are generally attributed to the domestic space. In the verses below, included in her hybrid essay “The Swelling of the Womb/The Forging of a Writer,” for instance, her domestic work as a mother and nurturer does not represent an obstacle for her creative work:

ever so often
 a line or word
 i have been seeking for a poem
 comes in the middle
 of making sandwiches
 for my children’s lunch
 i grasp hold of it
 in between spreading mayonnaise
 on slices of bread

i chant it to memory
 like my children’s repeated cry of
 mommie mommie mommie
 ensuring that their demands
 will be granted (Eros 102-103)

Adisa finds a creative place in between cooking and writing, at the crossroads between her domestic work and her literary task. Once more, she identifies with the writer who is also a mother. She describes her relationship with her children and her writing as follows:

I am writing all the time. . . . Sometimes my children must pull me into the moment to focus on their demands. . . . My younger daughter, Teju, . . . often tells me I need her to help me write because ‘I am a writer too, you know’. . . . Her being has provided me with a lexicon of stories. My son, Jawara, middle child, loves the stories I tell. . . . I often breastfed him while writing, one hand on the computer. . . . My oldest, Shola, respects me as a writer, yet. . . [s]he has often said, “Don’t expect me to be a good writer just because you are.” No argument there, yet she serves as the impetus, the first to draw from me the connection between my swelling womb and the rhythm of idiom. (103-104)



Nonetheless, Adisa also recognizes that not everything is “blissful joy or indulgence. There are some times that I resent my children’s demands, that I always have to be attending to some task or the other for them, *with them*, that keeps me from writing all that’s stored inside my head” (104). Adisa is conscious of the sacrifices she is doing to cover the demands of her children, yet she feels as if she could “never do enough for them,” as if her “only function [was] to please them, take care of their needs, attend to their whims.” Feeling as though she had “lost [her] identity” in order to become the mother of her children, she confesses that in many occasions she feels

over-looked, brushed aside, dismissed. The writing is the same way, perhaps even more demanding than the spoiled-brats I am raising. How can I begin to explain the countless days when my children are in school and the day is so glorious I want to hang out in the park, or just stroll around window-shopping, but the writing tugs at me, shuts me inside, refusing to even release me so that I arrive late to pick up my children who reproach me for being late. Damn if I do; damn if I don’t. (104)

According to Cixous, writing not only can disclose “the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality”, but it will also “tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty . . . ; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing” (“Laugh” 880). Similarly, Adisa is literally trapped between her children and her writing, where she feels “like the defenseless child in this trio;” she standing “in the middle,” as she describes it, “my children to my right, my writing to my left, a tug-o-war that draws, both refusing to release me.” Her description of how she must write intermittently in between “dropping children off to their respective extra-curricula lessons” and “cooking, returning telephone calls, helping with homework” is impressive, even for herself, who admits, “I am thankfully surprised at how easily I manage this these days.” She manages to “rework a few sentences, . . . complete another paragraph, then [she] must run again . . . to pick up children” (104). With the children at home, the intermittent writing continues in between their “slamming” of doors, their “barging into [her] office to complain about who pushes who,” in spite of the fact that she has “told them repeatedly not to interrupt [her] short of death and gushing blood.” As she



concludes, the fact “[t]hat writers need quiet space is an ideal I sometimes glimpse” (105).

In “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of Her Children,” included in her collection of womanist prose *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker comments on Nigerian-born, British novelist Buchi Emecheta’s book *Second Class Citizen*. The book is dedicated to her five children, “without whose sweet background noises this book would not have been written.” Walker affirms being perplexed at first, and suspected that “the dedication might camouflage the author’s unadmitted maternal guilt.” But then, she understood that “Emecheta is a writer and a mother, and it is because she is both that she writes at all” (66-67). As a matter of fact, the main character in the novel, Adah, makes a decision that Walker deems “impressive and important for all artists with children” (68). Adah’s life ambition has always been to write a novel; then she starts writing it for “the adults that her children will become.” Therefore, “it is okay with her if the distractions and joys they represent in her life, as children, become part of it.” This is how Adah “integrates the profession of writer into the cultural concept of mother/worker that she retains from [the] Ibo society” where she belongs. Walker then concludes that, in the same way as the African mother has traditionally done the housework and the agricultural work “with her baby trapped to her back, so Adah can write a novel with the children playing in the same room” (69). This novel discussed by Walker discloses theoretical implications that are in accordance with Adisa’s defense of the figure of the writing mother. Adisa’s argument seems to be that the figure of the writing mother represents one of the aspects of the motherwork described by Morrison—nurturing, preserving, bearing the culture, and healing (Green “Cultural” 260). The cultural bearing of Adisa’s literary work represents an important instrument for the future development of her children, as well as for the continuation of her Afro-Caribbean motherline, with all the empowering work it implies.

The scholar of feminist and diaspora studies Donnette Francis observes in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* that “the memories and knowledge of how prior generations dealt with crises can provide inspiring examples for our present struggles. Making one’s own way often means learning to live in several places at once, both imaginatively and literally” (*Fictions* 167). In a similar way, Adisa does not only have the ability to cross time lines between the present and the past when writing and exploring about her ancestors (see chapter 4.1), but also, as discussed in the present chapter, she is able to cross the lines that separate the many places she inhabits in the material world. She drifts from the Caribbean to the US, from her



home to her working place, from her writing work to her motherwork, and most importantly, from her own imaginary spaces to her written work. In this regard, Adisa asserts that it is not enough to imagine herself writing, like memorizing what she wants to write, but that the work needs to be done. Thus, if she wants her imaginary spaces to fulfill her, they have to be materialized:

I can't imagine that I am writing, when I am not, and feel any satisfaction from the imagining nor is there any satisfying pleasure when I am horny and only have my imagination on which to rely. . . . There is nothing like the real thing. My writer's imagination offers very little solace if I don't make time to write or if I don't have anyone in my life to pleasure me. (*Eros* 149)

In a similar way, Brathwaite also admits that, other than the necessary act of writing, he also needs to know that his work is going to be published, that is to say, that it is going to adopt a material form that enables his work to enter the public space: "Knowing that you have a publisher—as I know you know, Opal—is as important as having pen and paper to write your stuff out on" (Brathwaite interviewed by Adisa "Walking" 32). The necessity of reaching an audience, of being connected and having their writing affect other people, is paramount for both Caribbean authors. As Adisa claims,

[m]y poetry opens doors that I alone cannot open; my poetry paves the way for my children. . . . I am raising children who will be critical thinkers, who will have a sense of history, who understand that each of us progress on the backs of those who walked before us. . . . I insist that my writing has a life off the page. (*Eros* 112-113)

Adisa makes clear that she wants her writing to be useful and make a difference in the world. Her concern with genealogy—that is to say, the importance of looking back to learn from her African ancestors—is not expressed in order to establish a fix sense of Caribbean or African diasporic identity. It rather seeks to recognize—to follow Foucault's reflections on genealogy (*Language* 134)—that the task is not to reproduce things as they were in the past, but to focus on things as they are today and understand them as part of a system that has been physically and ideologically produced. The importance of the Black mother as a transmitter of memory and culture is also observed in Lorde's essay "Poetry is not a Luxury." In this essay,



Lorde views poetry as a place of power within women, as a place not “white” and shallow, but “dark, ancient and deep” (*Sister* 37). Poetry, then, is a source of illumination and creativity. Opposing the white fathers’ statement “I think therefore I am”, Lorde claims that the “Black mother within each of us—the poet, . . . whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (38). As Lorde further explains in a conversation with Adrienne Rich,

I’m not saying that women don’t think or analyze. Or that white does not feel. I’m saying that we must never close our eyes to the terror, to the chaos which is Black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy which is . . . sinister, smelly, erotic, confused, upsetting... (*Sister* 101)

Lorde’s claims are determinant to understand Adisa’s view on the experience of motherhood and writing. Indeed, the Black female body is “sinister,” “erotic,” and “upsetting” mainly because it has often been abused, or rejected within the racist and sexist imperialist society (see chapter 5). Accordingly, Adisa creatively theorizes about Black motherhood, and counteracts the detrimental vision of the Black woman by praising her erotic forces. The erotic potential of the Black woman can be translated into biological procreation, and the preservation of culture through the oral tradition.

In connection with the perception that motherhood and the story-telling tradition are intimate sites for the perpetuation of a whole culture, Adisa acknowledges in her essay “I Became the Stories My Mother Told About Me” from the collection of poetry and prose *I Name Me Name*,: “[m]y mother is a storyteller. . . . mostly it seemed she had a story about me she felt compelled to share with relatives, friends and even strangers”. “I was her favourite character,” Adisa observes, “my entire life is a story that she eagerly shares” (123). In this essay, Adisa includes some of her mother’s stories about her as a very young child, especially relating to her “*tegereg* behaviour” and womanish ways (122 emphasis in the original).¹²⁴ In these stories, Adisa was so young that she avows not remembering them but through the words of her mother. She reflects on how this repetitive storytelling of her mother—which often embarrassed her—has allowed her “to see

¹²⁴From Jamaican nation language. According to the Dictionary of Jamaican English (439), the word *tegereg*, or *tegreg*, is used to refer to a troublesome, provocative person. Specifically, Adisa uses it to denote a woman who will fight, and speak loudly and brash. Another example of Adisa’s use of the word *tegreg* can be seen in chapter 4.2, in the analysis of the poem “Me” that turns around the figure of Maroon Nanny, who was physically small, like Adisa, but fearless (*Name* 92-93).



certain character traits” that her mother “was imprinting” on her memory (127). Adisa’s sense of estrangement about her early past becomes filled out by the memories of her mother imprinted on her own memory. As postcolonial scholar Lucy Collins observes, the concept of estrangement can be perceived in connection with the present moment, but it also concerns “the cumulative nature of knowledge itself,” and this is where memory, the recreation of the past, plays an important role. For instance, Collins draws upon Freud’s word *Unheimliche* (uncanny) to name “everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret and has become visible” (Freud “Uncanny” 125 qtd. in Collins “Way” 129). Thus, when the secret becomes visible, when Adisa’s mother decides to share the personal, sometimes embarrassing stories she knows about her little daughter, then the familiar and the strange are no longer in opposition, because there is an “incorporation of the stranger within the self” (139).

In this same essay, Adisa reflects further about how her mother’s stories have stamped her character as a self-confident, audacious woman. Thus at a very young age, the elder women dubbed little Opal “Miss Madam, or Mother-Pepper,” because she had “the other children under manners like headmistress with cane” (Adisa *Name* 120). Adisa’s mother’s story of the disrespecting white boy that little Opal fearlessly put into place reveals much of Adisa’s early development as a decolonizing voice. This framed story was indeed told to Adisa’s mother by the school driver, who had witnessed the incident and rushed to the mother’s workplace to save little Opal from an unfair reprimand. A little English boy who was new to the school route had unmannerly discarded the driver’s indications about where he should sit down. The driver told Adisa’s mother, “Well, him don’t listen, and him bother all de children, but as him is manger son, me don’t say too much to him.”¹²⁵ It turned out that the boy took the seats that were usually allotted to little Opal and her older sister, and said to the driver, “just drive, you’re not in charge here.” When the two little sisters got on the bus, little Opal argued with the boy about the seat, which he refused to offer, claiming “Just you shut up, you black girl, because I’m in charge.” That was the last drop, and then young Adisa “jump up and pull him brown hair and shout, ‘How you can be in charge and you just come to Jamaica and you red like shrimp and you chat like marble in you mouth. Get up out ah me seat or me gwane pull out all you hair’.”¹²⁶ Once the story was made available to Adisa’s mother, she was ready to

¹²⁵“Well, he didn’t listen, and he bothered all the children, but as he is the manager’s son, I didn’t say too much to him.”

¹²⁶Adisa “jumped up and pulled his brown hair and shouted, ‘How can you be in charge when you just arrived in Jamaica and you are red like a shrimp and you chat as if you had a marble in your mouth. Get up out of my seat or I’m going to pull out all your hair.’”



respond accordingly to the English boy's mother, who did not take long to phone her. They both agreed that Dennis, the little boy, had to apologize to the two sisters, and it turned out that "he and Opal became good friends and would go trekking through the woods together." Her mother underlines her courageous attitude affirming: "I am telling you, Opal is not to be messed with," and Adisa depicts how her mother would nod in her direction, looking for her acknowledgement (120-122). It is interesting to note here that, although Adisa "was scolded for pulling out Dennis's hair and warned about [her] tegereg behaviour," her mother never mentions the "disciplining part" in her storytelling. As Smith puts it, human beings are selective about "what memory narratives to share, what memories to forget" ("Memory" 44). This selective choice of memories could be seen in the case of Adisa's mother as a motherwork strategy, by which she enhances only the positive aspects of the story in order to empower her daughter, and prompt her to defend herself in the face of racial discrimination.

Although Adisa acknowledges the importance of these stories in the shaping of her own identity, she wishes her mother could remember more details about what her feelings were, because she cannot remember anything about what she "was thinking and feeling". She knows that if she could access this information, she "would have a fuller picture of what motivates [her] emotionally" (122). Memories, or else, the spaces of the imagination, constitute a central part in Adisa's literary landscapes.

While the above story is Adisa's favorite one of her mother's repertoire, she avows that as a child she did not always enjoy her mother telling stories about herself: "I hear my mother launch into a familiar story, and I want to be off, far away, under a tree so I don't have to hear it again, but I know I have to stay until dismissed" (123). However, Adisa now recounts, "I often hear her voice and I see myself through her eyes. Yet, strangely, the stories give me an opportunity to look in on a girl who looks like me, but isn't me, rather is the girl becoming me" (127). With respect to the act of remembrance, Collins argues that in such act of reconstruction, "the past is contained within present perception." In order for something to become strange, there needs to be a "separation from the past," which occurs in "the act of memory" ("Way" 129). This strangeness also resonates with the notion that one turns to the past in order, not to find an essential/original self, but to understand how this self has been shaped, both ideologically and physiologically. Thus Adisa, through the vision/narratives of her mother, has learned to appreciate the Afro-Caribbean motherline where she belongs. As she states, "[n]ow I tell my children stories about themselves, hoping they too will glean important intuitive traits about themselves that will help them on the path of life that they must tread;" and concludes by showing



gratitude to her mother: “[t]hank you, Mummy, for treasuring my stories and giving them back to me as ladders with which I keep scaling fences” (*Name* 128).

In Opal Palmer Adisa’s writings, we can assert that the character of the maternal ancestor is closely aligned with the Black folk and the oral tradition. This thoughtful author moves with ease between history and poetry, opening the path for her readership to undergo a fluid, natural process of self-evaluation and transformation. Adisa’s writings, indeed, seem to have undergone what Cixous calls that “job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak” (“Laugh” 880). Furthermore, in her deeply felt, empathetic writings, Adisa is able to acknowledge first, and then to transcend (not reject) the figure of the mother as a biological instrument for procreation. She also draws attention on motherhood as the source of creative, erotic power that finally leads to a reliable, self-made social institution. In her essays and poems, we have seen how the writer offers a deep—and sometimes autobiographical—review on the role of mothers as influential elements in the education and continuity of a whole community. Adisa may well be defined as a peaceful warrior of postcolonial, neo-colonial times: armed with a *womanist* passion, this Caribbean woman poet, citizen of the world, mother and educator, fearlessly unveils the codes that govern the relationship between the received versions of history and the history of resistance.

By way of conclusion, it is my contention that Adisa’s volume *Eros Muse* advances the value and function of the essay in the Black diasporic intellectual tradition. This intellectual endeavor, as Byrd notes, started with the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois (*The Souls of Black Folk*), and then was continued with the committed writings of authors such as James Baldwin (*Notes of a Native Son*), Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider*) and Alice Walker (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, and *Living by the Word*) (Byrd “Review”). Arguably, I think Adisa’s *Eros Muse* could be added to this list as she develops a system of Black female aesthetics that is inclusive of the domestic space and as such recognizes the importance of parenting. The ease with which Adisa trespasses the borders between the domestic work and the writing work is worth highlighting. It is also significant how she crosses the lines between the intimate space and the public sphere. For instance, she invests herself to elevate sexual pleasure to the realm of creative force (Eros), and as such, as a source of knowledge that starts in the intimate task of knowing oneself. Finally, her description of mothers as an important element in the continuation of the African diasporic cultures is paramount in this volume. Other than *Eros Muse*, Adisa



also uses autobiographical prose in other works in order to reconnect with her Caribbean family and her own history. Notably in the collection *I Name Me Name*, as we have seen in my reading of “I Became the Stories My Mother Told About Me,” Adisa reconnects her own personal experience with the stories of the Black diaspora, bringing forward her Afro-Caribbean identity. Some of the poems included in her collection of poetry *Leaf of Life*, like the one I include in this section, are also drawn upon her intimate landscapes.

CONCLUSION

i would leave treasure map for my daughters
who would surely follow on my heels
listening keenly to the winds that beckoned them
herbal plants stored securely in their suitcases

—Opal Palmer Adisa, “Foremother II: Mary Seacole (1805-1881),” *I Name Me Name*



In Opal Palmer Adisa’s writings, the experience of dislocation and alienation intensifies the necessity to reproduce home. In the above verses, the poetic voice of Mary Seacole, a creole Jamaican nurse who attended the wounded during the Crimea War in England in 1855 (“Mary Seacole” at *Encyclopaedia*), speaks about her nursing and healing experience. Thus, Adisa looks into the sites of the intimate, in this case into the mother-daughter relationship, in order to produce alternative spaces from where to shape Black women’s identity. Mary Seacole’s acknowledgement of a matrilineal kinship, and her ability to heal with herbs, which Seacole learned from her Black Jamaican mother, indicate the importance of ancestry in the formation of a Caribbean identity. Adisa’s narratives come both in prose and in verse, as she does not make strict distinctions between the two stipulated genres. She draws her stories from the intimate experiences, which do not necessarily need to belong to her, as they can also be the intimate experiences of other characters or voices for whom she acts as a spokesperson. The stories and perspectives she portrays serve her to remap the home left behind, thus giving way to new cartographies, that is to say, new politizations of reality, that may help future generations to shape their immediate environment and to identify their place in it. Therefore, Adisa’s intimacy narratives are the new imaginary spaces from where notions of national belonging are debunked and a new concept of transnational identity pushes forward (MacDonald *Homes*, Spivak *Aesthetic*).

This dissertation started by discussing postcolonial and gender perspectives in the field of Caribbean studies. I have also complemented these theories by adding issues on intimacy studies. This third focus has allowed me to investigate the capacities of a space that has traditionally been relegated as secondary. It is my contention, and I believe Adisa’s too, that an approach to the



intimate everyday practices is key to identify the politics of colonization, as well as to offer new possibilities for decolonizing strategies as performed from the body. In Adisa's postcolonial and feminist writings, inherited practices and moral values are challenged by consciously and fearlessly rejecting the multiplicity of roles (gender, race, class, nationality) that society expects from the individual.

As examined in the theoretical introduction, the contemporary Caribbean space has been built upon two historical processes which are closely related: the African Diaspora, as the result of the Middle Passage, and Creolization, the immediate result of cultural colonialism. After the massive uprooting of African people and their subsequent relocation in the West Indies, cultural colonialism determined the structure of the slave society by which the slave masters imposed their language, their religion and their own laws over the African enslaved population. Thus, they abused the African population by using them mainly as labor and reproductive forces (see chapter 5.2). Within these practices, the Black woman was particularly stigmatized as either a sexually subjugated object, a sexually deviant woman, an unmarried mother, or an infertile mule, hence the term "mulatto" (Weir-Soley *Eroticism* 12-15, 56-57, 72). Creolization, on the other hand, is the result of the interaction, between the culture of the colonizer and the culture of the colonized in slave societies organized to benefit a minority group of European settlers, and to oppress the indigenous people and the African community. The unbalanced situations in creole societies brought forward an Afro-Caribbean aesthetics of survival and resistance (Brathwaite *Development* xxix-xxxii). It has been my aim throughout the present dissertation to identify such practices of survival and resistance in the writings of Opal Palmer Adisa. After a close study of how these mechanisms are reproduced, it could be argued that the best place from where resistance can be performed is to be found in the intimate spaces of embodied action.

This dissertation has thus explored Adisa's writings in order to establish connections between intimacy spaces and the practices of mapping Caribbean homes in the diaspora. Taking into account that the Caribbean region is a space conformed by a number of historic diasporas (mainly European, African, Indian, and Chinese), and that the Caribbean population has led the processes of globalization by actively migrating to the metropolitan centers (Otto, MacDonald-Smythe), I would like to start developing my conclusion on the basis that all Caribbean subjects, whether they are rooted in their home islands or abroad, are by definition diasporic subjects. Thus Adisa, as an Afro-Caribbean subject living in the US (and splitting her time



between the mainland and the US Virgin Islands), doubly represents the diasporic experience. Most of her work illustrates the ‘tidalectic’ movement already described by Brathwaite to explain the aesthetic processes by which Caribbean/diasporic identities are negotiated (Brathwaite *ConVERSations*). In what follows, I highlight chapter by chapter the number of apparently opposite sites—such as past and present, intimate and public, emotion and thoughts, spirituality and sexuality, sexual intimacy and politics, domestic spaces and public spaces, or pleasure and pain—which are bridged together in Adisa’s writing, thus enabling a tidalectical and fluid process of knowing.

Imperialism and slavery represent crucial factors in the articulation of a specific literary tradition in the Caribbean region. As explained in the introductory chapters, the Caribbean artistic production is marked by the uprising of an African consciousness and a subsequent desire for cultural and political emancipation. In postcolonial studies, the work of Caribbean writers represent an invaluable instrument to restore the ancestral epistemologies repressed by the colonial establishment. In fact, they bring to the fore elements of cultural resistance and strategies of subversion otherwise silenced or misguided by the dominant discourses. In light of this, chapter 4 analyzes Adisa’s works with regard to her own statement as a writer, her stylistic choices, and her critical vision on cultural colonialism in the context of the Caribbean.

Adisa’s attempt to define Caribbean female space in her writing is covered in chapter 4.1. For this first part of the analysis, I have drawn upon Adisa’s essay “She Scrape She Knee: The Theme of my Work” to examine the relationship between anger, feelings of pain, madness and writing which is established in her writings. Alongside this essay, the analysis covers other excerpts from Adisa’s poetry, fiction and essays, in order to illustrate how, for this writer, the painful experiences become part of a larger scheme of local materiality which interrogates established assumptions on the region’s knowledge and history. The author’s accounts in this section reflect on her own observation of how the colonial status quo affects the psyche of the colonized people of the African diaspora. She specifically underlines female perspectives, foregrounding an affective politics of resistance from the body that is paramount for Black female writing. Indeed, for Adisa, writing from the body implies the observation of other bodies in order to convey/translate the implicit decolonizing practices that exist among the members of her community. My analysis investigates her defiance of language, theory production and the hegemonic structures they entertain. In order to break with the



canonical assumptions that maintain that the rationality of language is not affected by feeling, Adisa's affirmation of embodied writing in connection with pain becomes highly significant. Borrowing theories by Cixous, Ahmed, Lorde and Scarry, I have investigated how Adisa embraces notions of textual embodiment as an instrument for resistance, thus emphasizing the relation between creative writing, emotions, thought, and knowledge.

