Broken Boundaries: Alternative Futures in Women's Literature of the Global South (1984-2006)

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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How do Black women in the Global South envision alternative futures which subvert the prescribed patriarchal futures that dominate discourse? My dissertation examines the works of three Black authors from the Global South, specifically from Cameroon, Mozambique and Puerto Rico—Werewere Liking, Paulina Chiziane, and Mayra Santos-Febres, respectively—who write new futures in their works by redressing ways in which women are removed from narratives of the present and the past in order to build power to change the future. This dissertation seeks to join their works together through a deterritorialized understanding of the Global South, an economically marginalized space which exists in the unevenness of development across the globe. These writers explore ways in which they can challenge and subvert patriarchal boundaries placed on them to break them and redraw them as they see fit. Patriarchal systems oppress women and alternative solutions to social issues in various ways to maintain dominance. The works by these authors explicitly challenge that suppression; they succeed in breaking away by subverting language and expectations to find ways to sabotage dominant discourses.

Each author intentionally reads genre, language, or cultural practice in a way which subverts dominant discourse and instead reads it in a way that benefits their needs. The primary outcome of this is that it redresses ways in which women are erased from narratives of the past and present, negating their creative solutions to present issues which not only affect them but

everyone in the broader society. On top of that, these narratives then allow women to envision alternative futures which do not conform to the often grim and violent predictions of patriarchal discourse about the future. Their texts essentially demonstrate pathways which can be used to unwind the present and follow alternative routes into the future. My project attempts to demonstrate the diverse demonstrations of ingenuity which go into the vision of alternative futures and the ways that specific contexts can arrive at those futures through subversions of established genres, language, and cultural practices.

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I also want to acknowledge and thank the authors and theorists whose works made this dissertation possible. Each one created brilliant works whose importance I felt was necessary to bring to a broader audience through my own research. It is my sincere hope that they are all recognized as vanguards of literature in the Global South and projects of liberation, their works have certainly inspired me in my own visions of what a better world can look like.

To the women at the margins of society imagining how to create a better world for yourself and those around you.

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I. Introduction: Loose Threads in Time

On August 9th, 1956, in the city of Pretoria, a crowd of 20,000 women marched to the Union Buildings to protest the Pass-laws, which famously required all black South Africans to carry documentation of their residence at all times or face imprisonment. The protest, which came to be known as the Women's March, was one of the most