The tidalectic force is present in all aspects of Adisa's literature. On the one hand, there is the history, which is viewed, not as a static element, but as a fluid component that nurtures her imagination, and which the poet herself repeats and reshapes accordingly to her new environment, like water poured into a new pot. On the other hand, there is the present time and place, from where Adisa as a Caribbean migrant writer shapes her future and that of her people. In chapter 4.2, I have examined Adisa's landmark essay "How to Write the Poem of the Pebble," her poem on the figure of Maroon Nanny "Me," and her poem where she gives voice to the rebel figure of "Three Finger Jack," in order to show how she rescues both female and male figures to bring up a diasporic consciousness that inherently resists essentialist notions of cultural belonging.

The narrative act of remembering and retelling is central in Adisa's literature. Her writing, which as we saw intertwines lyric and narrative elements, serves to challenge established binary oppositions between genres, at the same time as it foregrounds the stories of a diasporic people that still today struggle to resist colonial structures of dominance. Thus chapter 4.2 explores further questions on memory and the linguistic production of knowledge. An examination of Caribbean rescued stories enables the reader to see through the lenses of ancient slaves and their descendants. Adisa's role as a spokesperson is also discussed. Her firm commitment to give voice to the silenced participants of history enables this writer to make connections between the past and the present, Africa and the Caribbean, or the colonizers and the colonized. This analysis proves how Adisa is able to soften the edges between such polarities, thus unmasking the continuities of colonialism in today's so-called postcolonial society, where Black people—marked by a history of slavery and cultural exploitation—keep on struggling for freedom and cultural autonomy. In order to examine this, I particularly draw upon Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism, an approach to self-representation that promotes essentialist belonging and the (temporal) disregard of differences as ways for a given group to effectively impact on the public sphere. Spivak contends that the literary and artistic imagination, inasmuch as they have assisted nationalist agendas, can also be able to



de-transcendentalize nationalisms. In other words, for Spivak, literature, and the teaching of literature, enables to study the concept of nationhood comparatively, thus enabling the nation to transcend outside the borders of nation-state (*Aesthetic* 281, 291). In light of this, it is meaningful to observe how Adisa's creative use of language leads her to certain stylistic choices—such as the refusal to translate local speech (i.e. nation language), or the mixture of lyric and prosaic styles within the same piece—which enables the Caribbean culture to gain a legitimate status within the globalized world. Following the author's interrogations of formal epistemologies discussed in chapter 4.2, I have reflected on the mechanisms of discursive productivity—that is to say, the creative force of language—and the power relations it entails. In other words, Adisa is aware of the potentiality of words to shape reality, and therefore she chooses to create her own narrative, which enables her to remap a reality that matches the Caribbean experience. Her writing, I argue, brings forward national Caribbean identities which serve to resist the neoimperialist forces that attempt to erase differences and create spaces of flattened belonging.

Sexuality and sexual expression occupy a central space in the historical processes of the Caribbean, from slavery to contemporary global economies, as we can evidence in “sex tourism” (Sheller *Citizenship* 211) and in “dancehall” (261-270), where forms of labor engage “sexual energies and parts of the body,” thus conforming an integral part of Caribbean economies (Kempadoo *Sexing* 42 qtd. in Sheller *Citizenship* 251). In chapter 5, I have focused on Adisa's representation of Black Caribbean women as models for erotic agency, thus offering “alternative ways to think about the deep-seated relation between the self, the social, and the sacred; agency, structure and the metaphysical; autonomy, subordination, and divinity; and the body, the state, and the spirit” (Sheller *Citizenship* 47). Although, as seen in chapter 2, Black women's civic activism and public leadership have played an important role in the struggle for Caribbean freedom (Sheller *Citizenship* 48-52), most of Adisa's work is concerned with how Black Caribbean women have performed resistance from the (often neglected) domestic space—especially with regard to sexual and spiritual practices—and how their intimate experiences affect and/or are affected by the public structures. Throughout her work, Adisa deliberately recreates Afro-Caribbean women's ordinary lives in order to provide models for Caribbean female freedom. Thus, in her representation of women's intimate, everyday experiences, she helps to preserve the tradition of resistance to colonial power, which is rooted in slavery and continues to circulate in the present Caribbean context.



Chapter 5 particularly focuses on Adisa's novels *It Begins With Tears* and *Painting Away Regrets*, and her poem "PMS and PMDD Symptoms," in order to explore the political repercussions found in alternative interpretations of Afro-Caribbean kinship systems, sexual expression and spiritual practices. Her novels explore in depth gender roles and women's claim of sexual self-determination throughout the domestic, the public and the tourist spaces. Therefore, I have examined the mechanisms by which political consciousness is inscribed in the intimate spaces by means of the erotic. In this sense, Adisa's work could to be considered as part of the larger project initiated by Michel Foucault with his histories of sexuality. As Elizabeth Povinelli accurately reminds us in *The Empire of Love*, Foucault's aspiration was not "to study discourses of sexuality . . . for the sake of knowing sexuality," but rather to investigate "power and the discursive matrixes that underpinned it" (Povinelli "Introduction"). In my analysis of Adisa's work, I show how the social established norms are internalized in the body, and how they can be challenged from the very same body. This internalization occurs not only by means of the "control and regulation through denial" exercised by government authorities, but also, and most successfully, through "the production of pleasure itself" brought about by individuals (Cresswell *Move* 145 qtd. in Sheller *Citizenship* 45).

In chapter 6, I explore how embodied resistance can be performed through pleasurable activities. Thus, this chapter complements the discussions initiated in chapter 4 about Adisa's perception of pain as an unavoidable stage in the performance of resistance. Far from opposing each other, both the affirmation of pain and pleasure work very well together as Adisa's literary strategies. In line with Nietzsche's approaches to pain and pleasure, Adisa's decolonizing strategies are based on the assumption that, instead of avoiding fear and pain to obtain pleasure (like Epicureans and Freud would suggest), going through painful situations and overcoming them constitutes the greatest pleasure. Drawing upon a wide range of theories from Plato, Nietzsche and Freud, to the poststructuralists Lacan and Derrida and the French feminists, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray, I have explained the concepts of Eros as articulated in Greek mythology, Freud's concept of the 'pleasure principle' (*Lustprinzip*), and Nietzsche's concept of the 'eternal return.' The latter, like Adisa's notion of the 'poem's kiss,' contests the 'pleasure principle.' The study of these three concepts are useful to understand Adisa's advocacy of writing erotically. Most of the works analyzed in this section are drawn from *Eros Muse*, which in my view is the author's most creative and thought-provoking text about the



intimate process of creative writing. Other essays and poems addressed in this last chapter are taken from the collections *Traveling Women*, *I Name Me Name* and *Caribbean Passion*. In these works, Adisa makes clear connections between the experience of having sex and that of writing; both actions are for her creative; they enable a discovery of the self and of the world, and as such, they are pleasurable. With regard to female sexuality, Adisa observes that both sexual pleasure and the biological aspects surrounding sexuality and reproductive powers are all regulated from the public sphere. Her portrayal of female experiences of menstruation as shaped by the dominant patriarchal epistemologies is paramount to understand her connections between the intimate spaces and social power relations.

Additionally, writing is for Adisa a creative force that is also comparable with the act of mothering. In the last part of chapter 6, I analyze this writer's autobiographical prose, where she highlights the intimate connections between writing and mothering. Acknowledging such interconnection, Adisa conceives new ways to perceive the sites of intimacy, which go beyond the realm of sexuality and romance. For her, both writing and mothering are acts of intimacy, and both actions embody the creative force, as both activities are a form of perpetuating life and culture. Adisa bridges together the domestic space and her writing activity, and thus she recognizes the importance of parenting and storytelling in the perpetuation of the Caribbean consciousness, and the transmission of life and culture. In order to examine the central position of the mother figure in Adisa's work, I focus on her two novels, some of her most relevant poems and her most emblematic essays and autobiographical prose.

From the micropolitics of intimacy to the large-scale spaces of neocolonial governance, Adisa's writings open a new window on the inner workings of the imperialist processes that pervade Caribbean people's lives. My research contributes to the existing criticism in two ways. First it has brought to the fore the work of an insightful Caribbean intellectual and cultural activist whose work deserves close critical attention. Secondly, this dissertation has provided new ways to appreciate decolonizing practices from the intimate spaces, thus bridging the often unnecessary differences between postcolonial and feminist studies. The importance of embodied writing in the context of cultural and geographical dislocation is made manifest throughout this Caribbean author's work. This research shows how Adisa challenges a great number of received dialectical oppositions, such as those between home and exile, private and public, spirituality and sexuality, intimate and politic, or mothering and writing. The present research also opens up new horizons for future



research on literary cartographies and cultural belonging. In fact, I think that more could be done in connection to Adisa's perceptions on parenting, and family bonds, specifically from her two first short-story collections: *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (1986), and *Until Judgement Comes* (2007), where this author inquires about the limitations that gender roles place upon individuals, and how such conditions affect the power structures within their communities. This research would help identify the mechanisms of micropolitics in Caribbean history. As an educator, mother writer, and community theater playwright and director, I can affirm that the work of Adisa matches the characteristics of what Spivak calls a new "aesthetic of education in the era of globalization" (*Aesthetic*), by which comparative studies of literature and the necessity to read these works in their original languages, helps creating a more inclusive perception of peripheral worldwide cultures. Her approach to identity formation is thus related to the spaces of the imagination and therefore transgresses any kind of national boundaries. Adisa's literary recreations of Caribbean female histories, like that of Mary Seacole quoted above, serve to draft new politizations of the Caribbean territory. These personal maps seek to challenge the polarizations inherent in national identities, and thus to blur the borders between nations, races, and genders. In other words, Adisa maps postcolonial diasporas and intimacy discourses in order to debunk, once and for all, the patriarchal structures inherent in contemporary, neoimperialist, global societies.

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ANNEXES

CHRONOLOGY

Nov. 1954	Born Opal Palmer in Kingston on the Caribbean island of Jamaica Mother: Catherine L. James Palmer, family from St James, Jamaica Father: Orlando M. Palmer, family from St Ann, Jamaica, emigrated to Cuba. Siblings: Leonie Palmer, same mother and father Keith and Stratton Palmer, half brothers Patsy Palmer, another half sister
1970	Leaves Jamaica with mother, sister Leonie and brother Stratton
Dec. 1971	Obtains High School Diploma, Brandeis High School, New York
1972	Meets LeRoy Clarke, artist, poet, lecturer, philosopher and Orisha Leader from Trinidad and Tobago
Spring 1972-Spring 1975	Studies at Hunter College, New York, Ba. in Communications
1973	Sees Sonia Sanchez performing at Hunter College. This motivates Adisa to become a poet
Jan. 1976 – Sep. 1979	Returns to Kingston, Jamaica Works at the Educational Broadcasting Service as an Education Officer/TV/Radio producer for children's programming



	Meets Kamau Brathwaite and Mervyn Morris (1976)
Sep. 1979	Moves to San Francisco Bay Area
1980	Meets Barbara Christian
1981	San Francisco State University, CA. M.A. English/Creative Writing
1984	Given Yoruba name, Adisa, by priest. It means “speak one’s mind clearly”
Jan. 1985	First child, Shola Adisa-Farrar
1986	Publishes <i>Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories</i> , a short story collection (introduction by Barbara Christian) M.A. Theatre/Directing, San Francisco State University, CA. Meets Carole Boyce Davies Meets Louise Bennett officially, but had met her before in 1977
1987	Pushcart Prize for the short story "Duppy Get Her"
1987-1993.	University of California at Berkeley, Lecturer, African American Studies Department
1989	Marries Tarik Farrar Publishes <i>Traveling Women</i> , a collaborative poetry collection with devorah major



Jun. 1989	Gives birth to son, Jawara Adisa-Farrar
Aug. 1991	Gives birth to another daughter Teju Adisa-Farrar
1994	Divorces PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for <i>Tamarind and Mango Women</i> University of California at Berkeley Ph.D. Ethnic Studies/Literature: "Three Landscapes: Jamaican Women Writers at Home and in the Diaspora" <i>Fierce Love</i> , a collaborative poetry/jazz album with devorah major as 'Daughters of Yam'
1993	California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) Professor of Creative Writing and Literature (to date)
Fall 1995-Spring 1996	Chair of the Ethnic Studies/Cultural Diversity Program
Fall 1998-Spring 1999	Member of MFA in Creative Writing Development Team
1995	Stanford University, English Department Visiting Professor and Lecturer, Winter Quarter 1995. Course taught: Caribbean Women Writers
Fall 1994- Spring 1996	University of California at Berkeley, Visiting Professor, African American Studies Department
1997	Publishes first novel, <i>It Begins With Tears</i>



- 2000 Publishes *Leaf-of-Life*, a poetry collection
- 2001-2004 California Arts Council
Three-Year-Multicultural Program
Grant, for 'Daughters of Yam',
performance group with devorah major
- 2002 *The Tongue Is a Drum*, a collaborative
poetry/jazz album by 'Daughters of
Yam'
- Aug. 3, 2003 Berkeley Community Theatre
Daughters of Yam at Black August
International
- 2004 Publishes *Caribbean Passion*
- Dec. 2005–Mar. 2006 Sacatar Institute, Itaparica, Bahia, Brazil
Writer-in-Residence
Sacatar Wombs Words, poems & photos
(a chapbook)
- 2006 Publishes *Eros Muse*, poetry and essays
- Nov. 2006–Feb. 2007 Binational Fulbright Institute, Cairo, Egypt
Writer-in-Residence
- 2007 Publishes *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories*
(updated, with an introduction by Rosa
Guy)
Publishes *Until Judgment Comes*, a short story
collection



- 2008
Publishes *Playing Is Our Work*, poetry and stories for children
Publishes *I Name Me Name*, poetry and prose
- Jun. 2008
Caribbean-American Heritage Legacy Award
- 2009
Publishes *Conscious Living*, poetry, chapbook
Publishes *Amour Verdinia*, poetry, chapbook
- 2010
Publishes *Caribbean Erotic*, poetry, prose and essays (co-edited with Donna Aza Weir-soley)
University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), St Croix Campus.
Becomes a member of the teaching staff (January)
- 2010-2011
Editor of UVI's literary journal *The Caribbean Writer*, volumes 24 and 25
- Jun.1-Jul. 1, 2010
El Gouna, Egypt
El Gouna Writer Residency
Publishes *What A Woman Is*, poetry, with paintings by Shyma Kamel, poems translated into Arabic
- Apr. 20-24, 2010
Louisiana State University, Baton rouge
The Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars Chair panel and delivered paper "Women Writers Wombing the World: The Poetics of the Environment"
- 2011
Publishes second novel *Painting Away Regrets*
- Aug. 6, 2011
La Casa con Libros, library and rural hotel, La Zubia, Granada, Spain



- Poetry performance with 'Bembé
Batucada'
Workshop on erotic writing (Aug. 7)
- 2012 California College of the Arts, Professional
Development Grant for conferences in:
- May 2012 Suriname, "The Impact of Abusive Mothers on
their Sons in *Until Judgment Comes*," at
13th International Conference of the
Association of Caribbean Women
Writers and Scholars (ACWWS)
- Jun. 2013 Grenada, "The Importance of Oral and
Document History in Literary Works,"
at the 38th Annual Caribbean Studies
Conference (CSA)
- Fall 2014 Haiti, personal research interviewing surviving
women/mothers from the makeshift
camps around Port-au-Prince
and in Jacmel
- 2013 Publishes *Incantations & Rites*, poetry with
devorah major
Publishes *Four-Headed Woman*, poetry
- Jul. 2013 Writes and directs at the Dorsch Theatre, St
Croix, USVI:
Beyond the Bitch, about women
issues of motherhood and finding
appropriate mates
Queen Bathroom Grafitti, about a homeless
woman who lives in the public
restroom and gives advice to women
- Jul. 2014 Writes and directs at the Dorsch Theatre, St
Croix, USVI:



*Pick it up and Tek It, and Broken but Still
Standing*

- Nov. 2015 IV Espirales Poéticas por el Mundo, Lanzarote, Spain
Conference: “Caribbean Women Writers”
- 2015 Finds journal *Interviewing the Caribbean*
Attends Kistrech Poetry festival, Kissi, Kenya
- Aug. 2015 *Out of Control*, a full length play about domestic violence, performed at Savage Theatre, in St Croix.
Also performed at Pistarckle Theatre in St Thomas, USVI (March 2016)
- 2016 Publishes *Look! A Moko Jumbie*, a story for children
- Aug. 2016 Writes and directs *The Cock Crows Our Secret*, a full length play about child abuse,

performed at Savage Theatre, in St Croix
- Apr. 3-5 2017 University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez
XI Coloquio Nacional Sobre las Mujeres: “St Croix Female Identity in an Era of Change”
- 2017 Publishes *Love’s Promise*, stories



PHOTOS



Opal Palmer Adisa's mother: Catherine L. James Palmer



Opal Palmer Adisa at 9



Opal Palmer Adisa at 18



Jamaica, Christmas 2016. Adisa with her three children: Jawara, Shola, and Teju Adisa-Farrar

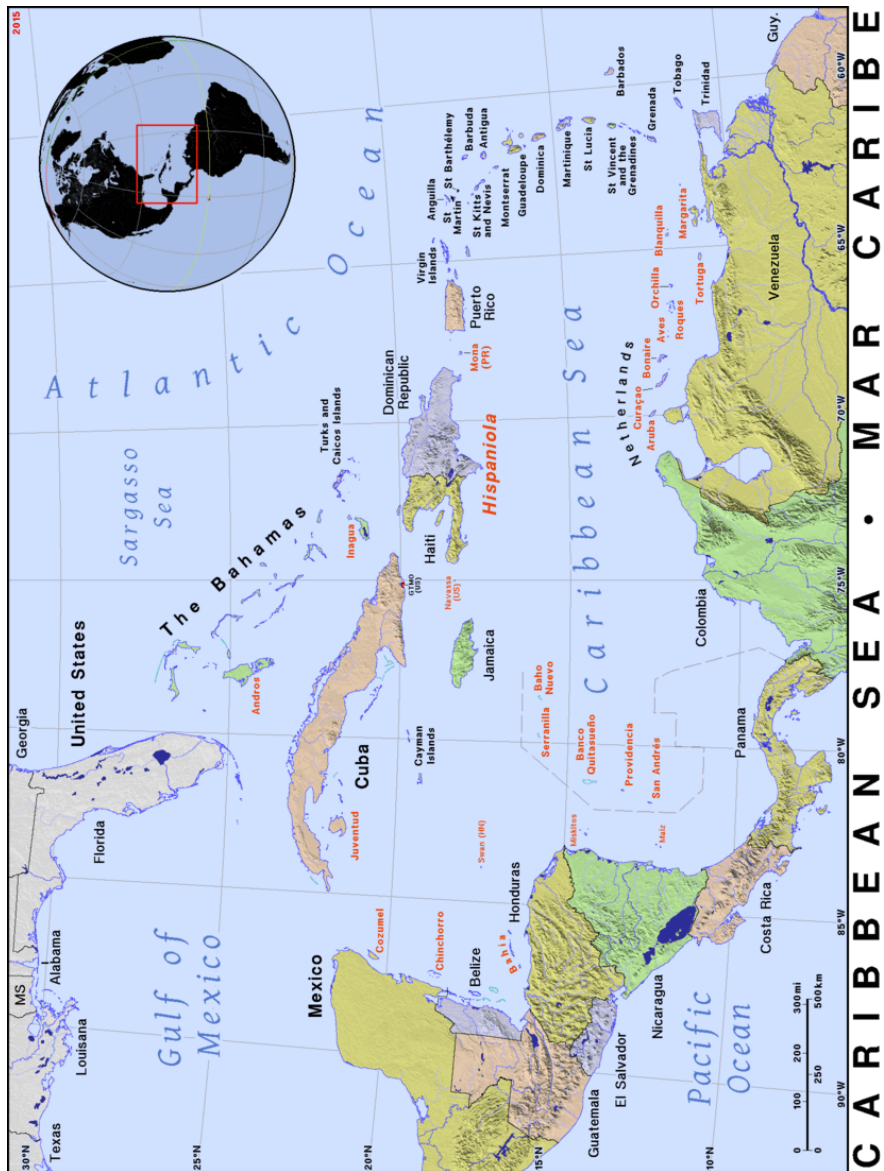


Figure 1: Map of the Caribbean



PUBLICATIONS
BY ELISA SERNA MARTÍNEZ

Rewriting the Caribbean Female Body, a Conversation with Opal Palmer Adisa

Published in *ATLANTIS: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*. 38.1
(June 2016): 203-220.

Opal Palmer Adisa is a familiar figure on the Caribbean-American literary scene with fourteen volumes of poetry and prose to her credit. She has been awarded the Caribbean-American Heritage Legacy Award (2008), the Pushcart Prize, the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award for *Tamarind and Mango Women* (1992) and the Distinguished Bay Area Woman Writer Award, amongst others. Her first novel, *It Begins with Tears* (1997) is included in Rick Ayers' *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teacher's Guide to Books that can Change Teens Lives* (2004).

Adisa was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1954 into a middle-class family where she grew up with a wide sense of family, and an awareness of the broader historical and spiritual significance of daily life, both of which inform much of her writing. At age 16 Adisa migrated to New York where she finished her last year of high school and graduated from college. Then she moved to California, where she completed her PhD at the University of Berkeley. A distinguished professor of creative writing and literature at the California College of the Arts, Adisa is a literary critic and she has published widely about parenting, writing and poetry.

Dominant themes in Adisa's texts are family life and the search for the sacred in everyday Afro-Caribbean history; she is interested in exploring questions on sexual agency and women's self determination. In *Painting Away Regrets* (2011), for instance, she uses maternity as a love force to recreate the spiritual legacy of the African diaspora and challenge received ideas on family structure. As a migrant Caribbean woman writer, mother of three, and an accomplished storyteller, Adisa employs her writing to mindfully recreate a Caribbean cultural imaginary that challenges the established geographical borders and gender limitations.

In an conversation we had in the summer of 2011 in Granada, Spain, Adisa, with a restless, yet still unyielding voice, unseated gender and race constrictions to reflect on the constraints that Caribbean writers encounter to reach a local readership. Adisa considers oral and bodily popular cultures, African-rooted spirituality and motherhood as the most capable institutions at promoting, in the Caribbean, a self-critical and self-respecting educational/ parenting system, which places the



experiential body at the center. The topics and poems discussed can be found in her collections *Until Judgement Comes* (2007), *I Name Me Name* (2008), *Caribbean Passion* (2004), *Traveling Women* (1989) and *Eros Muse* (2006) mainly.

ESM: When writing on race and gender, do you think in terms of double oppression?

Opal Palmer Adisa: Twenty years ago, following the Black Power movement, I would say gender and race *were* double oppression. But I have moved from the paradigm of oppression which speaks of victims, because I don't feel like I am a victim. I understand that these other identities and post-identities present restriction for me. But I don't experience my race and female identity as being oppressive, and this is important, because one is supposed to come to them as being oppressive. I don't know if I'm being delusional, but I don't feel them as oppressive; I feel them as assets. For me this is a shift of the paradigm.

ESM: Have women had difficulties in getting published in your environment?

OPA: Absolutely. But there are a lot of women who are being published now. It's an interesting thing about the whole hierarchy and these paradigms, because Caribbean women writers have been pushing. If you look at Peepal Tree Press's list of writers, I don't think you will find less women than men. And whereas I still think the men are the ones who are getting the major prizes—Derek Walcott certainly deserves the Nobel Prize; he has written tremendously and prolifically—I still think I deserve a Nobel Prize and a Pulitzer Prize and all these kinds of prizes, and I'm not quite sure how those things get distributed or assigned. How does your work get to get that kind of attention? In that regard, women's works have not necessarily gotten that critical attention. I think people like you and other female scholars are partly responsible for the advent and the tremendous growth of women writers, because, you are looking at our work, thank goodness. I remember twenty five years ago, before Barbara Christian died, talking to her about how her writing about Toni Morrison and Alice Walker helped position them to get the Nobel Prize, and the Pulitzer Prize, because if she wasn't doing that critical work that wouldn't have happened. I think the more there are young scholars who are interested in Caribbean women writers, the more you see that shift. Right now, most of the strong writers I know are women. Thinking of *The Caribbean Writer*, in both short stories and poetry, the majority of people who were sending work to us are women, so I don't

think there is an imbalance at all.¹ Certainly in the fifties and through the sixties, it was very much male emphasis. When you look at the exile writers, apart from Louise Bennet, of that era from the fifties, it was all men. But since [Jamaica's] Independence and post-Independence, there is much more distribution of women writers. I think, partly, that has to do with all the formidable women scholars that are now present, in as much as there is often tension between writers and scholars.

ESM: Miriam Makeba said that she learned singing from her mom. How do you understand that disclosure of the voice at the hand of mothers?

OPA: When Alice Walker wrote "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens," she said she couldn't trace anyone in her family who was a writer. She basically is responding to the critic's questions about female lineage, and though there were no writers in her family, there were people who gardened and crocheted and who did many things which speak to the same tradition, not in a linear way of course. Walker's piece speaks eloquently to me about how we would relate to words. Now Paule Marshall in "The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen" does it much more effectively when she talks about sitting around the kitchen table. I come to story-telling through my grandmother who died eight years ago at the age of a hundred and two. That's my tradition. I come to story-telling through listening to my mother and the stories that she tells and she and her friends told. And that's where the connection is with the griot tradition, because I was hearing these stories that I knew people would never write down, stories that really give a different face to the landscape of what and who Jamaica is.² I've been trying to persuade my mother to write, because my mother is a good reader and a good writer, and she has done some formidable things. What speaks more to me in terms of the oral tradition is Paule Marshall's piece. I need to sit down and write my own piece about that: how do we come to language? Who are our forebears who gave us this language and how did we utilize it? That's partly what I was beginning to chart in my collection *I Name*

The Caribbean Writer is the University of The Virgin Islands' literary journal. Dr. Adisa signed on as editor of said journal for Volume 24 in 2010. She also edited volume 25.

² The traditional griots/griottes from West Africa are "oral artists known as guardians of the word" (Boyce Davies 2008, 478). As such, they are the repositories of history, literature and the arts. Thanks to their role in maintaining culture we are able to document today many historical passages of the African diaspora. Oral artistic forms of the African diaspora, from calypso to hip hop poetry, are strongly influenced by the griot tradition.



Me Name, the poem about Mary Seacole and Mary Prince, all of these African-Caribbean women who during slavery and post-slavery made a mark for themselves.

*ESM: What about Maroon Nanny?*³

OPA: Maroon Nanny, tremendous; I grew up as a child hearing stories about her. I don't have any lineage or trace as far as I know, but I certainly claim her as my matrilineal ancestor who gave me voice and courage to speak the voice. Because people have voice, but they don't necessarily have the courage to speak it, to speak it in the way that they should, so that it impacts and influences others. And certainly Maroon Nanny is that for me and I evoke her all the time.

ESM: Could you tell me about your main influences in your writing?

OPA: In terms of influence, Sonia Sanchez, the African-American writer and Leroy Clarke, the Trinidadian painter and poet are great influences. These people opened the door for me to go back home and really seek out Mervyn Morris and Kamau Brathwaite. Kamau Brathwaite has been my greatest influence in terms of Caribbean poetry, even more so than Louise Bennett. I think he is brilliant and he continues to be innovative; he always pushed and encouraged me, just by being who he is being in terms of his African Caribbean sensibilities. He was, and still is, a tremendous influence on my work. Just looking at the way he uses his language, at the way he fuses African history, Caribbean history, folklore, and popular culture in his books, amazes me. You can find all this in any one of his latest books where he is doing a lot of experimentation. I really love the man and am happy that I know him well, that he looked at my work, that he encouraged me and that he is so prolific now.

Personally, I think Kamau Brathwaite should have a Nobel Prize, or certainly a MacArthur Award. I think he is far more innovative than, dare I say, Derek Walcott, and certainly he is as prolific, if not more prolific. I am glad that he got the major prize in Canada, The Griffin Poetry Prize, a couple of years ago, but I certainly think that someone of his caliber—someone who has been doing the kind of work that he's been doing on Caribbean literature and its various motifs and elements—is worthy of the MacArthur or a Nobel Prize.

³ Maroon Nanny is considered the "mythical original ancestress" of the Maroon societies in Jamaica, which were formed by fugitive slaves (Bylby 1981, 457).



ESM: Do you think that you have in common with Kamau Brathwaite the sense of being outspoken and talking about reality as it is without any fear? Thus keeping the mainstream away?

OPA: You are right. Kamau Brathwaite is very outspoken; he doesn't mince his word and he doesn't have different voices for different locations. His voice is consistent, so he is not subterfuge; I think that is a gift... as well as it could be a form of oppression because we know that these prizes, while they are awarded for your work, they also want someone who will be very thankful, be genuinely very thankful. It's not that I think Kamau wouldn't be, but I think he would be thankful and critical. He would say: "I am glad for this but why hasn't it happened before?" I think he would do that, so that makes it a little problematic.

ESM: And how would you behave; would you smooth your behavior?

OPA: I remember as a child my mother always would tell me that I had to learn to be diplomatic, and I think for the most part I've learnt to be as diplomatic as I can be. I believe in speaking my word and I believe in honesty, but I think I am not so brash anymore, so I am still speaking my word but I am not cursing you off. I think that's the shift that has happened for me, but I still think so many people are not speaking their word. It's important that I speak my word, and I don't want to be silent. I've seen enough people who were silent because of the position they find themselves in. And I think that's sad. I think if we are losing an important voice, dissident or not, that is important for the equation, important for the intellectual engagement and examination that we all must be undergoing continuously.

ESM: And this has a lot to do with identity.

OPA: It has a lot to do with identity and being proactive. I had a big argument with a professor when I was doing my dissertation who was asking me why I was resisting Kant and not appropriating his voice. I said I was not appropriating a European voice or sensibility and I had some problems with what Kant and these other guys were saying about literature and literary criticism. For me it was really important that I didn't appropriate another person's voice because I think when you appropriate someone's voice yours doesn't get stronger, and I didn't want my voice to recede. Which I think is also why my work hasn't got the kind of critical attention in mainstream America or even in the Caribbean, where it could probably make me some money.



I insist I am writing in Jamaican nation language. Other writers whose work has gotten prominent write about the culture, but their use of the nation language is very subtle. I use nation language, as people say, with people who don't even speak nation language, but I still believe I have to be the voice of these people who are marginalized; I believe that position that I have so far insisted on has influenced some of the critical attention that my work deserves. I think, this probably sounds arrogant somewhat, but I'm one of the most innovative writers out there. I don't see any other writer in any other part of the Caribbean who has been as innovative as I have been in both form and content. It's not just the use of Jamaican language, or the dual stories and folklore in my novels or how I'm weaving storytelling. In the collection, *I Name Me Name*, it has to do with how I'm putting stories and poetry together; in *It Begins with Tears* it's the double stories that I'm telling; it's evident in the new novel, *Painting Away Regrets* how I'm weaving in the Orishas and its presence in Jamaica. So I am doing stuff, consciously moving from the traditional, and even in the short story collection *Until Judgement Comes*, I'm introducing voice and gender in a way that I have not seen other writers do. Why aren't people taking notes of that? I have no idea.

*ESM: What is your experience with the Orishas?*⁴

OPA: When I went to College in the USA, for the first time I took a class on African religion and that opened up my world. Before that, I was raised in Jamaica in what I think is a very narrow Judeo-Christian belief, Anglican. By the time I was thirteen I knew there had to be something else because for me, the God I was supposed to be worshipping was such a mean bastard. Everything we did was sin. I just had enough. I told my mother at thirteen that I was through with church, because I didn't believe that a God could be so mean-spirited and if he was then I didn't want to have anything to do with him. I just feel religion is such an oppressive tool in the Caribbean, and I think the way it is taught is a form of oppression not a form of liberation. It breeds a lot of hypocrisy and duplicity, stuff that I don't want to participate in. Even more importantly it keeps people as victims.

Within my Black Power African kick, I realized that the motherland is not England, but Africa; this kind of profound shift in sensibility. I took a class on African religion and for the first time my world began to make sense. I saw elements

⁴ The Orishas or Orixás are the mythological deities that exist in many religious cults across the African diaspora, such as Voodoo in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, Candomblé in Brazil, Shangoism in Trinidad and Tobago or Pocomania in Jamaica (Boyce Davies 2008, 119, 228, 824).



of things in Jamaica that people whispered about, and you shouldn't look at. Elements of the Yoruba tradition in Pocomania, and in other practices that people do and that they don't have the name for it because they lost the names. Nevertheless, scholars would say to me that Jamaicans don't have a strong Yoruba tradition like in Trinidad where they have Shangoism, because the dominant people who came to Jamaica were from Ghana, the Ashantis. In any case, it's there. I don't know how it got there but I know it's there. So I began to see these elements in the Jamaican culture. Having a pantheon of Orishas who are in charge of different aspects of nature makes sense to me. That's the most sensible thing for me. Look at the way in which African religion in the New World has been maligned, whether it's Voodoo or Macumba. Last year when I was teaching in the Virgin Islands, people talked about Obeah. They had not studied it and it was just a negative word for them, about people putting little spells on you. But that's just the surface; the entire concept has become corrupted. But, what is the etymology of it? Caribbean people, in spite of all their strong sense of Caribbeaness, have not spent the time to study their history and culture.

ESM: Do you think there is a revival in Jamaica about this kind of spirituality?

OPA: There have been Orisha conferences that have been happening and that have included Jamaica. And the last time I was there I found a small group of people who have been practicing their own version of the Yoruba religion. That development is happening in Jamaica; it's its own Yoruba culture but it's there, and it's growing. It's women centered and women led, like in Brazil. I think the young educated intellectuals are looking for an alternative paradigm to Christianity, are finding meaning and sense of connection there. It's not big nor does it have a strong group like in Brazil or even Trinidad. But there have always been elements of it there in Pocomania.

*ESM: Could you explain what Pocomania is?*⁵

OPA: Pocomania was very big when I was a child, and it's still very big, and it has elements of the Orishas in it. If you see their tents and altars you would not be able to distinguish them from altar preparations for the Orishas. They don't call it that, but that's what it is. I was blown away. Remnants of the tradition are still

⁵Also known as Pukumina, Pocomania is a religious movement practiced in Jamaica that combines elements of Christianity and African tradition. Its rituals include drumming, dancing and spirit possession (Black, n.p.).



strong, vibrant. I'm hoping the next time I go I'll be able to visit them and make some other connections. They have been doing that for a long time. It's not new; it's not imported. It's been there, just been underground because of the way the dominant members of the society view them and their practices.

Now that some scholars are looking at these forms and presenting them in new ways, the establishment and the so-called middle-class are in awe. People are like "Oh! this is very interesting stuff but we don't want to be involved." Still it's getting its due, so more evidence of it is apparent.

ESM: How do you position yourself with respect to Rastafarianism?

OPA: In *I Name Me Name*, I use the Rastafarian lingo "I and I." I credit the Rastafarians because they were the first group, and they developed out of the Marcus Garvey Africanist movement, who promoted Africa in the Caribbean. They made us embrace Africa. We didn't have to be ashamed of being primitive, running around naked, beating drums. So the Rastafarians have always been heroes to me. Because they have elevated blackness; they worshipped the first black Christ I knew of. Now, it is true that many of their tenets are very chauvinistic, and I don't even know if I should use that word, because I think that word can add many different connotations. But certainly in terms of gender participation they are very much a male hierarchy. There are some formidable contemporary women who are Rastafarians, who embrace Rastafarianism; this is giving it a totally different face and a totally different feel, forcing some of the men, to reexamine their role and women's role in the Rastafarian movement. It has become commercialized; everybody is now Rasta but everybody really isn't a Rasta. Most people think of Rastas as people who just smoke ganja and grow their hair. That is not what Rasta is; that is just the dressing. They do have a philosophy; look at Barry Chevannes, who unfortunately died, I think last year, 2010, he was one of the leading scholars on Rastafarianism. Over the years I've been privileged to go to some of their binghi sessions.⁶

For me the Rastafarians are an important element for Jamaica and the Caribbean, because they have connected black people to Africa. They have influences in St. Croix, in Trinidad and all of the other islands, and they have allowed black people to throw off the clothes of colonialism, which made us feel bad about who we were,

⁶ The Nyahbinghi cult developed in Jamaica in the 1930s as an orthodox order of Rastafarianism (Turner 1994, 30). Today Nyahbinghi, also called binghi, is a Rastafarian cultural performance that "consists of a complex integration of chanting praises, drumming, reasoning, proper conduct, dancing, clothing, symbolism and devotional discourse" (Yawney 1994, 80).



and embrace who we are. To me, you cannot talk about modern Caribbean society without talking about Rastafarianism and the influence they have had on cultural and historical life. Many of our leading artists in Jamaica come out of that tradition, both musicians as well as visual artists. That culture comes to breed that kind of creativity. They have influenced all of Jamaican culture, and they have certainly influenced who I am as a human being and as a writer.

ESM: I just can't avoid making a connection between reggae music and dancehall music.

OPA: I love dancehall. Do you know Carolyn Cooper? Have you heard of her work? Carolyn Cooper has just proved the middle-class people wrong, because they want to condemn dancehall. Cooper looks very critically at dancehall, reflecting its continuum. Everything is a continuum and everything evolves. Dancehall is no different to me from how Jamaica started with the mento music; then we went to ska, then we went to reggae and now we are at dancehall, and after dancehall there will be something else.

Dancehall music speaks to what is happening in the society, the kind of baseness. There are no boundaries, there are very few sexual boundaries anymore. In a lot of early ska and calypso music we didn't talk about "let's have sex," but we talked about "salt fish," so it was euphemism. It was hidden, but it was there; you know it wasn't straight up. Now everybody is speaking straight up. This sexual explicitness in the music most likely will change again, so I accept and appreciate the continuum; there is no interruption or break in the development of the music.

I am very much against the homophobia in Jamaica among some musicians. When I hear those musicians being played on the radio I change the station; I don't dance to that music; I don't listen to those musicians.

*ESM: I see, like this "kill the batty boy."*⁷

OPA: Yes, you know, that is just wrong, I'm sorry. And in every era there are musicians who are wrong. And so to those musicians who have their homophobia, promoting hatred and killing, I say no. I don't listen to that, I don't buy them and I

⁷ This is the refrain of a controversial song by Jamaican reggae musician Sizzla. *Batty boy* is a derogative Jamaican English epithet for homosexual men. It should be noted that homosexuality is a criminal practice in Jamaica, probably because of Christian and Rastafarian conservative beliefs: "According to the law, consensual sex between two men in Jamaica will get you 10 years of imprisonment and hard labour. Any 'act of gross indecency'—kissing for instance—will get you two years . . . The new Jamaican prime minister, Portia Simpson-Miller . . . promised to call for a parliamentary conscience vote on the law" (Tomlinson 2012, n.p.).



say to people that they shouldn't buy them. But they are not the entire group of reggae artists. Some important women artists are out there such as Tanya Stephens, Queen Ifrica and Etana, they are marvelous women, Rastafarian musicians who are talking about culture, sexism, child abuse. These Rastafarian women, are right up there talking about important things. But I love dancehall, I love the nastiness of it.

*ESM: I am always telling my friends who have not been to the Caribbean how impressed I was about the freedom of bodily expression I could feel there, specifically with wining, and how I ended up loving it.*⁸

OPA: Oh, I do too!

ESM: And again, one of the commonest comments from female and male friends here in Europe would be they couldn't help seeing this dancing as a way to undermine women, to make them sexual objects.

OPA: Yes, but do you know what? Dancehall queens have taken it to a whole other level. I haven't studied it in the way Carolyn Cooper has. She hasn't just studied it as an intellectual discourse, she has been there; she goes to the dancehall, she knows its people, they know her, and at first they looked at her with a pronounced question mark: "Is wha yu a do here?" Now Lady Saw is in my mind, the forerunner to dancehallness; do you know Lady Saw? First time I saw Lady Saw, about fifteen years ago, I was just blown away. I was like "Oh my God this woman is so dreadful!" She is so slack—you know, we use that term in Jamaica to mean lacking morals. That was my initial response to her, my middle-class sensibilities were on overdrive. Anyway Lady Saw came to St. Croix I think last year, Christmas. And I thought to myself, for a woman to be like that, it is just audacious. Being brass gives women sexual freedom that men always take for granted; Lady Saw totally takes the power away from men. That's the only way I can explain it; the ball is in her court and she kneels and teases. The power reversal is dynamic and confusing for everyone.

I think what dancehall women have done is like saying "Do you want our bodies? Do you think of our ass or our tits or whatever? We will give it to you. But we are going to give it to you the way we want to give it to you; we are going to explore the foreground of our sexual selves and you are just going to be a voyeur: you can look,

⁸ This is a hip-centered dancehall movement performed by men and women that requires a slight bending of the knees and the "S-shaped stance." Because of the rotation of the hips it is often considered to be "sexually charged." To learn more about dancehall see Stanley Niaah (2010, 121).



but you can't touch. We will tantalize you and tease you, but that's about it, coz we own it. This is fully our bodies," you see, it's a way of turning it around. What dancehall has done for women is to give them permission to have good sex, to truly enjoy their bodies, and understand that they have a right to be satisfied, not by a man who thinks just because he comes you are satisfied. That's the freedom that dancehall has given to women, especially because we have these double standards of sexuality and promiscuity. If you are middle-class, then you don't act this way, but if you are a common woman you act this way. I think dancehall, which is aligned to working class women, has given all women, including middle-class women, a way to demand sexual satisfaction.

ESM: And even though they have this in common, there is still this social class division . . .

OPA: Yes. And again, the success of reggae music has blurred those lines a little bit. Jamaica is still very much a British model of class and culture. In fact a really good story that I published in Volume 24 [of *The Caribbean Writer*] was by a Jamaican woman writer, Ashley Rousseau, who explores just these issues. The story is entitled, "The DJ." It's about this dancehall guy who moves into this uptown, middle-class neighborhood, and all the neighbors, even though he's in the papers all of the time, don't want to talk to him because they have this idea that he obviously must have come from the poor class, that he obviously must be doing drugs and all kind of stereotypes. The story looks at the class divide and how middle-class Jamaicans still snub their nose at dancehall and all such people whom they feel are below them.

ESM: A recurrent topic in your work, especially in Eros Muse, is that of being a working mother. In your case, it is revealing how you connect the act of writing with sexuality and hence with motherhood.

OPA: When I was in graduate school and I had my first child it was kind of ok, but I remember when I got pregnant with my son, my second child, a professor looked at me and he said to me: "I'm so disappointed, I thought you were going to be a brilliant scholar, but obviously you are not thinking of your career." Because in the academy, and I think this is particularly true of North America, if you are a scholar and you are a mother, then maybe you have one child, but you certainly don't have three children; and certainly you are not going to be a great scholar, or artist, or poet or whatever if you have to devote time to children. Caribbean women



who want motherhood run up against the academy, which again has been, until fairly recently, an all boys camp, and those boys always had children but they never lost office time, they never lost any time because the wife was responsible for all of that. As more women—black women, Caribbean women—are entering the academy and wanting to be mothers, the issue of motherhood becomes important, and many women defer motherhood because of that. I’ve always been rebellious. My mother would tell you “I’m gonna do what I wanna do, and I will do it.” And it might be difficult; I am not going to suggest that it isn’t. I think I’ve been productive, but it’s true if I wasn’t raising children, I probably could have been more productive, rather than just publishing two novels, I could have had six, who knows.

ESM: Or maybe not.

OPA: Exactly, maybe too, wanting to leave my children a body of literature serves as its own motivation. I really believe that motherhood has made me be a better human being, a much more understanding and compassionate human being, and that informs my writing. It is motherhood and not a husband or a lover that has made me understand unconditional love, which I have from my children and which I know I can apply to the world. Motherhood taught me that. You don’t learn that with a lover. Motherhood also forces you to prioritize in a way. I had children, I knew that I wanted to write and I wasn’t ready to give that up, and my children knew that. I would say to my children, “if you don’t give me space to write I am not going to be a good mother.”

Motherhood has allowed me to sharpen my focus about what it is I’m going to write and how I want to write it. I write a lot about women who are mothers because that’s the reality of the Caribbean; it still is. While I think more women are choosing not to be mothers the majority of Caribbean women do, because they, consciously or not, still believe having children is part of their identity as women. And motherhood impacts them. Single motherhood is a big issue in the Caribbean and I think it will remain like that for a long time until Caribbean men are forced to be more responsible. So for me it’s really important that we look at both the positive as well as the negative sides of motherhood.

The short story collection *Until Judgment Comes* is looking primarily at the negative impact of motherhood. It’s looking at those mothers who I see in the Caribbean, and who I see everywhere, as it’s not just in the Caribbean obviously. Mothers whose boyfriends or husbands have left them and so they take out their hatred and their resentment on their children and they raise children in this kind of



oppressive emotional and physical imbalance. This is to me alarming and frightful, and I think it adds to the widespread misogyny that we have been seeing in this society in the last twenty years. The kinds of incidence of crimes that men have been performing against women didn't exist before. I think part of that is that silent hatred, because we haven't had a chance to heal from the trauma. Many mothers don't have an opportunity to heal from the trauma of, "how do I deal with a man whom I love, whom I give my life and then he walks suddenly out on me and his children" or "how do I deal with that and not pass it on to my son and my daughter?" A lot of them have no outlet for dealing with that, and so my work, I hope, begins to open up that dialogue, by saying "hey what you are doing is wrong." I understand that this man was a dope, a no-good, but what do you do with your feelings and his poor behavior? Do you continue to pass it on by saying to your child, "you're worthless like your father, or do you say, this man was no good and I'm going to deal with raising my child with love and compassion so that as an adult, if he chooses a heterosexual relationship, he will make good choices as opposed to bad choices." So I had to write about those things.

And there are lots of silences around motherhood that haven't been written about in Jamaica. I was very happy when Queen Ifrica did her song on sexual abuse, because growing up I heard about incest, but again it was whispered; nobody wanted to talk about it.⁹ That's something I have been wanting to write about, because it has been buried; it involves friends of friends, friends of my mother, we are talking about diving into the personal realm to extract the pus.

ESM: You have written extensively about how the experience of motherhood has made an impact on yourself, both as mother and daughter. Furthermore, you also connect that experience to other individuals and to society at large.

OPA: Motherhood is about taking on the responsibility of the society for me, and I entered into motherhood very consciously. I wanted to be a mother, but I didn't want to be—and my mother is a good mother—that kind of a mother. There were things she did that I wanted to do differently, I wanted to raise socially responsible children in as much as it's possible. What you realize as you are raising children is that you are not raising them alone; that despite your best intention there are all of these other influences from school and the media that go against the grain. But still you have an opportunity to show them something different. I would like to think that

⁹ Queen Ifrica is a Jamaican reggae singer and DJ. In 2007 her condemning song on incest "Daddy" hit the Jamaican charts, causing some controversy (UNICEF, 2012).



I have shown my daughters and my son something different. In the Caribbean physical beating is allowed, but I didn't do that, I never did that so I think I have shown them that you can raise decent people and my children are decent. It's not that they don't have their flaws; I have mine too. But for the most part I think they are decent human beings, with a sense of responsibility for the community, with a sense of honesty and pride, and those are important values.

For me writing about motherhood is looking about how to grow a different society. The Caribbean society is in crisis, and it's not just because drugs have been brought in; that's an easy escape: Yes, that has had a tremendous influence. But we have to look at the way in which our social institutions such as motherhood and parenthood have not been guided or educated. There has been no training in that. If you want to produce a nation—and everywhere you go the violence in Jamaica is talked about—Jamaica has become a place where a lot of people don't want to go any more or won't live in because of the crime and the leggoism.¹⁰ What concerns me is how do we raise a culture that is still dynamic and that is being promoted all over the world with our singers and athletes, a culture that is loving, a culture that is not violent, a culture where people can live with each other and work out differences without resorting to killing? That has to do with parenting. That's the most political issue, but the political issue starts with, how do we parent the culture? For me that's important. I am compiling some of my articles for a book on the topic. One of the pieces that I am working on is an essay which I sent for a book on Caribbean motherhood. In order for us to ameliorate the pain and the violence that is in this society, motherhood is necessary. It has to do with creating a society where women are loved, feel honored and respected and are therefore empowered to raise children who are loved and respected.

ESM: Derek Walcott once said that his countrymen are not interested in reading what you writers write. How do you get the information out to this important part of the society?

OPA: Through theater. Do you know of Sistren Collective? Sistren was a collective that started around the eighties by Honor Ford-Smith, a Jamaican woman.

¹⁰A *leggo beast* is "Jamaican slang for an unruly wild person. Leggo just means to let go, to cut loose/go crazy or do something without care or caution . . . nuff leggo beast gal inna dance." (The Urban Dictionary 2011). Adisa understands leggoism firstly as cultural resistance, as when someone is self-sufficient and runs his/her own business, but in this case the poet refers to the extreme situation, when people only look for their own interest and become disrespectful towards others and the law (Serna-Martínez 2015, n.p.).



It was a collective of primarily working class women who wrote and performed, and they performed not just on stage; they performed in the market place, they performed in community centers. Jamaica for a small island has a vibrant theater, and always had. Sistren was phenomenal in terms of education. This group is responsible for bringing domestic violence [to public attention] and making it a crime in Jamaica. Because they explored domestic violence, and explored how the police were not coming out and helping women; and they put it on the map, on the table, on the government's policies. So, Derek Walcott is right about those men who are in the country but not reading what we write, but they go to the theater. That is why Reggae is such a strong medium of change in Jamaica. Whether it is a performance on the radio, or by people in the countryside, it is still oral tradition. They won't buy my books but if my work is performed, they will absolutely more than likely attend the performance. Oral tradition is still alive in the Caribbean. Plus, books are so prohibitive. Books are a luxury in the Caribbean; it is not like in Europe or even America. My books sell for some outrageous hundreds of dollars, and an average person just can't afford it. They are barely affording school books for their kids; they can't afford books as it's still perceived as a middle-class thing, and the middle-class people want to read books from America. They support local writers, but books are still a commodity that is out of reach for the average person in Jamaica, because they are not printed in the Caribbean; they have to be imported, and importation taxes are costly. Having works converted into theater, movies or TV shows is the way to go. And Derek Walcott knows it, because that is how he became famous. He didn't become famous as a poet; he became famous as a playwright. His plays, like *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, are still classics, as far as I am concerned. His plays explore very important issues that have to do with the Caribbean and people came out to see them throughout the islands. The theater is still a viable medium, because of its orality and its immediacy. That's what I want my work to be; I want to be in touch with people in Jamaica. There is a very brilliant dramaturgist, his name is Eugene Williams, who teaches at the Jamaica School of Drama; I want him to turn my stories in *Until Judgment Comes* into plays and produce them, because it's the way to reach an audience.

ESM: As a postcolonial writer you explore and create new meanings; your poem "Bumbu Clat" represents another turn of the screw in terms of hate speech.

*OPA: That's definitely transgression. The poem, "My Work Speaks to Those Other Women," in the collection, *Traveling Women* (with Devorah Major) is a*

precursor to “Bumbu Clat” (Adisa 2004).¹¹ It’s this poem that I think allowed me to write “Bumbu Clat.” I see this poem and another in the collection entitled “We Bleed” as the building blocks that allowed me to do “Bumbu Clat.” And I have to say this: I really loved performing it with Bembé yesterday.¹² I remember when *Caribbean Passion*, came out I was invited to Calabash in Jamaica and someone said to me “you are not going to read that poem?” because, you know it is still a bad word.¹³

ESM: But here in Spain we don’t know much about it.

OPA: Right, exactly! And I read it, but it was with great trepidation; it was like, “oh my gosh!” How are the people going to hear what I am saying? Are they going to think that I’m cursing? So it is still a risky poem, but a necessary, essential poem. And again, this is what I mean: I don’t think Caribbean critics are looking at these poems in terms of the movement, the trajectory that I’m making, the way in which I’m taking on women’s issues that are very much public. Men say it all the time: “Why are you cursing us? Why are you cursing our blood, our life?” You know what I mean? Because that’s really what they’re doing: “You bomboclat” you know? “You bloodclat.” What does that mean in the psyche of Jamaicans? To be cursing and this is one of the worst curse words in Jamaica: to say “You bloodclat,” “your mother’s bloodclat,” “your wife’s bloodclat,” “your sister’s bloodclat.” Why hasn’t that been taken on? Why haven’t they taken on that? Caribbean women critics aren’t taking up the poem; they ken it up at all.

ESM: Do women use the word just like men do?

¹¹“Bumbu clat” is a hybrid word composed by “bumbu,” which originates in west African languages and refers mainly to the female genitalia, and “clat” which is Jamaican patois for “cloth”. Accordingly, “*bumbu clat* makes allusion to sanitary napkins and, as an extension, to the menstruation, an essential part of women’s sexuality” (Serna Martínez, 2011: 27). The word “originally meant *sisterhood* and today has become one of the most coarse and misogynist expressions in Jamaican society” (Serna Martínez, 2011: 25). This swear word and its derivatives are equivalent to “son of a bitch” and can be written with different spellings; in the present interview the following are found: ‘bumbu clat,’ ‘bomboclat’ and ‘bloodclat.’

¹²—Adisa refers to her poetry performance at La Casa con Libros, in la Zubia, Granada, Spain, with the local percussion band Bembé Batucada on August 6, 2011. The band members, all women, chanted “Bumbu Clat” repeatedly as part of the performance.

¹³Calabash International Literary Festival, held during May every two years in Jamaica since 2001. This festival provides a platform for Jamaican and international artists of the spoken word.



OPA: It's mostly for men, but women use it. Everybody uses it. But that's definitely a word that men hurl. It's like the dagger; it's like bomboclat plunges the dagger: "Rastaaa!" It's just throwing daggers and then "Bomboclat!" It connects.

ESM: With this poem, you came to say: "look, this word became a curse word because it was unmentionable, forbidden, ignored, rejected by its speakers," but also, you rescue a wide range of other possible, positive meanings.

OPA: Yes. You know, in many of the secret societies that developed in West Africa, from which Jamaicans trace their roots, they develop around menses and things like that, and there were very powerful women, women who influenced, who got to be King, even in Ghana. The women counsel was very important in West Africa and even though it might seem like men had the power, it was the queen mother who decided who was going to sit on that stool.¹⁴ And it was her in conjunction with the other women, who decided many of those policies. So you could see, once we were transported from West Africa to the Caribbean, how this was a way of displacing our power. In Yoruba tradition it's this way; I have a mix of feelings about that. Why these women, when they are on their menses, there are certain things they can't do? Rastafarians would not have their women cook for them when they're on their menses. Which is kind of good, because so you get off being expected to cater to men (laughs). In Jamaica, I don't know if it has changed, but I doubt it. Strict Rastafarians would not have anything to do with women when they are on their period. It's a very powerful time for women. One of the ways to check that power is to curse it, to invert it, to make it wrong, to make it ashamed, to make it negative. And that's what bomboclat I think has done. It's a way of disempowering the female.

ESM: How do you think this story of disempowering through language and beliefs started?

OPA: I can't even begin to imagine. I don't even know how that came about, actually, and it would be interesting to investigate it, but I am not sufficiently curious anymore to investigate it. But it would be interesting, because, here is the thing: My paternal grandmother would tell me that men in Jamaica would say—one of our dishes is called stewed peas and rice; it's red beans stewed; traditionally it is

¹⁴ It refers to the Golden Stool, the throne of Asantehene, the king of the Asante, which represented "the people, the soul of the nation and the good fortune of the nation". The Asante people, a section of the Akan people, were settled in today's modern Ghana when thousands of them were taken as slaves across the Atlantic during the British colonial period (BBC n.d.).



done with salt beef and pig's tale and it's stewed and eaten with rice—well, men are always warned not to eat stewed peas from a woman who they think might want them, because it is believed that women would put some of their menses' blood in it and if they do, it would bind the man; in other words, the man would have to do what she says. I think part of it comes from men understanding how powerful a woman's blood could be and how much they could influence what they do or not do. So, in order to neutralize, or rather to deflate the power; then they turn it around. You don't even eat food from her because you don't know what she's going to do.

ESM: They receive the same treatment as voodoo and all the African-rooted religions.

OPA: Exactly.

ESM: Tell me about your poem "Market Woman," (Adisa 1992) when at the end the market woman tells the lady that she is sleeping with her husband.

OPA: I love traditional market women, because market women, as far as I am concerned, and this is my feminist point, were the first feminists in Jamaica. I know a lot of people are down on them, because a lot of market women do not marry the man they live with, and they move through relationships, so they might have five children from three different men. This sense of sexuality was not navigated by middle-class women who practiced monogamous relationships. Market women had serial monogamy, because often they had a monogamous relationship but it was not a life-long relationship. They would have this man and if he doesn't do what they want him to do, they leave him and go to somebody else.

ESM: Because they were economically . . .

OPA: . . . independent. Economy had a lot to do with it. Market women usually had their own plot of land; they grew their food, ground provisions and vegetables, and they went to the market and sold their produce. They were not dependent on a man for survival. And therefore their sexuality was not circumscribed by the restraints of middle-class women who were dependent on a single man. They could move from relationship to relationship to get their satisfaction and their fulfillment. So market women were like Maroon Nanny's daughters as far as I was concerned. They had that kind of fierce independence. Also, I was just amazed because a lot of them would stay in the market—now they don't because transportation is much easier—but they would go to the market Friday night or early Saturday morning and



they would be there until Monday morning. So it was like these women were living two days a week in the street, in a market place; they basically were out there. To me that was phenomenal! They could sit out there all day, and they were a community that looked out for each other and oftentimes they brought their children and they still do. So, for me, they were just an amazing set of women. They were strong; they carried all their food, see it wasn't this delicate, whimsy, little . . . no! Market women for me totally defied all of the normality of what a woman was, all of the sensibilities of what a woman was. They set their own paradigm of what a woman was, and it was the antithesis of anything that the society was saying we were. So for me they were feminists. Men in Jamaica, when I was growing up, and it still exists today, they always had an outside family. So it's a man who was married to a middle-class woman, like my father, but he had children outside, and it's called outside family, very common in the Caribbean. These middle-class women would go to the market and buy from these women. But sometimes their husbands were sleeping with these market women, so that's what that last line is saying. So here is that middle-class woman acting as if she's above, and this market woman is saying "yuh not above me because yuh husband ah sleep wid me." You know, you can pretend all you want, but your husband is in my bed, so stop with your pretence. It's like a final: I'm not going to take you on, because I have your man kind of thing. In January I was in Haiti and I went to the market and I took pictures of these women; they are still formidable. And they support each other; you know: they really have a community. In fact, that's a project I probably need to do. All these projects I need to do.

Sexuality and Identity in the Caribbean Poetry of Opal Palmer Adisa

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“The writer –like the musician or painter- must be free to explore, otherwise she or he will
never discover what is needed (by everyone) to be known.”
(Walker, 1983: 264)

For the long history of human civilization, men have been the active agents of poetry. Women, on their side, have been the (passive) subjects of men’s poems. Women as objects of inspiration, women as objects of desire, women set on a pedestal, women idealized, far away, unknown. A female body every male voice talked about but who was never given the microphone to tell her own version of the story.

Adisa’s work represents a constant search for new meanings that aim to redefine female identities of an afro-Caribbean generation, descendant of black, strong women. A collective vision constructed not only out of the poet’s personal experience, but also from her knowledge of other black women’s histories. Among Adisa’s many topics, in this paper I am going to focus on the process of ontological deconstruction of “bumbu clat”, a phrase that originally meant sisterhood and today has become one of the most coarse and misogynist expressions in Jamaican society. In her attempt to create a collective identity for black Caribbean women, Opal Palmer Adisa claims “May the sisters without voices be given microphones” (1986: preface). Contrary to the patriarchal European-oriented vision that dominates the mainstream cultural production, Adisa’s womanist approach proposes a closer, intimate epistemological conception of women descendant of African slaves in Jamaica.

Following Foucault’s utopian approach, Opal seeks to represent the Caribbean female body as a place for experience rather than as an object of study. In the same line, the political anatomy of the body, the body as historical construction is dismantled to give way to new forms of meaning in which the body becomes the reporting subject of the experience lived. The structure of her poem “Bumbu Clat” combines two different voices, one that serves as an introduction to the second, the former being Caribbean male voices using the given phrase in different contexts, all of them with the function of damning, causing offense, provoking or reinforcing violently the message uttered; the second voice, her own, gives way to an exploration of the palimpsest, an attempt to dismantle the semantic derogation apparently inherent to the word.



yu muma bumbu clat

in bemba
 bumama means
 sisterhood
 in jamaica
 bumbu is a curse
 you hurl
 going under your mother's skirt
 to shame

The first stanza of the poem is uttered in Nation Language or Creole whereas in the subsequent gloss of the word's two possible meanings, standard English is appropriated by the author. If we consider that "the most common method of inscribing alterity by the process of appropriation is the technique of switching between two or more codes, particularly in the literatures of the Caribbean continuum" (Aschcroft et al., 1998: 72) the author brings to the fore the tension between two social forces: that of the English colonizer and that of the colonized. In this punctual reading, it is important to outline that many of the English colonizer's patriarchal structures have been replicated by the colonized men. Given this framework, we must consider the double oppression of which black women are object.

As a result of this consciousness of dominating and dominated forces, Adisa abrogates the assumption of a fixed meaning inscribed in the word. This purposeful deconstruction of the usage of 'bumbu clat' raises a new consciousness in the reader: How do meanings change? Why one meaning emerges as normative while the others have been rubbed out? What does this change of meaning reveal about how power is arranged? These are the questions I am trying to answer using relevant passages of the poem 'Bumbu Clat' appearing in the collection of poems *Caribbean Passion* by Opal Palmer Adisa.

If I may use Derrida's terminology to describe the process of deconstruction that occupies us, the author of the poem seeks to recover the residual original meaning of 'bumbu', originally 'bumama' whose *trace* is visible only through the *secret*. The *trace* of the *secret* is the silenced, yet latent meaning it conceals: sisterhood; the *secret* as such is something that must not be spoken because it does not adjust to the established model. It was certainly not convenient for the dominant culture to



acknowledge the existence of any group of women with common interests organized in close relationship.

gu weh yu ugly
like bumba clat

as a derivative
bomba means to be wet or soaked
in lingala
bomba connotes hiding
before pads and tampons
women used cloth napkins
left them soaking in basins
(covered and concealed)
to bleach out the blood

Through exploring different African languages today -we should bear in mind that the African languages that survived the middle passage had been once the languages of the established culture in their homelands- Adisa proposes possible connections to the origins of the word *bumbu* and leaves open the possibility of other meanings. One is the above mentioned *bumama*, whose meaning is *sisterhood*; and the other is *bomba*, which could mean either *soaked* or *hiding*. It's interesting to mention here that in Brazilian Portuguese, the word *bunda*, which has an African origin, makes reference to the bottom. Finally, the reader can easily deduce that *bumbu clat* makes allusion to sanitary napkins and, as an extension, to the menstruation, an essential part of women's sexuality. This might be the reason why, when colonizers imposed Christian, patriarchal values upon the colonized, they censored every part of speech related to women's sexuality.

Yu is nutten but
a little bumbu clat

as a teenager
whenever i had to purchase
pads i waited
until no one else



was in line
 then i made sure they
 were carefully wrapped
 tucked under my arm

If we think of a patriarchal, colonizing process where the main interest is to maintain male domination, according to Braidotti, a woman's body, as something that exceeds the established form of the body from a phalocentric perspective, would automatically become suspicious. There is the normative body, the male's body, and the body of the others, the female's body. From this perspective, women's menstruation would represent an excess of the normative body, a deformation, a monstrosity. In consequence, all speech related to women's sexual specificities, as opposed to men's universals, would become a taboo. Language would render women docile, subjected to be included in the system only if they hide what is suspicious.

In order to understand this tension between ideologies struggling for legitimacy, we need to bear in mind that "the practice of polygamy, which universally prevails in Africa, is also very generally adopted among the Negroes in the West Indies; and he who conceives that a remedy may be found for this, by introducing among them the laws of marriage as established in Europe, is utterly ignorant of their manners, propensities and superstitions" (Brathwaite, 2005: 215). It can be said that, because women's sexuality was bound to be denied during colonization, words that originally related to female bodies, such as 'bumbu', as stated in the poem, were automatically forbidden. The actual consequence of the censorship of speech leads to semantic derogation, the forbidden speech stands out as a reaction to its own negation and becomes hate speech. The transformation of the palimpsest occurs when the subversive, fugitive body of the black woman -a body that becomes confused between being defined and defining itself- rewrites itself, attempts to erase the "secret" given to them through language and history.

wha te bumbu clat
yu do is mad yu mad

unless anansism is your guise
 you'll not be able to trick the snake



to victory
 but bumbu as verb
 creates a space
 out of unease

In this stanza, Opal makes allusion to *anansism*. Anansi tales are West African stories of oral tradition that survived the Middle Passage and persist today in different parts of the New World and the Caribbean, they are given this name because of the West African story of Anansi, who found himself having to capture different creatures (among them the snake) in order to bring back the stories to the world. There is a call for the revival of this oral tradition which would enable the liberation of the slave descendants from the post-colonialist imposed traditions.

In the same line of the *anansi* oral tradition, Peter Tosh's song "Bumbo Claat" appeals to the community of black people in Jamaica for the creation of a collective identity which must be used to redeem themselves. In the following lines, we can learn more about the moment of the spiritual revelation.

One night an evil spirit held me down
 I could not make one single sound
 ...Jah told me
 son use the word
 and now I am as free as a bird

Oh bumbo claat
 Oh rass Claat
 Oh bumbo claat
 Oh rass claat

In the prelude to his other song "Ready Fe War", Peter Tosh claims that *bumboclaat* is "one of the most highest potential of culture that relieves the spells of evil" he says:

"I've been investigatin this word so long to find out what these words mean, and what they are for, cause in the beginnin was the word and the word was with Jah. And the word was Jah the same was in this time. Cause so it was in the beginnin so it shall be in these days"



This transmutation of the sacred, is indeed the thought from outside which is referred to when Foucault talks about heterotopias, that external sacred place, where dupes and other spirits manifest themselves. In this sense, we could argue that certain mechanisms of knowledge demonstrate that “we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well” (Foucault, 1967)

In Jamaica and the other English-speaking Caribbean countries, *bumbu clat* has been used as a derogative especially related and referred to women. Indeed, it is extensively used for cursing or reinforcing a threat, especially in hate discourse. As for what Peter Tosh says in the prelude of the above-mentioned song: “Well, I was born and raised and grown up in colonialism and exploitation, and hear dat I heard dat and ummm... Bumba claat, ras claat, blood claat, and every kind of claat yuh can tink of is bad words, and indecent language”.

In the case of Peter Tosh, the prohibition of the use of *bumbo claat* could be seen as another mechanism of ethnic oppression. For Opal Palmer Adisa, *bumbu clat* is part of the hate discourse used to dominate over female bodies in Jamaica. According to Derrida’s secret, what is considered outside the normative value, the male-oriented conception of the universal body, becomes *unsayable* and thus a subversive word. Adisa’s purpose of unveiling the *secret* enables a re-discovery of residual meanings. These meanings revisited play an important role in the construction of identities in the Caribbean. In Aschcroft’s words, “all post-colonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between ‘worlds’, a gap in which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and appropriate their practice” (Aschcroft et al., 1998: 39). We cannot deny that Adisa is playing with the potentiality of meanings of *bumbu clat*, she is enabling herself the freedom of exploring new territories, other places, in the field of women’s identities. If the construction of meaning involves conflict and power, then, discursive fields need one another’s versions of reality in order to reinforce their own authority.

In the poem, Adisa analyzes, by reversal and displacement of binary oppositions, the way difference operates in *bumbu clat*. This reveals the interdependence of apparently dichotomous terms and their meaning relative to different times in history. She reverses the established concepts, avoiding any dualist approach and thus positioning her exploration of language from outside, from another place, leading to an ontological deconstruction that enables a feminist



political subjectivity. There is in her creative writing a strong sense of self-transformation through thought. According to Butler's theories, this transformation process by means of an aesthetic experience, poetry in our case, makes of language the condition of possibility of the speaking subject and not merely an instrument of expression. Adisa pays special attention to language, instead of reinforcing and perpetuating conventional understandings of the black Caribbean woman, she opens up new interpretive possibilities.

Considering the postcolonial tendency that aims at "finding an authentic 'native' voice", it is counter-argued that such recovery "can end up perpetuating the construction of the native as an 'alien' category outside the 'standard' and 'normal' subject of Western thought". Critics like Spivak and Chow would say that "anti-imperialist texts which try to replace bad/inauthentic images with good/authentic images of the native will not solve this problem." (Villar-Argáiz, 2008: 204). May I mention Austin in *How to do things with words*, and consider his idea of the performative function of language to conclude that the act of creative writing could also be an act of creating the world. In this case, therefore, creative writing would make of Opal Palmer Adisa a political activist.

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Revelations in Painting Away Regrets by Opal Palmer Adisa

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When the personal experience of a young Caribbean woman settled in America is placed against the backdrop of Afro-Caribbean cultural and mythological elements, the result is the latest fiction work by Opal Palmer Adisa. Spiritually charged and yet socially relevant, the story gives account of a woman's evolution from passionate, uncontrollable actions: "you're losing your head over this man. Chris, what do you know about him? I know you say this is just a summer fling, but you are not acting like it is" (2011:81), into a widely conscious, subtle and yet strong, self-healing attitude to life: "It had been foolish of hers to try to hang on; she had known that all along. She had been brought up with the idea of marriage as a lifelong union, a stable umbrella under which to raise children" (2011: 348). All along *Painting Away Regrets*, the divine forces are present in every aspect of human life to such extent so as to find both realms –the imaginary and the worldly- overlapping each other, when not disrupting into the other's apparently unrelated sphere. The following excerpt gives evidence of one of Christine's subconscious experiences, as vivid as life itself, during a therapy session within the practices of the Yoruba tradition, which she undergoes in search of a response to her difficult marital situation:

"Forgive me," she cried into the silent room. "Please don't take my children from me, please. I need them. I miss them desperately." [...] her mind veered again to the murderous scheme emerging in her consciousness. She had been planning it in detail. From the semidarkness, as if reading her thoughts, a voice said, "Tonight. He's in his office. Do it tonight."

She rolled onto her back, placed her arms on her abdomen, and closed her eyes.

Some time later she nodded awake, alarmed and confused. Where was she?

Lurching forward in the chair, she shook her head clear, then focused. She stared at Donald, his chin resting on his chest; eyes glazed, open, motionless (2011: 16).



Not unexpectedly, Adisa's conception of fiction goes beyond any prescription; structurally, the novel consists of a set of episodes each of which is ruled by the presence of a mythical figure of Afro-Caribbean cosmology. The description given at the beginning of each episode, serves as an anticipation of what is about to happen in the psyche of the characters. Indeed, the narrative voice shifts from the field of action of mythological imagination to the main character's own reality with the same ease as it moves between paragraphs: "Oshun had captured Christine for Donald, now Yemoja was going to bind her to him" (2011: 107). The author's figurative prose –the intermittent references to the qualities of the Orishas– plunges the reader into the most resentfully concealed parts of the human mind with such straightforwardness that one is impelled to be a lively part of the whole picture, carrying one's own life into the text and thus releasing the pain of the reader's own wounds: "After you have lost your mind, acted impulsively, Obatalá summons you, wraps your head with coconut flakes and bids you rest until you see your path clearly" (2011: 346). Without being neither judgemental nor absolutist, Adisa's novel raises all human actions – those we want to praise and those we want to hide– up to the most sublime level of consciousness: "She had to forgive herself for all her actions. She had to forgive Donald, and truly wish him happiness and pray for him to achieve his divine potential" (2001: 349).

Painting Away Regrets addresses issues of community formation and family bonding which are of great importance in the modern global society of today. The merging of places and cultures effectively provides a deeper, more complex portrayal of an otherwise commonplace story on love and family. Opal Palmer Adisa gives account of the multicultural reality of her characters, for instance, when pointing out that "British-African accent" of Donald who "had lived in London since he was ten years old" (2011: 46). Additionally, foregrounding the significant role of ancestors in Jamaican communities, when Christine's grand mother's voice appears to her, she utters her counselling in Jamaican patois: "Yu best tek care of yu head or yu gwane lose more dan yuself" (2011: 337). Following the line of argument of Carol Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, Black women's writing must be regarded from a conscious state of "expansiveness and the dialogics of movement and community" (1994: 4). Boyce Davies maintains that by rethinking the foundations of Black women's writing, we are also redefining identity outside the realms of marginality and exclusion. Drawing upon cross-cultural perspectives, the work of Opal Palmer Adisa rethinks and reshapes concepts and values found in



Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American representations of community and self. Katrina Bell McDonald explains in her article “Black Activist Mothering: A Historical Intersection of Race, Gender and Class” how, “from a very young age, Black women are reportedly socialized to yield to the call of responsibility to “hold the Black community together” (Joseph and Lewis 1981, 106) and preserve the race and gender” (1997: 776).

Adisa’s text stands central to the production of Black feminist thought, and in *Painting Away Regrets* she expresses genuine concern with the physical, spiritual and emotional needs of women, and in particular with the modern life difficulties of mothering. As Weir-Soley maintains in *Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women’s Writings*, in Adisa’s production we can find Caribbean women who are “at once agent of Eurocentric modernity’s nihilism and formidable forces of spiritual and cultural resistance against its destructive potentiality” (2009: 181). In this novel, Adisa openly suggests a more comprehensive value system that balances the relationship between African, New World and Eurocentric cosmologies, thus providing the ground for self-realization and social transformation.



SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION IN SPANISH

Ninguna obra de carácter intelectual es producto del azar. El presente trabajo de investigación no habría sido posible si su autora no hubiera vivido en Barbados durante el curso 2008/2009. Me instalé en esta isla caribeña tras haber residido junto al lago de Ginebra durante tres años. Paradójicamente, me había mudado de un cuerpo de agua rodeado de tierra a un cuerpo de tierra rodeado por agua. Ser consciente de ello me parecía esencial y, con el transcurrir de la estación lluviosa y de la seca, fui experimentando nuevas percepciones de la realidad. Este cambio de entorno tan dramático no podía pasar desapercibido en mi proceso de adaptación al nuevo contexto. Ni que decir tiene que esta experiencia personal colocaría mi acercamiento crítico a los valores caribeños, no más allá de mi propia cultura, sino más bien “entre” dos culturas. Me refiero a que, en mi intento de adaptarme a un nuevo entorno, estimé necesario deshacerme la idea de que la cuestión cultural es una experiencia dual de típicos enfrentamientos binarios entre ‘aquí’ y ‘allí,’ el ‘ser’ y el ‘otro,’ y ‘negro’ y blanco.’ Es posible que parezca una tarea de difícil ejecución, tanto más teniendo en cuenta los enfoques tradicionales para resolver cuestiones de identidad cultural en el mundo moderno; pero el hecho es que a mí me parecía el método más natural, y desde luego el más apropiado para la supervivencia, teniendo en cuenta las perspectivas darwinistas de cooperación para adaptarse al cambio. En palabras de Bhabha, lo que me impulsaba a hacer realidad mi proyecto era “la necesidad de pensar más allá de las narrativas sobre subjetividades iniciales y originarias para centrarme en aquellos momentos o procesos que tienen lugar en la articulación de las diferencias culturales” (*Location 1*).¹²⁷ Como ya he observado al inicio del presente resumen, esta elección no surgió de la nada, sino que fue el resultado de un complejo y reposado proceso que despertaría mi conciencia sobre la trascendencia de las diferencias culturales. He de mencionar aquí un pasaje muy clarificador del escritor y activista político keniano Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, que en su obra *Decolonising the Mind (Descolonizar la mente)*¹²⁸ sostiene que la perspectiva

¹²⁷ Salvo que indique lo contrario, todas las citas y títulos en español aquí indicados son traducciones mías.

¹²⁸ Esta obra cuyo título completo es *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, ha sido traducida por la profesora española, experta en teorías postcoloniales africanas Marta Sofía López Rodríguez, bajo el título *Descolonizar la mente: La política lingüística de la literatura africana*.



desde la que entendemos la realidad depende de “nuestro posicionamiento en relación al imperialismo tanto en su etapa colonial como en la neocolonial,” y que “tenemos que mirar con frialdad y conciencia a lo que el imperialismo ha estado obrando sobre nosotros y nuestra visión de nosotros mismos en el universo” (88). Estos argumentos hacen referencia a la conciencia cultural de África—y en concreto de Kenia—pero también resultan apropiadas para definir mi condición de crítica europea que, en su “búsqueda de pertinencia y de una perspectiva correcta” para la formación identitaria de la mujer negra, se ha mostrado sensible ante las múltiples experiencias e intercambios con las personas que están implicadas y que viven “dentro del contexto de la lucha general contra el imperialismo” (88).

Además, mi estancia en Salvador de Bahía entre enero y marzo de 2008 también me permitió ampliar mi conocimiento sobre Capoeira, que es un arte de resistencia con características corporales y espirituales de origen africano y que se desarrolló en Brasil entre grupos de esclavos fugitivos, y el cual he estado practicando desde el 2003 hasta la fecha. Mi interacción directa y diaria con el pueblo bahiano, muy profundamente arraigado a la historia de la diáspora Africana, propició un escenario adecuado para percibir los gozos y limitaciones propios de una exposición directa a otras realidades socioculturales. Tengo consciencia de cómo mis experiencias en Brasil y en el Caribe me han dotado de nuevas y muy valiosas herramientas para estudiar la genealogía de los prejuicios culturales y la construcción de la identidad. Retomando la anterior cita de Ngũgĩ, abrí los ojos ante lo que el imperialismo ha estado haciendo a los pueblos colonizados, pero también, tomé consciencia sobre lo que el imperialismo ha influido en mí y en mis compatriotas europeos. Esta experiencia a la deriva entre la vieja Europa y el Nuevo Mundo encarna lo que me atrevería a llamar una particular travesía del Atlántico, similar a la que hicieron los esclavos de antaño, pero evidentemente mucho menos trágica. En fin, una experiencia de desarraigo y alienación que se me antoja comparar, a menor escala, con la diáspora africana. Como quiera que se llame, creo que los procesos de globalización—consecuencia, al fin y al cabo, de la colonización—me permitieron conseguir un trabajo en Barbados como emigrante y de alguna manera desarrollar un papel activo en la reconstrucciones de identidad que muchas personas llevan a cabo como resultado del desplazamiento y de las relaciones intersubjetivas.

Como experiencia estética, cuando viví en Barbados no sólo pude apreciar el eterno clima cálido, las aguas turquesas y los flamboyanes en flor tan característicos de la vida en el Caribe, sino también una gran variedad de actividades a las que



generalmente acuden los barbadienses. Estas actividades permiten a los individuos expresarse de manera creativa y autónoma tanto a nivel verbal como no verbal. Al principio sin duda me chocaban ciertas manifestaciones de la cultura popular barbadiense, como los movimientos sicalípticos de baile que todos, hombres y mujeres, llevan a cabo sin ningún tipo de trabas en cualquiera de los lugares donde suena este tipo de música. También es muy común asistir a sesiones de micro abierto. En estas reuniones los poetas locales y cantantes se inscriben para salir al escenario y compartir sus voces, así como un lenguaje corporal fresco, desinhibido y libre de los corsés a los que nos hemos adaptado los occidentales. Mi interés por la poesía caribeña fue intensificándose gracias a estas actividades de poesía oral. Fue al escuchar el poema de Opal Palmer Adisa “The Tongue is a Drum” (“La lengua es un tambor”)¹²⁹ cuando me enamoré de su obra, que más adelante me conduciría a varios descubrimientos y placeres.

En relación con lo que escribiría Ngũgĩ en su ensayo “Towards a National Culture,” (“Hacia una cultura nacional”) incluido en *Homecoming (Volver a casa)*, puedo afirmar que, desde mi experiencia como europea, donde la cultura se considera una actividad intelectual del individuo, lo que más me fascinó fue el carácter compartido de la cultura caribeña, que está directamente relacionada con el concepto africano del arte como servicio a la comunidad. Así es como pude observar que el significado del folclore caribeño residía en su funcionalidad integradora; en palabras de Ngũgĩ “la canción, el baile y la música eran parte integral de la batalla de una comunidad con su entorno, parte indisoluble de las necesidades y aspiraciones del hombre de a pie” (6). De acuerdo con el pensamiento de este autor, la cultura es un modo de vida que surge de la acción diaria de una comunidad que se adapta a su entorno. De hecho yo me adapté fácilmente al entorno a través de las actividades culturales, y en ese proceso, acabé descartando ciertos valores y creencias occidentales que allí no servían. Buscando una cultura diferente, me descubrí a mí misma. He ahí la epifanía: si quería conocer al otro, tenía que retar el concepto que tenía de mí personalidad y crear una identidad adecuada con la ayuda de mis vecinos.

Cuando 2009 empecé el programa de Máster de Literatura y Lingüística Inglesa en la Universidad de Granada, tenía muchas ganas de investigar sobre la

¹²⁹Este poema está incluido en el CD *The Tongue is a Drum* (2002), una grabación de jazz y poesía protagonizada conjuntamente por Opal Palmer Adisa y la aclamada poeta devorah major, que actúan bajo el nombre artístico de ‘Daughters of Yam.’ En mi blog del mismo título, del que hablo más adelante, se puede leer el original y mi traducción de este poema: www.sellingshells.wordpress.com/category/poesia-protesta/ (Última visita, 27 Mayo, 2017)



producción literaria del Caribe anglosajón, ya que durante mis viajes se había despertado en mí una intensa curiosidad hacia este campo de estudio. Me inscribí en el curso “Postcolonial Narrative” (“Narrativa postcolonial”) impartido por la doctora Celia Wallhead, y fue entonces cuando entendí la importancia de los estudios postcoloniales a la hora de estudiar literatura caribeña. Gracias a este curso pude entender un nuevo e interesante significado de modernidad y de las realidades del presente mundo globalizado. Fue entonces, a la edad de 29 años, cuando por primera vez recibí una educación seria y epistemológica sobre la historia del colonialismo. En mis años de instituto, claro está, no no tuve la suerte de recibir nociones equilibradas y consensuadas sobre esta parte tan importante de la historia. Más bien, simplemente se me instruyó para que supiera a grandes rasgos que Cristobal Colón descubrió América y que, desde ese momento, España se convirtió en un gran imperio. Nada me habían contado entonces sobre la aniquilación masiva de los pueblos indígenas y sus culturas, o sobre el trauma de la violenta travesía del Atlántico por parte de los africanos y los años posteriores de esclavitud en el Nuevo Mundo.

Años después, durante mis años de carrera en el departamento de Inglés de la Universidad de Granada (2001-2005), pude aprender sobre literatura británica y americana, e incluso tener algunas nociones sobre literatura sureña (es decir, la de los estados sureños de EEUU). De hecho, por entonces había un incipiente número de cursos de grado que ofrecían la posibilidad de aprender sobre literaturas postcoloniales y de minorías, incluyendo algunas literaturas de África y su diáspora. Esto significa que existían profesores investigando sobre el tema. Así pues, se estaba empezando a extender la literatura postcolonial dentro de los cursos de grado. Me consta que el ya fallecido Dr. Manuel Villar Raso dedicó gran parte de su vida a rescatar las historias silenciadas de África en la península ibérica. También fue un experto en literatura chicana, junto a la Dra. Rosa Morillas. Por otro lado, la Dra. Morillas y el Dr. Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde solían enseñar sobre literaturas minoritarias de Norteamérica a nivel de grado, y me consta que siguen haciéndolo. Gracias a profesores como éstos, las literaturas postcoloniales han ido ganando terreno dentro del departamento de Filología Inglesa de la Universidad de Granada. A día de hoy, por ejemplo, la Dra. Morillas trabaja junto con el Dr. Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas enseñando los cursos de grado “Introducción a las literaturas de minorías en lengua inglesa” y “Análisis de Textos Literarios Norteamericanos,” en los cuales abarcan el estudio de autores tan relevantes como Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker o Junot Díaz. También el Dr. Aguilera Linde ha estado investigando



más recientemente sobre literaturas en lengua inglesa de la India, mientras que la Dra. Pilar Villar-Argáiz ha contribuido de manera significativa a dar mayor visibilidad a los estudios irlandeses postcoloniales dentro del departamento. A fecha de hoy, ambos profesores imparten cursos en sus respectivas materias de especialización. En mi opinión ha quedado demostrado que, a lo largo de los últimos años, la situación de las literaturas periféricas de la Commonwealth ha evolucionado positivamente dentro del departamento. Principalmente gracias al arduo trabajo de los académicos arriba mencionados—from the most senior scholars, such as Dr. Wallhead to the emergent ones, such as Dr. Villar-Argáiz and Dr. Rodríguez-Salas—las literaturas periféricas de la Commonwealth dentro del departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana de la Universidad de Granada se ha convertido en un campo de estudios cada vez más dinámico. Al investigar sobre literaturas postcoloniales caribeñas, un campo que no ha sido explorado a fondo en mi entorno académico, tengo la esperanza de estar contribuyendo al credimiento de los estudios postcoloniales que se realizan dentro del departamento.

También me gustaría que mi trabajo contribuyera a expandir la tradición de los estudios literarios postcoloniales que se llevan un tiempo desarrollándose en el ámbito de los departamentos de filología inglesa de las universidades españolas. Me gustaría mencionar aquí el trabajo de algunas de las académicas pioneras dentro del contexto académico español, tales como la Dra. Paloma Fresno Calleja, de la Universidad de las Islas Baleares, cuyo trabajo se centra principalmente en las literaturas del Pacífico y en las identidades multiculturales; la Dra. Marta Sofía López Rodríguez, de la Universidad de León, cuya experiencia en teoría postcolonial desde la perspectiva de los estudios literarios africanos constituye un hito en la escena nacional; y la Dra. Belén Martín Lucas, cuyos estudios se centran en las literaturas postcoloniales canadienses y las teorías sobre globalización cultural.

Cuando me involucré en los cursos de Máster, no era del todo consciente de que yo era una ciudadana europea privilegiada que, tras la licenciatura de Inglés, unos cuantos años de experiencia en la enseñanza internacional, y todos los viajes que hubiera podido permitirse, decidió regresar a la universidad en su tierra natal. Como ya había decidido que quería indagar más sobre la obra de Opal Palmer Adisa, y que necesitaba concentrarme en temas feministas y postcoloniales—aunque para entonces no estaba familiarizada con este último término—intenté ceñirme a las asignaturas que más se acercaran a mis intereses. A parte de las intensas clases de narrativa postcolonial con la Dra. Wallhead, quien también me dio a conocer el



trabajo de la escritora caribeño-americana Paule Marshall, la mayoría de los otros cursos resultaron ser bastante apropiados: me deleité en las clases de la Dra. Encarnación Hidalgo Tenorio aprendiendo a pensar de manera crítica sobre género y lenguaje, ya que la citada profesora es una maestra motivando a sus alumnos a leer entre líneas. El Dr. Aguilera Linde fue muy esclarecedor a la hora de mostrar el pensamiento postmodernista en América. En especial disfruté con su acercamiento a la teoría cultural marxista. Con el Dr. Rodríguez-Salas aprendí a fondo las relaciones entre las teorías postcoloniales y de género. Sus dinámicas explicaciones sobre el concepto de ‘mimetismo’ como práctica literaria subversiva resultó un descubrimiento clave para mí. Finalmente, el Dr. Julián Jiménez Heffernan ofreció un interesante marco político-filosófico de la Inglaterra de los siglos XVII y XVIII. Captaron mi atención principalmente las cuestiones sobre la naturaleza del poder planteadas por Locke y Hobbes, y la lectura crítica de *Robinson Crusoe*. Aunque también recibí otros interesantes cursos durante el Máster, he mencionado tan solo aquellos cuyos contenidos me resultaron especialmente útiles para mi posterior Trabajo Fin de Máster (TFM). En relación a mi experiencia en temas de género, la Dra. Adelina Sánchez-Espinosa, que fue mi profesora de estudios de género y cine durante el Máster, me dio la oportunidad de trabajar en la coordinación del Máster Erasmus Mundus en Estudios de la Mujeres y de Género GEMMA, que ella coordina desde la Universidad de Granada. Durante el último trimestre del año 2010 y todo el curso académico 2010/2011 en que trabajé allí, tuve la oportunidad de adquirir y desarrollar algunas habilidades administrativas dentro de un ambiente académico. Además, organicé algunas actividades académicas. Por ejemplo, participé activamente en la organización del Foro para Jóvenes Investigadores “Voces del GEMMA: Intercambiando Experiencias de Investigación en Estudios de las Mujeres y del Género en un Contexto Transnacional,” que tuvo lugar en Granada el 18 de Octubre de 2010. Este y otros encuentros me proporcionaron la oportunidad de conocer a investigadoras de alta calidad, así como estudiar y debatir sobre temas de género, lo cual dilató mi conocimiento sobre este estimulante campo de estudios.

En aquel momento no estaba matriculada en la asignatura de Pilar Villar-Argáiz titulada “Women and Literature in Ireland,” pues no tenía conocimiento de que la literatura irlandesa también era postcolonial—de hecho no sabía muy bien de qué trataba el postcolonialismo. Pero el destino quiso que la Dra. Villar-Argáiz, especialista en estudios postcoloniales, irlandeses y de género, acabara siendo la tutora de mi TFM primero, y más adelante para la presente tesis doctoral. Puedo afirmar ahora que tuve la mejor de las suertes al cruzarme con ella en mi camino



académico. Mi TFM, titulado *From the Womb to the Word: Postcolonialism and Black Feminism in the Caribbean Poetry of Opal Palmer Adisa* (*Del Útero a la Palabra: Postcolonialismo y Feminismo Negro en la Poesía Caribeña de Opal Palmer Adisa*), prepararía el terreno para realizar mi tesis doctoral. Debo confesar que la cantidad de lecturas que llevé a cabo para adquirir más nociones sobre el contexto postcolonial y, más en concreto sobre el contexto caribeño, me dejaría en un estado de mutismo por más tiempo del que hubiera esperado. La cantidad de terminología teórica y la variedad de autores existentes para abordar el campo de los estudios Caribeños y feministas resultaron abrumadoras. Una mezcla de temor y timidez generada por mi desconocimiento del medio y por no crearme capaz de expresar pensamientos con mis propias palabras, con el tono académico necesario, y en una lengua extranjera, me mantuvo dudando durante algún tiempo. Siempre me ha sorprendido la capacidad de la Dra. Villar-Argáiz para esperar que mis palabras surgieran. Si finalmente he logrado hacer lo que en principio me parecía una hazaña hercúlea, ha sido gracias a su habilidad para encarrilar mi trabajo de investigación, y por su apoyo y confianza constantes.

A lo largo de los años, estuve dudando sobre qué hacer con mi TFM. Tras haberme puesto en contacto con Opal Palmer Adisa, tuve la fortuna de que accediera a visitarme en Granada durante un viaje por Europa. Junto con el grupo de música ‘Bembé Batucada’¹³⁰ del que yo formaba parte entonces, Adisa ofreció una vibrante actuación en el centro cultural y hotel rural La Casa con Libros de La Zubia, Granada. También traduje al español todos los poemas que la autora había escogido para la ocasión, que fueron proyectados simultáneamente. Al día siguiente, Adisa dió un curso de escritura creativa erótica en la biblioteca de La Casa con Libros, en el cual serví de intérprete. Fue entonces cuando tuve mi primera entrevista seria con ella. Debo confesar que, a pesar de que conocía y amaba su cultura, y aunque ya había leído la mayor parte de su obra, todavía me sentía una intrusa en materia de estudios caribeños, y con poco conocimiento legítimo para hablar del tema con una autoridad como Adisa. De hecho, me venían a la cabeza pensamientos del tipo “No puede ser que yo enseñe literatura de escritoras negras—su experiencia es tan

¹³⁰ ‘Bembé Batucada’ es una banda de percusión, parte de un proyecto social iniciado por un grupo de mujeres estudiantes de la Universidad de Granada. La banda, gracias al apoyo de la Consejería de Igualdad, se creó en enero de 2010, como respuesta al hecho de que la escena musical granadina está dominada por los hombres, y como tal, no favorece la participación activa y autónoma entre la población femenina. Creíamos pues, que era necesario un espacio donde las mujeres pudieran desarrollar su creatividad y tomar decisiones sin tener que consentir con las condiciones impuestas por los hombres del grupo, proporcionando así una experiencia diferente. Para más información, visiten el sitio internet www.myspace.com/bembebatucada (Última visita: 27 Mayo, 2017).



diferente a la mía,” palabras que tomo prestadas de Lorde (*Sister* 43). Pero la verdad es que, por aquel entonces ni siquiera había leído a Audre Lorde, y tampoco había pensado en las respuestas de Lorde a dichas preguntas, las cuales más adelante me ayudarían a trabajar mis sentimientos de diferencia. En su ensayo titulado “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (“La transformación del silencio en lenguaje y acción”). Lorde sostiene que se nos han impuesto tales “farsas y separaciones” sin ni tan siquiera cuestionar su legitimidad. En cambio, prosigue, “¿cuántos años has estado enseñando a Platón y a Shakespeare y a Proust?” Lorde afirma que lo que nos inmoviliza no es la diferencia, sino el silencio, “y hay tantos silencios por romper” (*Sister* 43). Por tanto, a pesar de los sentimientos de diferencia que me hacían sentir pequeña y desautorizada, Adisa me ayudó a romper el silencio. Por suerte para mí, acababa de conocer a una persona muy empática, y una excelente conversadora. Sus respuestas alentaron más preguntas, hasta el punto que todo aquello sobre lo que había estado dudando finalmente cobró sentido. Esta conversación, que está adjunta en la sección de Anexos, fue finalmente publicada en *Atlantis*, la prestigiosa revista de la Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Americanos. Conocer a Adisa y presenciar el efecto que ejerce su obra ante un público español marcó un momento decisivo en mi camino hacia la realización del TFM, ya que comprendí la importancia de incluir las voces caribeñas en el contexto de España. Finalmente defendí mi tesis de Máster en Septiembre de 2012, la cual fue recibida favorablemente por el comité examinador, recibiendo una generosa calificación.

Tras este primer encuentro, Adisa y yo hemos continuado trabajando. Además de su solícita disponibilidad para responder por correo electrónico cualquier duda sobre su trabajo o sobre la cultura y el inglés de Jamaica (el lenguaje-nación, según Brathwaite) también ha mostrado interés en mi proyecto para hacer que su obra se conozca en España. Al cabo de un tiempo creé un blog en versión bilingüe donde, de manera regular, comparto una parte de mis traducciones al español de su obra, así como algunas noticias relacionadas con la misma.¹³¹ Hasta el momento han sido publicados dos poemas inéditos suyos en las colecciones impresas *III Espiral*

¹³¹ ‘Bembé Batucada’ es una banda de percusión, parte de un proyecto social iniciado por un grupo de mujeres estudiantes de la Universidad de Granada. La banda, gracias al apoyo de la Consejería de Igualdad, se creó en enero de 2010, como respuesta al hecho de que la escena musical granadina está dominada por los hombres, y como tal, no favorece la participación activa y autónoma entre la población femenina. Creíamos pues, que era necesario un espacio donde las mujeres pudieran desarrollar su creatividad y tomar decisiones sin tener que consentir las condiciones impuestas por los hombres del grupo, proporcionando así una experiencia diferente. Para más información, visiten el sitio internet www.myspace.com/bembibatucada (Last accessed May 27, 2017).



Poética (2013) y *IV Espiral Poética* (2015), dentro del marco del proyecto compartido *Espirales Poéticas por el Mundo*, en el cual he participado activamente desde el 2012 como poeta y traductora. Este proyecto reúne cada dos años a un gran número de poetas españoles y extranjeros con el objetivo de realizar lecturas poéticas en diferentes puntos de la geografía española situados en plena naturaleza.¹³² La IV edición del proyecto Espiral tuvo lugar en Noviembre de 2015 en Lanzarote. Como colaboradora del comité organizador, me encargué de la bolsa de viaje de Adisa. Para esta ocasión, Adisa—que además de escritora es profesora en el California College of the Arts and Crafts (CCAC), preparó una conferencia bajo el título “Poetas caribeñas: El lenguaje de la identidad,” para el cual realicé la presentación, la traducción de los poemas de varias poetas caribeñas sobre las que Adisa hablaría—como Grace Nichols y Lorna Goodison—y la interpretación simultánea. Adisa y yo presentamos para la ocasión una edición limitada de libritos, en los que incluimos una selección de sus poemas en versión bilingüe, titulada *Poemas Escogidos / Selected Poems*, que tuvo gran aceptación tras una memorable lectura. También, tuve la oportunidad de tener una entrevista cara a cara con Adisa, que fue publicada en el sitio internet www.reggae.es.¹³³

Durante mi tercer año como estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad de Granada, recibí una beca dentro del marco del Programa de Movilidad Internacional de Estudiantes de Doctorado, convocado por la Universidad de Granada y CEI Biotic, en el marco del cual pude pasar tres meses en la University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, en Kingston, Jamaica, de abril a junio de 2015. Durante este periodo de investigación, la Dra. Carolyn Cooper aceptó amablemente la propuesta para ser mi supervisora, me recibió cálidamente y pudo organizar algo de tiempo en su apretada agenda para escuchar mis múltiples preguntas y dudas sobre mi plan de trabajo. Por otro lado, el Dr. Michael Bucknor, que por entonces era el director del

¹³² Durante el año que precede a cada encuentro, cada poeta recibe una palabra, que es la última palabra del poema escrito por otro anteriormente. Cada poema debe empezar con la última palabra del poema anterior; a su vez, la última palabra de este poema será la primera del siguiente. Después, los poemas se publican en este mismo orden, y se leen durante el encuentro. Para la lectura, los poetas se colocan en forma de espiral, siguiendo el orden de las palabras que recibieron. Se puede encontrar más información sobre el proyecto Espiral en el blog de Espiral Poética en www.espiralpoetica.blogspot.com.es/search/label/IV%20ESPIRAL%20PO%20C3%89TICA%20POR%20EL%20MUNDO (Última visita: 27 Mayo, 2017).

¹³³ Reggae.es es una página web creada por la “Asociación Cultural Reggae” (España), que está especializada en música jamaicana. En esta entrevista, Adisa habla sobre género y descolonización dentro del contexto musical jamaicano. Fue publicada el 27 de Noviembre de 2015. www.reggae.es/2015/11/27/la-poeta-jamaicana-opal-palmer-adisa-nos-habla-de-connotaciones-colonialistas-y-patriarcales-en-el-pais-del-reggae/ (Last accessed May 27, 2017). I have also included this interview in the annexes section.



Departamento de Inglés, me recibió con amabilidad en varias ocasiones que, a la postre, resultaron muy fructíferas, y me orientó para establecer una metodología y cuadro teórico apropiados. Estoy particularmente agradecida por sus sugerencias para explorar las perspectivas recientes en el terreno de las ‘intimididades postcoloniales,’ un término que me resultó totalmente novedoso y que acabaría por determinar una parte importante de mi tesis. La Dra. Anthea Morrison fue muy generosa al conseguirme un espacio para presentar un seminario dentro del programa de seminarios de postgrado (Staff/Postgraduate Seminar Series) que ella misma organizaba en el Departamento de Inglés. En esta ocasión recibí comentarios muy valiosos de otros profesores, como la Dra. Elizabeth (Betty) Wilson.

Mi asistencia a otros seminarios también me permitió conocer a otros estudiantes de doctorado, con los que pude conversar sobre literatura postcolonial. Además, también asistí a presentaciones de libros en el Departamento de Inglés, como el de Erna Brodber *Nothing's Mat*, que tuvo lugar el 9 de junio de 2015. Por otro lado, en la UWI asistí a la Conferencia del Instituto Confucio 2015, que se celebró entre el 17 y el 21 de Junio de 2015.¹³⁴ Fuera de la universidad asistí a las actuaciones poéticas organizadas por la Sociedad de Poesía de Jamaica (Poetry Society of Jamaica)—que se celebran el primer martes de cada mes en el Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts—donde me familiaricé con las voces de poetas jamaicanos emergentes, como KTO (Kerione The Poet); y otros poetas más consolidados como Mbala y Cherry Natural. Junto con Cataveiro Capoeira Jamaica, el grupo de Capoeira con el que entrenaba allí, participé en la VII Conferencia Anual de Cimarrones (7th Annual International Maroon Conference), sobre cimarrones y pueblos indígenas, celebrada en Charles Town, Portland, Jamaica, del 20 al 23 de junio de 2015, donde tuve la oportunidad de conocer al ya fallecido Colonel Lumsden, que entonces era el líder del asentamiento de los cimarrones de Charles Town (ver capítulo 4.2), y el renombrado poeta dub Rastafari Mutabaruka. A día de hoy, tengo la seguridad de que mi estancia en Jamaica estuvo repleta de experiencias culturales enriquecedoras que ampliarían mi conocimiento, respeto y amor por la cultura de la gente de esta isla.

El contexto literario caribeño

En el periodo posterior a la conquista de las independencias nacionales del Caribe, hubo un renacimiento de las expresiones culturales Afro-Caribeñas que fue decisivo

¹³⁴ Más información en: www.mona.uwi.edu/modlang/confucius-institute-conference-2015 (Last accessed on May 29, 2017).



en la formación de un sentimiento de pertenencia e identidad. La conferencia de la asociación para los estudios de la lengua y la literatura de la Commonwealth (Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, ACLALS) celebrada en 1971 en la University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, supuso un hito en la literatura postcolonial del Caribe anglosajón, ya que vino a significar una presentación formal de los escritores caribeños a su público local. Este acontecimiento hizo de la escritura un movimiento social, dado que tanto los escritores como los lectores tenían un papel activo y comprometido en la formación de una tradición literaria propia (Breiner, *Introduction* 4-5). Con el apoyo de un público local, como indica Breiner, los escritores contaban con la confianza necesaria para desarrollar su lenguaje regional característico y sacarle provecho a su propia cultura. Una característica de relevancia extrema en la cultura popular caribeña es la reproducción oral, la cual según Breiner, no surge de la influencia del teatro, sino más bien del hecho de que los recursos para publicar dentro del territorio son muy limitados. Como consecuencia de lo que podría parecer una traba, la poesía oral resulta para los poetas caribeños una manera efectiva de alcanzar al público. Sin ir más lejos, una de las reivindicaciones de la conferencia ACLALS fue la necesidad de reconocer la cultura popular, diferenciándola de la alta cultura. Así se marca el comienzo de un reconocimiento literario de las influencias africanas latentes en la producción cultural, como es el caso de la música calypso.¹³⁵ De este modo, lo que Kamau Brathwaite llama la “pequeña tradición,” o la cultura popular, ganaría con el paso del tiempo el estatus de “gran tradición” o alta cultura (Breiner *Introduction* 10).

Con la glorificación de la “pequeña tradición,” existe la posibilidad de que la gente de a pie desarrolle un papel importante en la definición de identidad nacional, ya que se convierte en el tema mismo de los poemas, y también en la principal productora y consumidora de poesía. Breiner nos recuerda cómo esta tendencia ha sido un elemento recurrente tanto del nacionalismo cultural entre los románticos europeos, como de los escritores nacionalistas del Caribe (11). Con el fin de poder canonizar ciertas prácticas populares, era necesario ampliar la

¹³⁵ En *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry*, Christian Habekost explica que el calypso es una forma musical caribeña que se originó en Trinidad y Tobago y que se caracteriza por la presencia de ritmos africanos fusionados con ritmos europeos (37-38). Habekost sostiene que el calypso surgió de la censura y el conflicto social propios de la historia colonial y que, como tal, ha sobrevivido como un elemento de resistencia contra la autoridad. La canción del maestro del calypso Mighty Sparrow “Dan is the man in the van” (1958) representó, según Brathwaite, “un cambio fundamental en la conciencia,” ya que incluía la típica estructura africana de “pregunta y respuesta” creando así una conexión entre el poeta y su audiencia. (“History” 279-80).



definición de poesía; de manera que, apropiarse de las formas orales tradicionales y de los ritmos musicales del patrimonio africano era algo muy común entre los poetas caribeños, que desarrollaban así “estrategias criollas de adaptación” (10-12). De hecho la conferencia ACLALS sembró el terreno para la creación de sociedades literarias, revistas y antologías en todo el Caribe anglosajón, como *Breaklight* y *Savacou* (9). Con la misma finalidad, se empezaron a celebrar una serie de festivales culturales, como el *Carifesta*, para celebrar las artes creativas y escénicas del Caribe, generando así “una conciencia literaria pancaribeña” (Brown and McWatt xxxii).

Los escritores del Caribe anglosajón, en su empeño por encontrar unos valores culturales distintivos que validaran su patrimonio africano, se centraron en la legitimización de sus lenguas criollas. En su discurso “History of the Voice” (“Historia de la voz”) (1979/1981), que fue transcrito de una charla que dio en 1979, e incluido en su colección *Roots*, Brathwaite insiste en el papel que la lengua inglesa tiene en el Caribe, pero no se refiere al inglés estándar importado, sino al de “la experiencia y sensibilidad sumergida y surrealista, que siempre ha estado ahí” y que está “influyendo la forma en que se percibe al pueblo caribeño contemporáneo” (266). Brathwaite acuña el uso caribeño del inglés con el nombre de ‘lenguaje-nación,’ término que decide utilizar para diferenciarlo de la designación de ‘dialecto,’ la cual, en opinión del autor de Barbados, tiene connotaciones peyorativas de inferioridad. Así lo explica:

El dialecto tiene una larga historia que viene de la plantación donde la dignidad de la gente era distorsionada a través de sus lenguas y de las descripciones que el dialecto hacía de ellos. El lenguaje-nación, por otro lado, es la parte sumergida de este dialecto que está íntimamente relacionada con el aspecto africano de la experiencia caribeña. Puede que sea en inglés, pero a menudo es en un inglés que es como un aullido, o un grito, o una pistola, o el viento, o una ola. Es también como el blues. Y a veces es inglés y africano al mismo tiempo. (266)

[cacho 9]

Así pues el lenguaje-nación es el lenguaje de los pueblos que fueron importados al Caribe desde la costa oeste de África. Brathwaite informa que, con la llegada de estos pueblos africanos, que serían esclavos, trabajadores y siervos en el Nuevo Mundo, también llegaron muchas lenguas africanas con una forma semántica y estilística similar (260-261). Brathwaite observa que aunque estos lenguajes se



parecen al inglés “en función de [su] léxico;” no son inglés “en función de [su] sintáxis.” Como concluye el mismo: “Desde luego que no es inglés por lo que respecta a su ritmo y a su timbre, su propia explosión sonora” (“History” 266). De hecho, el mismo ensayo de Brathwaite refleja su elección para dejar rastros del ‘lenguaje-nación’ en la transcripción de su charla, enfatizando así la sintaxis y los aspectos rítmicos de su lengua materna. En el capítulo 1 de la presente tesis, ofrezco un estudio detallado sobre el uso y el funcionamiento de término ‘nation-language.’

En su artículo “ ‘Woman is a Nation... ‘ Women in Caribbean Oral Literature” (1994), Carole Boyce Davies examina la representación de las mujeres en la cultura popular caribeña, desvelando así los mecanismos a través de los cuales se denigra a la mujer. Boyce Davies sostiene que, en la lucha contra la supremacía imperialista, los líderes negros desplazaron a los señores coloniales para situarse ellos mismos en una posición masculina de dominancia (186); esto se puede aplicar a los movimientos culturales de las independencias en el Caribe. A continuación ofrezco una breve reseña de los poetas más importantes en la construcción de las literaturas nacionales del Caribe. En 1912, el poeta de origen jamaicano Claude McKay publicó dos volúmenes de poesía titulados *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. McKay fue el primer poeta del Caribe que escribió en el dialecto de Jamaica. En “History of the Voice,” Brathwaite insiste en que se llame dialecto y no lenguaje-nación, ya que McKay todavía estaba escribiendo dentro de las estructuras del pentámetro (275). No obstante, es significativo mencionar a este autor, ya que, tras emigrar a los Estados Unidos, se convirtió en un líder de lo que más tarde se conocería como el Renacimiento de Harlem, el movimiento negro de auto-conocimiento que emergió en el periodo de entreguerras (Brathwaite “History” 274). El hecho de que la generación del mundo moderno encontrara cierto exotismo en Harlem permitió a la América negra descubrir su esencia africana y propagarla por el mundo (Breiner Introduction 26). Ciertamente, McKay llegó a los poetas de la *Négritude*¹³⁶ en Haití y París, los cuales hicieron su obra popular en el Caribe (62).

Otro poeta que ha contribuido de manera significativa al engrandecimiento de la literatura caribeña es el Premio Nobel de Literatura Derek Walcott, de St. Lucia, recientemente fallecido. Walcott era consciente de la importancia de la tradición oral en el Caribe, e hizo una importante labor por la cultura caribeña con su

¹³⁶ ‘Négritude’ es el término usado por Aimé Césaire y Leopold Senghor para describir los primeros intentos de crear una teoría consistente de escritura y estética Africana. Muchos de los supuestos del movimiento de la *Négritude*, surgidos tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial en París, serían luego incorporados a los movimientos del Black Power en América y el Caribe (Aschcroft et al., *Empire* 20-3, 47, 123-4).



taller de teatro de Trinidad, el cual—como indica Adisa en la primera entrevista que me concedió (Adisa con Serna-Martínez “Conversation” 215)—le hizo más popular que su propia poesía en todo el caribe anglosajón. En su poema épico *Omeros* (1990), claramente influenciado por la estética clásica, Walcott consigue desvincularse del pentámetro victoriano.¹³⁷ Sin embargo, esta forma métrica, sostiene Pérez Fernández, recuerda vagamente a la *terza rima* de Dante. En ella reduce el número de sílabas a doce, a veces más, para poder recrear “la idea de recurrencia del ritmo del mar” (Martínez-Dueñas and Pérez Fernández 53-79). A pesar de esta representación personal y creativa del ritmo, el punto de partida son los convencionalismos europeos los cuales, estéticamente hablando, posicionan su poesía más cerca de los modelos de la tradición occidental que de los de África.

Kamau Brathwaite, al que se representa tradicionalmente en términos opuestos a Walcott,¹³⁸ se distingue entre sus contemporáneos por su lúcida concepción de África como una tradición literaria. Otra de las razones por las que es conocido es por sus teorías sobre el lenguaje-nación, al que considera un componente esencial así como un medio indiscutible para la poesía (Breiner *Introduction* 143). Las percepciones de “internacionalización/localización”¹³⁹ de Brathwaite—se traducen como una intensa “experiencia vital” y de producción escrita “caracterizados por una voluntad de moverse en direcciones divergentes y creativas” (Brathwaite *Development* ix). Este autor ha escrito ampliamente sobre temas caribeños con voz singular y tono aseverativo, adaptando tanto las formas de crítica literaria o investigación histórica como de poesía. Su inclinación hacia la experimentación rítmica y con el jazz, así como su alabanza del lenguaje vernacular caribeño son las características más visibles de su poesía. En *The Arrivants* (*Los Inmigrados*) (1973), su primera trilogía, establece una identidad caribeña distintiva, a base de incorporar elementos africanos y el uso del lenguaje-nación. La segunda trilogía de Brathwaite—que contiene *Mother Poem* (*Poema Madre*) (1977), *Sun*

¹³⁷ En estos temas, ver entrevista con Pérez Fernández en *Approaches to the Poetics of Derek Walcott* (Martínez-Dueñas and Pérez Fernández, 179-180).

¹³⁸ Sobre la dicotomía Walcott-Brathwaite, ver “Caliban’s New Masters: Creolizing Archetypes in Kamau Brathwaite’s *Arrivants* Trilogy” de John Thieme, en www.eastanglia.academia.edu/JohnThieme/Papers/1003388/Calibans_New_Masters_Creolizing_Archetypes_in_Kamau_Brathwaites_Arrivants_Triology (Último acceso: 11 de Mayo, 2017).

¹³⁹ Esta idea está en la misma base del concepto de criollización de Brathwaite. Básicamente significa que se deberían considerar las “raíces” no solo como un lugar de origen, sino también “como una reivindicación de pertenencia” a pesar del desarraigo experimentado en los procesos de dislocación. En concordancia con los argumentos de Brathwaite, Sheller sostiene que la criollización debe ser un proceso de “desarraigo/reconexión” con su consecuente entramado de “rutas” moviéndose en ambas direcciones, desde la tierra de origen y hacia otras tierras (Sheller *Creolization* 286).



Poem (Poema Sol) (1982), y *X/Self* (Ser/X) (1987), material clave de la literatura caribeña—está marcada por el uso de un ‘inglés’ al que llama “calibanización,” en referencia a una criollización “que entra en conflicto con la autoridad cultural imperial de Prospero” (Brathwaite *Mother Poem* 121 qtd. in Gabbard *Jazz* 83).

Según Breiner, las obras de Brathwaite y Walcott, que gozaron de gran reputación a mediados de los años sesenta, “galvanizaron a los poetas más jóvenes pero también tuvieron el efecto de hacer sombra a sus propios contemporáneos” (Breiner *Introduction* 68). Este podría ser el caso de Mervyn Morris, quien, junto a Louise Bennett, fue uno de los más arduos defensores del uso del lenguaje-nación en la poesía. Morris, Bennett y Brathwaite han ejercido una enorme influencia en el trabajo de Adisa por sus temas descolonizadores y su uso del lenguaje-nación en la literatura. De hecho, estos cuatro autores parecen tener una misión común: la necesaria proclamación del lenguaje-nación en la génesis de unos valores culturales caribeños.

Obviamente, hay muchos otros poetas que han contribuido a la mejora de las literaturas nacionales en el Caribe anglosajón, como el nacionalista jamaicano George Campbell o el más reciente Kendel Hyppolite de St. Lucia. También, respecto al tema de incluir características rítmicas del lenguaje-nación en la poesía, no se debe olvidar la inestimable contribución de los poetas dub jamaicanos de los años setenta Oku Onoura, Michael Smith, y Linton Kwesi Johnson (Brathwaite “History” 290). Sin embargo, tal y como explicaré en la siguiente sección, las precursoras indiscutibles de la oratura¹⁴⁰ caribeña son dos escritoras, Louise Bennett y Miss Queenie que han influido hondamente a la generación postcolonial de los poetas caribeños de tradición oral.

En el artículo arriba mencionado sobre la presencia de la mujer en la tradición popular del Caribe, Boyce Davies explora cómo las formas literarias orales caribeñas tales como el proverbio, el cuento popular y la canción calypso no pocas veces han retratado a la mujer como “una entidad malvada y despreciable” o incluso como un “personaje maleable, irreflexivo y sepultado” (“Woman” 165). Este trato que reciben las mujeres dentro de la tradición oral tiene un factor económico: cada vez que las mujeres intentan mejorar su estatus económico y social se torna una amenaza para la superioridad masculina, la cual a su vez tratará de “poner a las mujeres en su sitio” degradándolas a través de un lenguaje abusivo (185). De hecho, en la lucha por la independencia política, la tradición oral caribeña ha estado

¹⁴⁰ Este término viene a definir la literatura de tradición oral propia de los pueblos africanos. Para una explicación más amplia del término, ver el capítulo 1, página 82.



dominada por el hombre negro, ya que tanto los líderes políticos y las voces literarias han pasado a ser negros, pero siguen manteniendo una mayoría masculina (186). Esto pone en evidencia el hecho de que las voces de las mujeres se han quedado fuera de lo público. En *Out of the Kumbla*, Boyce Davies y Fido entienden la falta de voz como la ausencia de perspectivas femeninas en la historia, tanto sobre temas sociales y culturales como la esclavitud, el colonialismo, la descolonización y los derechos de las mujeres (1). Estas autoras hacen referencias, por un lado, a las observaciones de Audre Lorde en “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (“La transformación del silencio en lenguaje y acción”) sobre el hecho de que el silencio femenino ha estado íntimamente conectado al temor a la autoafirmación. Por otro lado, citan a la escritora Michelle Cliff, nacida en Jamaica, quien afirma las dificultades que encontró al tratar de expresarse de manera creativa en inglés (Boyce Davies y Fido 3). Para las escritoras caribeñas, la marginalización de sus voces conlleva, en primer lugar, la necesidad de encontrar un lenguaje privado propio, lo que acarrea el rechazo del texto falocéntrico. Por otro lado, también implica el renacimiento de una conciencia feminista/womanista donde la autoexpresión transgrede los límites de lo culturalmente convencional—como ocurre en la danza. De ahí que estas mujeres desarrollen y se apropien de la oralidad del cuento que en el fondo les ha pertenecido desde siempre, aunque sea solamente en el terreno de lo privado y lo familiar (4).

Según Breiner, Una Marson fue “la primera poeta de prestigio de la región.” Publicó cuatro libros de poesía en los años treinta, y también trabajó como editora, periodista y dramaturga dentro y fuera de la isla (64). Otra figura literaria importante es Louise Bennett. Bennett empezó a usar el dialecto en los años cuarenta. Según las palabras de Breiner, esta poeta “ha creado una obra poética *escrita* en jamaicano coloquial para su representación *oral*” (69; cursiva en el original). Algunas de sus obras más representativas son *Jamaica Labrish* (1966), *Anancy and Miss Lou* (1979) y *Aunty Rochoy Seh* (1993). Aunque ella no fue la primera poeta en incluir rasgos orales en su obra literaria, Bennett—muy influenciada por la tradición del mento¹⁴¹—también usaba el pentámetro iámbico en sus versos, aunque tenía la habilidad de “transformarlo con el sonido de su lenguaje” y sus “ritmos,” como se puede evidenciar en su poema “Dutty Tough” (Brathwaite “History” 285). Sin duda Bennett es una portentosa fuente de inspiración en la promoción de la dimensión

¹⁴¹Ver el artículo “Louise Bennet and the Mento Tradition:” “Antes de la llegada de Rhythm and blues americano en los años cincuenta, el mento era muy popular en Jamaica y se tocaba en bailes campestres (“brams”), en bodas y en otros tipos de encuentros” (Doumerc 23-24).



oral de la poesía del Caribe, especialmente en Jamaica, donde movimientos como el Rastafarianismo o los “poetas dub”—que son la cuna del reggae clásico y de gran parte de la música popular jamaicana—han sido reconocidos como fuerzas culturales importantes. La poesía interpretada de Bennett, que se ha grabado en numerosas ocasiones, supone una “inversión en los aspectos orales e interpretativos de la poesía,” y ha allanado el terreno para otros proyectos alternativos de publicación entre los poetas del Caribe anglosajón. Cabe destacar que esta griotte¹⁴² revolucionaria, la “embajadora de la cultura jamaicana,”¹⁴³ conocida cariñosamente como Miss Lou, consideraba en Jamaica simplemente como una actriz cómica, no recibió una atención seria “hasta después de la independencia” (Breiner 69). Fue entonces cuando su contribución cultural empezó a ser considerada como algo más que un “chiste local” (Morris “Reading” citado en Donnell *Routledge* 194-197).

Fue sin embargo otra poeta, Miss Queenie, la que llegaría a encarnar lo que Brathwaite llama “expresión total.” Según Brathwaite, para entender la complejidad de la tradición oral, es obligatorio percibir, no solo la “dinámica de la narración” y “las notas azules” de la voz de Miss Queenie, sino también todo su cuerpo interpretándolo (“History” 273 cursiva en el original). La unión de voz y cuerpo en la poesía de estas escritoras, como alude Brathwaite, parece ayudar a completar el significado y los propósitos del lenguaje-nación (Brathwaite “History” 298). De acuerdo a las palabras de DeCaires, la contribución de Miss Lou y Miss Queenie al concepto de nacionalidad sugiere “un tipo de exceso corporal o de fecundidad indomable” que resulta diferente a la “conciencia transformativa revolucionaria” de sus compañeros masculinos (DeCaires Narain, *Contemporary* 93).

Sin embargo, no fue hasta la independencia que las voces caribeñas femeninas se juntaron para un reconocimiento digno (Brown and McWatt xxx). En los años setenta surgiría un mayor interés por las escritoras caribeñas, y su obra se publicaría en revistas como *Savacou* 3 / 4 ‘New Writing’ (1970/1), y en una antología de poetas, *Guyana Drums* (1972). En los años ochenta, vio la luz otra publicación centrada en el género bajo el título: *Jamaica Woman: An Anthology of*

¹⁴²Los griots/griottes tradicionales del África Occidental son “artistas orales considerados los guardianes de la palabra.” Como tales, son los depositarios de la historia, la literatura y las artes. Gracias a su papel como conservadores culturales, hoy día se pueden documentar muchos pasajes históricos de la diáspora africana. Las expresiones artísticas orales de la diáspora africana, desde el calypso hasta la poesía del hip hop, están altamente influenciadas por la tradición griot. Ver entrada de la *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora, Origins, Experiences and Culture, Volume 1*, editada por Carole Boyce Davies (478).

¹⁴³Así es como Adisa llama a Bennett en “Love Letter to Miss Lou: Memories Intersect History” (“Carta de amor a Miss Lou: Los recuerdos se cruzan con la historia”) (1).



Poems (Mordecai and Morris, 1982). En las últimas dos décadas las escritoras negras de la diáspora han desarrollado un trabajo literario serio y coherente. En el caribe anglosajón, un gran número de eminentes poetas, como Lorna Goodison y Jean Binta Breeze, ambas de Jamaica, han sido reconocidas a nivel internacional. Entre las poetas más representativas, se pueden destacar las que están incluidas en *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Poetry* (Brown y McWatt): Velma Pollard, de Jamaica, Marlene Nourbese Philip y Dionne Brand, de Trinidad y Tobago, y Merle Collins, de Granada. Adisa, que también aparece en esta antología (Brown y McWatt 289), tiene un papel significativo en este grupo de escritoras caribeñas, ya que a menudo saca a la luz temas sugerentes que invitan a la reflexión y que por tanto merecen una atención crítica. Adisa, como la mayoría de las poetas arriba mencionadas, también escribe ficción en prosa. Entre las escritoras de ficción del Caribe, algunas de las más representativas son Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, Makeda Silvera, Merle Hodge y Erna Brodber. Uno de los factores comunes que unen a todas estas artistas es su preocupación por los rasgos africanos en la literatura caribeña y su interés por resaltar el papel de las mujeres en la creación de una amplia y legítima identidad caribeña. Muchas de estas escritoras hacen hincapié en el cuerpo femenino sexuado como objeto de abuso. De igual modo, también se interesan por las experiencias sobre la maternidad, las cuales consideran prácticas corporales valiosas para la continuidad de las tradiciones culturales afrocaribeñas. La importancia de la tradición matrilineal del cuento adopta un cariz central entre las escritoras caribeñas. Como lo indican Brown y McWatt, la presencia femenina en las letras caribeñas es indispensable a la hora de ofrecer una visión integral de la poesía caribeña del siglo XXI (xxxi).

Opal Palmer Adisa: Vida y Obras

Adisa nació en Kingston, Jamaica, en 1954, en el seno de una familia de clase media, y creció en su isla natal.¹⁴⁴ De joven estuvo expuesta a las formas caribeñas de parentesco y espiritualidad. Estas experiencias tempranas servirían para, más tarde, despertar en ella una conciencia sobre el amplio significado histórico que se respira en la vida cotidiana del Caribe, una percepción que está muy presente en gran parte de su obra. En 1970, con dieciséis años Adisa se trasladó a los EEUU con su madre y sus dos hermanos. En 1976, tras graduarse en Comunicación, regresó a su isla natal, donde trabajó como responsable de educación y productora de programas infantiles para televisión y radio en los Servicios de Difusión Educativa.

¹⁴⁴Ver más datos cronológicos en la sección “Chronology” incluida en los anexos (“Annexes”).



Allí es donde conoció a Louise Bennett, un encuentro que fue muy influyente para ella. Durante una conversación por correo electrónico con Adisa, he podido obtener algunos detalles sobre estos primeros encuentros casuales con Miss Lou: “Estuvo en algunos programas de invitados, y por entonces todavía estaba en activo y realizando un espectáculo para niños cuyo nombre no recuerdo, pero el eslogan [era] ‘Clap, oonuh clap for them’ [(‘Aplaudan, apláudanles todos’)]. Vi la grabación de algunos de estos programas y hablamos.”¹⁴⁵ En 1976, Adisa concertó una cita con el historiador y poeta Kamau Brathwaite, que entonces era profesor en la University of the West Indies, Mona. Su intención era buscar asesoramiento para su escritura, y a él le interesó su trabajo.¹⁴⁶

En 1979, Adisa regresó a América, donde cursó estudios de postgrado en la San Francisco State University. Allí obtuvo dos grados de Máster, uno en inglés y escritura creativa (1981), y otro en teatro y dirección (1986). Mientras tanto, en 1984, un sacerdote Yoruba le dio el nombre de Adisa, que en la lengua Yoruba significa ‘decir lo que una piensa con claridad.’ En 1985 Adisa dio a luz a su primera hija, Shola Adisa-Farrar; este año publicaría un libro infantil, *Pina, The Many-Eyed Fruit* (*Piña, la fruta con muchos ojos*), una estimulante historia sobre una relación difícil entre una madre y su hija. En 1986, publicó su primera colección de cuentos, *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (*Bake-Face y otras historias de Guayaba*). Los cuatro relatos incluidos en este libro describen diferentes historias sobre maternidad y estructuras familiares en el Caribe. Al año siguiente, Adisa recibiría el premio Pushcart por su relato “Duppy Get Her” (“Atrapada por un espíritu”), que está incluido en esta colección. En ese mismo año, 1987, Adisa empezó a enseñar dentro del programa del departamento de estudios afro americanos de la Universidad de California (UC), Berkeley, un puesto que ocuparía hasta 1993.

Durante los años en que enseñó en UC Berkeley, Adisa impartió clases de teatro afroamericano y literatura, cubriendo materias como redacción, poesía negra y literatura de mujeres afroamericanas. A lo largo de estos seis años, Adisa se casó con Tarik Farrar, el padre de su primera hija, y tuvo dos hijos más con él, Jawara (1989)

¹⁴⁵Esto es parte de una conversación por correo electrónico que tuve con Adisa sobre Louise Bennett el 3 y el 4 de Febrero de 2017. Adisa ha dado una serie de conferencias y publicado numerosos artículos sobre Louise Bennett. Ver por ejemplo, sus ensayos “Female Persona and Feminist Leanings in Louise Bennett’s Poetry,” y “The Living Word: Louise Bennett.”

¹⁴⁶Información obtenida de una conversación telefónica con Adisa del 2 de febrero de 2017. Como resultado de este y otros encuentros, el temprano poema de Adisa “Ethiopia Unda a Jamaican Mango Tree” (“Etiopía bajo un árbol de mango jamaicano”) se publicó por primera vez en la edición de la revista *Savacou* que Brathwaite realizó al año siguiente. Este poema también se incluyó más tarde en la antología de Kwame Dawes titulada *Wheel and Come Again* (27-28).



y Teju (1991). También publicó *Traveling Women (Mujeres viajeras)* (1989), una colección de poesía colaborativa junto con la aclamada poeta devorah major, donde proponen una conciencia negra y feminista con poemas como “We Bleed” (“Nosotras sangramos”), de Adisa, (ver capítulo 6.1) y “Resistance” (“Resistencia”), de major. En 1992, Adisa publicó *Tamarind and Mango Women (Mujeres de Tamarindo y Mango)*, una colección de poemas escritos entre 1974 y 1990, en la cual hace uso del “dialecto jamaicano y del inglés estandar” con la intención de “reflejar la fusión entre las dos lenguas que son tan comunes para el pueblo jamaicano” (*Tamarind* epígrafe). Este poemario ganó el premio de poesía del PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Literary Award. En 1992, Adisa terminó su doctorado en estudios étnicos por la UC Berkeley, especializándose en escritoras caribeñas. Se divorció en 1994, haciéndose cargo de sus hijos desde entonces.

Desde 1993, Adisa ha sido profesora de escritura creativa en el California College of the Arts. También ha sido profesora visitante en UC Berkeley (1994-1996). Adisa es, además, una crítica literaria y ha publicado cientos de artículos sobre educación parental, escritura y poesía. Todo ello sin abandonar la creación literaria. En 1997 publicó su primera novela, *It Begins With Tears (Empieza con lágrimas)*. Escrita en el espacio de tres veranos, gracias al apoyo de su hermana Leonie, que se ocupó de los niños durante semanas (*Begins* página de derechos de autor), la novela está ambientada en la Jamaica rural, y explora temas como el perdón y la sanación espiritual afrocaribeña, la sexualidad femenina, y las estructuras familiares, mostrando así una interconexión equilibrada entre modernidad y tradición en el contexto del Caribe rural (ver capítulo 5.1). *It Begins With Tears* está incluida en el libro de Rick Ayers *Great Books for High School Kids: A Teacher's Guide to Books that can Change Teens Lives (Grandes libros para jóvenes de secundaria: Una guía del profesor para libros que pueden cambiar la vida de los adolescentes)* (2004), y asimismo se lee en cientos de centros educativos a nivel secundario y terciario. En el 2000 Adisa publica *Lef of Life (Hoja de vida)*, donde explora su relación con su tierra natal, integrando el entorno Caribeño y su historia, y reflexionando sobre relaciones de amor y dolor, con una clara intención de sanar y reconciliarse con el pasado. Su siguiente colección de poesía, *Caribbean Passion (Pasión Caribeña)* (2004), es tal vez su primer trabajo de carácter sensualista, donde la relación con su entorno se vuelve más aguda y placentera. Este libro celebra el cuerpo femenino y aboga por la liberación de binarios opuestos patriarcales. En su colección de poesía y prosa, *Eros Muse* (2006), Adisa ahonda en las experiencias sexuales y de maternidad, y explica cómo éstas son el motor de su



escritura. Esta importante colección reinventa la forma tradicional del tratado de estética, adoptando así una posición creativa desde la que exponer sus principios sobre la creación literaria. En este volumen, Adisa mezcla los géneros de poesía y prosa, y explora la relación entre erotismo, creatividad y conocimiento. Con un enfoque en el acervo caribeño, Adisa aúna maternidad y lenguaje, sexualidad e historia, y poesía y filosofía (ver capítulo 6).

En 2007 Adisa publicó su segundo libro de relatos *Until Judgement Comes* (*Hasta el día del juicio*). En estos cuentos Adisa indaga sobre la relación de los hombres jamaicanos con el lenguaje, la religión, la historia y las mujeres en su entorno inmediato tanto en Jamaica como en los EEUU. En 2008 publicó su segundo libro infantil, *Playing is our Work* (*Jugar es nuestro trabajo*), así como su segunda colección de poesía y prosa: *I Name Me Name* (2008). En esta última obra Adisa investiga sobre su propia vida y experiencias, y sobre las experiencias de figuras históricas afrocaribeñas y afroamericanas (tanto conocidas como anónimas) con el objetivo de construir una identidad panafricana. Al abordar una experiencia sensual y espiritual, su obra atraviesa la geografía de la diáspora africana entre África, el Caribe y América, y así toca tanto la esfera privada como la pública. En 2009 publicó junto a devorah major dos plaquettes de poesía, *Conscious Living* (*Vivir conscientemente*), y *Amour Verdinia*.

En 2010, junto con Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Adisa editó una colección de poesía, prosa y ensayos titulada *Caribbean Erotic* (*Erótica Caribeña*). Esta obra es muy significativa, ya que aúna por primera vez a autores caribeños de diversos orígenes lingüísticos que abordan los temas de la sexualidad y el erotismo como lugares de liberación. Este mismo año, Adisa empezó a trabajar como profesora visitante en la University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) durante los semestres de primavera de 2010 y 2011. Durante aquel tiempo también editó dos números especiales de la revista literaria de UVI, *The Caribbean Writer*. Su segunda novela, *Painting Away Regrets*, (*Pintar contra las penas*), se publicó en 2011. En esta novela, Adisa indaga en el tema del divorcio con una historia contada dentro del contexto de dos terrenos aparentemente opuestos: la espiritualidad ancestral afrocaribeña y la modernidad norteamericana. Así aborda la maternidad como una fuerza del amor que repone el legado espiritual de la diáspora africana y desafía las ideas establecidas sobre la estructura familiar tradicional (ver capítulo 5.1).

En 2013, Adisa publicó *Incantations and Rites* (Encantamientos y Ritos), otra plaquette de poesía con devorah major en la que ambas poetisas cantan con el alma sobre el tratamiento inhumano y los asesinatos racistas que padecen los



afroamericanos dentro de la sociedad estadounidense. El mismo año, Adisa también publicó *Four-Headed Woman (Mujer de cuatro cabezas)* (2013), una colección de poesía que explora en profundidad las conexiones políticas entre el entorno natural, la naturaleza del cuerpo femenino y las políticas de poder y dominación. Aquí Adisa abarca algunos temas interrelacionados que van desde sus días de inocente juventud en el Caribe, hasta las experiencias de la menstruación, el comportamiento sexual, y el aborto. Su más reciente publicación se llama *Love's Promise (Promesa de amor)* (2017), una colección de relato breve que se centra cómo se vive y se disfruta del amor en diferentes épocas de la vida. Desde 2011 Adisa ha sido profesora distinguida del California College of the Arts and Crafts, donde actualmente imparte clases en el semestre de otoño. El resto del año lo pasa en St Croix, donde trabaja como editora de *Interviewing the Caribbean*, la revista que ella misma ha fundado; dedica tiempo a su arte, y continua haciendo teatro social. En estos momentos está trabajando sobre una nueva obra de teatro titulada, *Old, But Still Dancing (Viejos, pero aún bailamos)*, que trata sobre las personas mayores, la demencia, y otros temas relacionados con la edad. Se representará los días 15 y 17 de julio de 2017 en St Croix.

Temas, influencias y estilo en la obra de Adisa

Adisa es consciente de los prejuicios discriminatorios basados en género, raza y clase. De esa manera su escritura se compromete con las voces periféricas para poder explorar sus implicaciones políticas. Los temas dominantes en los textos de Adisa son la vida familiar, la búsqueda de lo sagrado y la historia afrocaribeña reflejada en el día a día. Le interesa abordar los temas sobre cuestiones de autonomía sexual y la autodeterminación de las mujeres. Su trabajo se inscribe dentro de la tradición literaria de escritoras caribeñas que exploran la resistencia femenina dentro del contexto de la esclavitud y de la globalización, tales como Merle Collins, Grace Nichols, Lorna Goodison, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Erna Brodber y Marion Bethel. Aparte de las cuestiones de raza y género, estas escritoras también abarcan temas sobre el folclore, el espacio y el lenguaje. En su ensayo "I Must Write What I Know so I'll Know that I've Known it All Along" ("Debo escribir lo que sé para saber que lo he sabido desde siempre") Adisa afirma: "Soy una mujer caribeña que escribe y sé que lo que escribo ha sido vivido, ha reclamado lágrimas, ha desbaratado sueños. Por eso nombro las cosas. Para inscribir la historia" (56). De cara a las políticas imperialistas que alienan el cuerpo y la mente



de la gente, Adisa trata de restaurar el papel de las narrativas de intimidad en la construcción de la identidad cultural. Como escritora caribeña y emigrante, madre de tres hijos, y experta cuentacuentos, Adisa usa su escritura para recrear con conciencia total un imaginario cultural caribeño que desafíe las fronteras geográficas establecidas y las limitaciones de género. De este modo, Adisa desafía el lenguaje establecido desde el poder resistiendo todo tipo de expectativas canónicas, tanto temática como estilísticamente. Siguiendo la tradición de la literatura caribeña femenina, maneja una singular audacia sobre lo sensual y lo espiritual, y arroja nueva luz al escribir sobre la sociedad caribeña y su lugar en el mundo.

Como dice Adisa en el ensayo arriba mencionado, “el lenguaje ha dejado de ser la propiedad exclusiva de los críticos de la élite.” De hecho, muchas personas y críticos en los EEUU que son originarios de diferentes grupos étnicos hablan y escriben sobre lo que saben. Para ella, conocer está relacionado con “la apropiación del lenguaje” y nos hace pensar sobre el hecho de que “no todo el mundo es dueño de su lengua” (55), una afirmación que conecta con la cuestión de Spivak “¿pueden hablar los subalternos?” que se aborda en el capítulo 4.2. Sobre esta materia, Adisa cuestiona la importancia que se le da a la abstracción de la teoría. En particular hace alusión al artículo de Barbara Christian “The Race for Theory”¹⁴⁷ (“La pugna por la teoría”) (1987), para ilustrar como el uso del lenguaje y las vagas generalizaciones sobre la cultura han silenciado la existencia de los negros en la sociedad, hasta el punto que no pueden ni tan siquiera comentar sobre su propia literatura (Adisa “Must” 55). Como escritora afrocaribeña, Adisa explica que el conocimiento, el lenguaje y la literatura están íntimamente relacionados, y afirma que, para escritoras como ella, dar cuenta en su obra de los recuerdos individuales y colectivos sirve para situar sus experiencias silenciadas en el centro del conocimiento, así como para incluir su sabiduría en el desarrollo teórico (55).

Con respecto a sus influencias literarias, Adisa ha declarado que, aunque existe un gran número de poetas que la han inspirado y guiado en su escritura, su principal influencia es “su atención a los detalles de la vida.” Tal y como ella explica en “Who I Read Then, Who I Read Now” (“A quién leía antes, a quién leo ahora”), un ensayo incluido en *I Name Me Name* (*Nombro mi nombre*), su escritura se ha alimentado de las personas que conocía en su temprana juventud. Hoy los temas sociales son de gran interés para ella y suponen su mayor influencia. Adisa afirma que la poesía que más le mueve es la que ocurre en los lugares más comunes de la

¹⁴⁷En inglés la palabra ‘race’ hace alusión tanto al concepto de raza como a la acción de participar en una competición. Christian aborda ambos sentidos de la palabra en su artículo.



vida cotidiana, y que disfruta escuchando a aquellos que, al hablar, están haciendo poesía sin ni siquiera darse cuenta (165). Desde que tenía más o menos siete años, Adisa escuchaba a Louise Bennett y aprendió a valorar su propia forma de hablar: el patois jamaicano, una forma que se consideraba inapropiada en la escuela, pero que a ella le parecía “resonante y rotunda, que hacía del lenguaje una forma de música, clásica, poética.” De adulta, Adisa decidió usar ritmos locales en su escritura porque, tal y como reivindica, esta decisión “da color y sabor y valida nuestros valores culturales” (*Name* 149). Así pues, su estilo literario está naturalmente influenciado por el uso del lenguaje local. El uso del lenguaje-nación, como he explicado antes, tiene mucho que ver con el ritmo y la musicalidad, y también se caracteriza por ciertas elecciones estructurales y sintácticas por parte de una comunidad de hablantes cuyos orígenes culturales y lingüísticos están en África. Para quienes están acostumbrados al inglés estándar, el lenguaje-nación puede sonar como un inglés roto, dado que aparece fragmentado y con faltas en la sintaxis, así como con una pronunciación que se ha venido tachando de inapropiada. El lenguaje-nación del que hace uso Adisa representa una actitud subversiva frente a la racionalidad del lenguaje, similar a la noción de *écriture féminine* desarrollada por las feministas francesas Hélène Cixous y Luce Irigaray, que intentaron identificar las características comunes de la escritura femenina (ver capítulo 2). Mi opinión es que Adisa encuentra en la creación literaria un placer al romper el silencio del sexo femenino, escribiéndose ella misma, y también a otras (y otros) y representando así una gran variedad de voces femeninas sobre todo, pero también masculinas.

Objetivos y metodología

Como dije anteriormente, los viajes que realicé a Brasil, Barbados y Jamaica han determinado mi fascinación por la historia, la música, las artes y la literatura de la diáspora africana. Las dislocaciones que acontecen al viajar son de gran importancia para entender mis conexiones personales con el Caribe anglosajón. De hecho, si me hubiese quedado en Suiza, o si hubiera regresado a mi país natal, no habría descubierto la riqueza de las culturas de la diáspora africana, al menos no al mismo nivel. Soy consciente de que viajar a otros países y poder interactuar con sus gentes durante un tiempo determinado es un privilegio, una característica de la modernidad que casi todo el mundo sueña con hacer pero que solo unos cuantos tienen la suerte de realizar.

Viajar es una forma de habitar otros mundos y una posibilidad de dejar atrás nuestra vida cotidiana y pasar a ocupar otros espacios, como también lo es la



literatura. Este pensamiento me vino a la mente mientras reflexionaba sobre mis motivaciones para escribir esta tesis. De igual modo en que somos capaces de viajar a través de los libros, los viajes físicos también ofrecen la posibilidad de ‘leer’ otras realidades. Queremos leer porque queremos saber, y queremos viajar porque queremos conocer. Tal vez queramos saber que existe alguien en algún lugar que piensa y siente como nosotros; o tal vez queremos descubrir otras posibilidades de ser y vivir en este mundo. Así como los primeros exploradores/cartógrafos se dedicaban a viajar por el mundo y a trazar líneas imaginarias, cartografiando la inmensidad del mundo en porciones más pequeñas y manejables; de igual modo hace el escritor con las palabras para delimitar y concebir el mundo en el que vive. Como dice el crítico literario deconstructivista Josephe Hillis Miller:

Una novela es una cartografía figurativa. La historia traza de forma diacrónica el movimiento de los personajes de una casa a otra, de un tiempo a otro, mientras que el ir y venir de sus relaciones va creando de forma gradual un espacio imaginario. Este espacio está basado en el paisaje real, . . . el entorno del cual se puede decir que es una figura de lo que acoge, en este caso de los agentes que se mueven, actúan e interactúan dentro de la escena. . . . El mapa es lo que queda después de que los personajes hayan muerto o se hayan casado felizmente, . . . como una casa con sus jardines, cercados, senderos, que ha sido poco a poco creada por la familia que la habita. (*Topographies* 19-20)

De igual modo, Benedict Anderson pensaba que “los exploradores, topógrafos, y fuerzas militares,” no eran simplemente personas que producían abstracciones científicas del espacio existente, sino que eran más bien los que, con sus mapas, estaban dándole forma al espacio real, anticipándolo, y transformando los mapas en instrumentos políticos muy adecuados para el ejercicio del poder y la dominación dentro de las prácticas imperialistas (*Imagined* 172-173). Curiosamente, la literatura, las narrativas imperialistas en este caso, también se han usado para politizar el territorio. De hecho, el poder de la escritura, de nombrar la realidad de una forma determinada, no solo afecta los modos en los que funciona la imaginación, sino también la manera en la que funciona el mundo material. De igual modo que la nación se crea dibujando líneas imaginarias sobre la tierra, es también un producto de una serie de narrativas imaginarias que recrean las experiencias de las personas que viven en un lugar concreto. El escritor, entonces, es un cartógrafo; ambos la



literatura y los mapas son productos abstractos de la imaginación que acaban definiendo los espacios que habitamos. Al igual que estas cartografías representan la actividad de las conquistas políticas y de la colonización cultural, también el escritor postcolonial puede recartografiar el territorio colonizado.

Recartografiar pues, es deconstruir el territorio politizado, borrar las fronteras imaginarias, y modelar los espacios. Opino que Adisa realiza un examen de las prácticas humanas desde abajo para así poder desestabilizar el concepto de nación y adoptar una identidad caribeña más amplia capaz de ignorar las cartografías coloniales. Las prácticas descolonizadoras como la de recuperar las lenguas nativas en la literatura y reevaluar los modos autobiográficos de representación son muy comunes en la escritura postcolonial (Aschcroft et al.). Ambas profesiones, la de cartógrafo y la de escritor implican movimiento e interacción entre los espacios. Así pues, no existe una forma estática en el proceso de conocer y habitar el mundo. Cada viaje, cada lectura, trae consigo una interpretación única. En el último trabajo de Boyce Davies *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes From Twilight Zones*, esta crítica se mueve “entre lo autobiográfico y lo conceptual, la experiencia y la teoría, para así poder perturbar la lógica del discurso académico excluyente que a menudo rechaza lo personal” (6). Creo que este trabajo es innovador y significativo para mi lectura de la obra de Adisa por varias razones. En su contenido, el último trabajo de Boyce Davies aborda la experiencia íntima como una forma de acceder a las epistemologías existentes en el contexto caribeño y de la diáspora africana. En su forma, está escrito en un lenguaje accesible que permite que un público más amplio pueda aprender sobre los temas que se tratan en la academia. Como afirma Boyce Davies, “he desarrollado una estrategia narrativa deliberada para presentar esto como si estuviera transmitiendo [a una audiencia menos especializada] lo que la gente comenta en las comunidades académicas, a la vez que también me dirijo a esta misma audiencia académica” (7). De modo similar, creo que esto es lo que Adisa ha estado intentando hacer con su escritura. Al combinar prosa y poesía, por ejemplo—algo que hace también en sus ensayos de crítica literaria—Adisa ha conseguido atravesar un amplio número de fronteras que tradicionalmente han separado el ‘aquí’ (en la diáspora) del ‘allí’ (en la tierra de origen), el individuo de la comunidad, lo personal de lo político, lo privado de lo público, lo doméstico de lo público, y al escritor de su escritura.

La obra de Adisa ha llamado la atención de unos pocos críticos literarios, muchos de los cuales se centran principalmente en sus percepciones como poeta caribeña y madre viviendo en EEUU, como puede percibirse en las entrevistas que



ha otorgado a lo largo de los años (Calderaro, Dawes, Miller). En especial sobre su primera novela, *It Begins With Tears*, se han realizado críticas significativas (Feng, Spencer, Weir-Soley, Valovirta). Sin embargo muchos de sus trabajos de poesía y prosa más provocadores se han dejado generalmente sin examinar, o no han recibido la atención crítica que creo se merecen, y que contribuiría al compendio de crítica literaria que se realiza sobre los estudios de la literatura caribeña. Teniendo en cuenta esta laguna académica, el principal motivo del presente trabajo es explorar una selección de poesía, obras de ficción y de no ficción escritas por Adisa y exploradas desde una crítica literaria postcolonial y feminista.

Definir la obra literaria de Adisa no es una tarea sencilla, ya que considero imprescindible abordar procesos de formación de identidad basados en la pertenencia de raza, cultura, geografía y género. Teniendo en cuenta los temas y el estilo de Adisa, que están íntimamente relacionados con su propia experiencia como madre y escritora caribeña afincada en los EEUU, el presente trabajo pretende ampliar el debate sobre las conexiones entre la experiencia de la diáspora y las prácticas íntimas que se inscriben en las obras literarias postcoloniales y feministas. En particular me centraré en una selección de obras de Opal Palmer Adisa que considero adecuadas para abrir nuevos debates sobre las conexiones entre las narrativas de la diáspora y las de intimidad. De hecho, en el marco de los estudios postcoloniales, la crítica diaspórica ha resultado ser muy útil a la hora de desestabilizar las limitaciones y prescripciones del acercamiento nacionalista en estudios culturales. En particular, tomaré como puntos referenciales las teorías de Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, y Kamau Brathwaite. De igual modo, los discursos de las intimidades han surgido para debilitar las nociones hegemónicas entre lo público y lo privado, y entre lo personal y lo político. Principalmente usaré un conjunto de autores cuya obra está explícitamente relacionada con teorías de la intimidad. Muchas de estas autoras son feministas, y sus perspectivas se centran en estudios de los afectos y acercamientos a las políticas de la emoción y de lo sagrado, como Elizabeth Povinelli, Ann Laura Stoler, Sara Ahmed, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Trinh T. Minha. Por su defensa de la experiencia íntima como fuente de conocimiento, los estudios de la intimidad se relacionan de cerca con los discursos de resistencia que se encuentran en la crítica postcolonial, sobre todo en lo que se refiere a la importancia de la memoria y a los modos de representación autobiográficos, como los críticos postcoloniales Homi Bhabha y Stuart Hall, quienes abordan de manera explícita los aspectos politizados de la experiencia íntima. De igual modo, existen obras previas que se han



preocupado por la inclusión de los lugares íntimos en la política y en la sociedad. En consecuencia, incluiré algunas obras a las que hacen referencias los autores de estudios de la intimidad, sobre todo las que se centran en el placer y las políticas sexuales, como Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray (ver capítulo 3).

Uno de los objetivos de estudiar la obra de Opal Palmer Adisa es identificar sus intentos de adoptar y desbancar prácticas y discursos hegemónicos. De este modo, estudiar su obra me permitirá reflexionar sobre cómo los espacios íntimos femeninos que ella describe continuamente se ven afectados por estos mismos discursos hegemónicos. También pretendo estudiar las conexiones que existen entre la construcción de la nación/la tierra de origen—tanto en el territorio caribeño como en la diáspora hacia los EEUU—y la forma en la que se escriben las intimidades. En último lugar, pretendo explorar la multiplicidad de los lugares de la intimidad, ya que a menudo lo íntimo no está limitado a lo sexual y/o a la experiencia romántica, ni trata siempre de asuntos personales. Por eso, trataré de explicar el significado de términos como ‘privado,’ ‘íntimo,’ y ‘doméstico,’ e identificar similitudes y diferencias entre ellos (ver capítulo 3). La idea que quiero transmitir es que, al abordar los espacios íntimos y domésticos para recrear la cultura propia, y al incluirlos en los espacios de la imaginación que conlleva el desplazamiento geográfico. Adisa, una escritora caribeña en la diáspora, está destacando la importancia de recrear los espacios íntimos que ayudan a preservar el significado de la tierra de origen.

Lo que intento probar es que los contenidos de los discursos de intimidad son tan poderosos e influyentes como cualquier otra autoridad externa, en cuanto que la fenomenología del sentimiento y el nacimiento de la nación son productos de un imaginario cultural compartido. Adisa describe la división existente entre lo público y lo privado, y entre lo personal y lo político, a través de la autonomía de sus personajes y voces femeninas que, no solo consiguen sostener sus hogares y sus lugares de origen, sino que también desafían las narrativas convencionales de progreso que, de manera axiomática, suelen inhibir las posibles experiencias íntimas e individualistas. Para poder evaluar la adhesión de Adisa a los espacios íntimos, tomaré prestadas teorías de las intimidades que reivindican la relación entre las emociones —sobre todo el dolor, el placer (sexual o no), y la vergüenza—y la historia. Algunos de los hallazgos más importantes en la materia han sido llevados a cabo por Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Mimi Sheller, Sara Ahmed, M.



Jacqui Alexander, Donnette Francis, and Audre Lorde. Echaré mano, por tanto, de sus teorías en mi análisis de cómo Adisa percibe la relación entre el conocimiento y el cuerpo.

El presente trabajo consta de dos partes. La primera ofrece un marco introductorio sobre las teorías que pretendo abarcar en mi lectura de la obra de Adisa, es decir, postcolonialismo, feminismo y estudios de intimidad. La segunda parte ofrece una lectura detallada de una selección de textos de Adisa, y establece una conversación entre su obra y las teorías presentadas en la primera parte. Cada parte a su vez se divide en tres capítulos. El objetivo del capítulo 1 es situar la literatura postcolonial en el centro de la teoría postcolonial (Mullaney *Texts* 4) haciendo hincapié en los estudios culturales negros y caribeños. Así pues se da una visión general sobre los comienzos de los estudios postcoloniales dentro de la crítica literaria. En esta parte también presento algunas nociones epistemológicas del término ‘diáspora’—es decir, sobre cómo se construye la noción de diáspora como objeto de conocimiento, desde sus significados primitivos y esencialistas hasta cómo se interpreta hoy en el terreno postcolonial. En esta sección se presta una atención especial a los procesos de criollización y a la presencia africana en el Caribe. El capítulo 2 sobre feminismo ofrece una visión general de los postulados teóricos feministas que nos servirán para entender los textos aquí analizados, abarcando desde las autoras occidentales hasta las afrocaribeñas. Así, en este capítulo me centro en la obra de críticas literarias como Alice Walker, Barbara Christian, Audre Lorde, Carole Boyce Davies, y bell hooks. También abarco la obra de las feministas francesas Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous y Luce Irigaray, así como la de Trinh T. Minha y la de la misma Opal Palmer Adisa, que también con sus ensayos ha dejado una importante contribución al pensamiento feminista. El objetivo principal de este capítulo es que el texto literario es suficientemente autónomo como para suscitar temas feministas y crear así su propia teoría. El capítulo 3 se centra en las micropolíticas de la intimidad. Comienzo ofreciendo una visión general sobre la importancia de las intimidades en la narración de nacionalidad y otras construcciones de la tierra de origen, argumentando que los estudios de las intimidades no están exclusivamente relacionados con el espacio doméstico o las relaciones románticas y sexuales. Seguidamente ofrezco una terminología que aclara la repercusión de los términos privado, doméstico e íntimo, especialmente desde la visión de Irene Pérez Fernández, Catherine A. MacKinnon y Ruth Gavison. En último lugar, realizo un examen de algunas de las ideas más relevantes en el campo de las intimidades postcoloniales, abarcando desde Foucault hasta alcanzar las más



recientes teorías sobre la ciudadanía desde abajo con un enfoque caribeño, tales como las obras de Donnette Francis, M. Jacqui Alexander, y Mimi Sheller.

Para poder establecer la relación entre las teorías arriba mencionadas y la propia perspectiva de Adisa, el capítulo 4 se centrará primero en las percepciones personales de Adisa sobre el papel descolonizador del escritor caribeño, poniendo especial atención a sus prácticas corporales de supervivencia y resistencia. Para completar mi lectura, aplicaré las teorías de Hélène Cixous, Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, y Elaine Scarry sobre sus percepciones en torno a la escritura de las mujeres y el dolor. En la primera parte, capítulo 4.1, abordo su ensayo titulado “She Scrape She Knee” (“Se rasca la rodilla”) para poder estudiar las prácticas literarias corporales y las políticas afectivas del dolor. Según Adisa, rascarse la rodilla tiene que ver con recuperar las historias de dolor y violencia—en lugar de olvidarlas—un acto que ofrece a la comunidad afrocaribeña la posibilidad de curarse de la historia sintomática del colonialismo. A lo largo de este capítulo, también analizo una serie de poemas y ensayo publicados en *Tamarind and Mango Women* (1992), *Leaf of Life* (2000), *Eros Muse: Poems and Essays* (2006) y *I Name Me Name* (2008). También me he detenido en algunos pasajes relevantes de su novela *It Begins With Tears* (1997) y su colección de relatos *Until Judgement Comes* (2007). Después, en el capítulo 4.2, me centro en el compromiso de Adisa con la historia Caribeña. En concreto, examino como recrea en su trabajo el patrimonio cultural a través de reconocer las voces de sus antepasados caribeños. Para Adisa, entender la historia de sus antepasados es clave a la hora de crear espacios de pertenencia. Existe una conexión entre las historias del pasado, tal y como se cuentan en la tradición oral, y las expresiones de la gente en la vida diaria contemporánea. Tomaré como punto de referencia su poema “How to Write the Poem of the Pebble” (“Cómo escribir el poema del guijarro”) donde Adisa reivindica la necesidad de escribir desde abajo. Adisa está comprometida a rescatar las voces de sus antepasados, y trata así de conectarlas con las voces contemporáneas de la sociedad caribeña. En este sentido, tomo prestadas las nociones de Spivak sobre subalternidad, representación e identidad cultural.

El capítulo 5 se dedica principalmente a las dos novelas de Adisa, centrándose en la relación entre espiritualidad, sexualidad y la autonomía erótica femenina. En el capítulo 5.1, ofrezco un análisis de *It Begins With Tears* (1997), profundizando sobre las interpretaciones de Adisa sobre sexualidad, estructuras familiares de origen africano, y prácticas sanatorias en el caribe rural. Leeré este texto a través de los postulados teóricos de Mimi Sheller, M. Jacqui Alexander,



Audre Lorde, y Sara Ahmed. En concreto también debatiré sobre la obra de críticas como Pin-chia Feng, Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Elina Valovirta y Suzanne Keen, que han escrito sobre la primera novela de Adisa y abarcado los temas de sexualidad, vergüenza, sanación espiritual, empatía, masculinidades y lo erótico como poder. En el capítulo 5.1 también incluyo una lectura detallada de la segunda novela de Adisa, *Painting Away Regrets* (2011), ofreciendo así el primer estudio exhaustivo sobre esta novela. En esta obra de ficción Adisa mantiene las conexiones entre las prácticas sagradas afrocaribeña y las políticas sexuales que llevarán a su personaje, una caribeña afincada en los EEUU, a través de un camino de perdón y sanación. El capítulo 5.2 examina las implicaciones políticas de la violencia sexual, y las políticas de reproducción femenina y de control de natalidad tal y como se han utilizado históricamente en detrimento del cuerpo negro femenino caribeño. Esta sección abundará en los temas expuestos mediante el comentario de algunos pasajes de *It Begins With Tears* y *Painting Away Regrets*. También se analiza el poema de Adisa “PMS and PMDD Symptoms” (“Síntomas y trastornos premenstruales”) para entender mejor sus reivindicaciones feministas dentro de los procesos de descolonización. En esta sección me centro principalmente en las premisas abordadas por M. Jacqui Alexander, Mimi Sheller, Sara Ahmed, Boyce Davies y Audre Lorde.

Finalmente, en el capítulo 6 explora la poesía más íntima de Adisa, así como su narrativa autobiográfica, donde aborda los temas de la escritura, la sexualidad, la menstruación y la maternidad. Para Adisa todas estas realidades son espacios de la intimidad. También aquí examino como las prácticas íntimas no están únicamente relacionadas con cuestiones privadas, sino que están firmemente arraigadas en las políticas sexuales y en los procesos descolonizadores. En el capítulo 6.1, estudio los modos en que el lenguaje, la literatura y el conocimiento son espacios eróticos para las prácticas descolonizadoras. Para ello, explico brevemente la presencia de la fuerza erótica de la creatividad tal y como la entendía Platón en sus primeras obras. Seguidamente, realizo una lectura de los ensayos de Adisa “The Orgasmic Rupture of Writing” (“El arrebató orgásmico de escribir”) y “When the Poem Kisses You” (“Cuando el poema te besa”), de su colección de poesía y ensayos *Eros Muse* (*Musa Eros*) (2006). Con el fin de interpretar estos ensayos, tomo prestadas las percepciones sobre el placer y lo erótico expresadas por filósofos y psicoanalistas, abarcando desde Nietzsche y Foucault hasta Freud, Marcuse y los postestructuralistas Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva e Irigaray. En esta subsección también realizaré el análisis de dos de sus poemas sobre la menstruación, titulados “We



Bleed” (“Nosotras Sangramos”) y “Bumbu Clat” (“Hija de puta”), en los que Adisa plantea cuestiones sobre la necesidad de empoderamiento erótico y su repercusión tanto en la esfera íntima como en la pública. La sección 6.2 aborda los temas de su propia experiencia como hija y como madre, y trata sobre como ambas experiencias están íntimamente relacionadas con la tradición de contar cuentos y con su propia escritura. Aquí me centro en su prosa autobiográfica, en concreto en su ensayos “The Sea Between a Writer and a Mother: The Waves That Connect Them, The Shore Where They Meet” (“El mar entre la escritora y su madre: la olas que las conectan, las orillas donde se encuentran”) y “The Swelling of the Womb” (“La expansión del útero”) incluidos en *Eros Muse*, “I Became the Stories My Mother Told About Me” (“Me convertí en las historias que mi madre contaba sobre mi”), incluido en *I Name Me Name*, y su poema “Held and Let Go” de su colección de poesía *Leaf of Life*.

En la conclusión, ofrezco una visión general de los principales hallazgos. En concreto retomo algunas de las cuestiones relacionadas con el papel de las narrativas de la intimidad en la obra de Adisa. En especial hago también hincapié en la habilidad de Adisa para crear nuevos espacios de pertenencia en su obra literaria, los cuales tienen sus raíces en las prácticas sexuales, espirituales, domésticas y privadas. Mi intención con la obra de Adisa es subrayar la importancia del lenguaje y la literatura en la creación de nuevos territorios para el imaginario cultural caribeño. De este modo Adisa, en tanto que escritora, posee el potencial para recartografiar el territorio colonizado, dado que, al igual que un cartógrafo, es capaz de definir la geografía y dotarla de nuevos sentidos políticos.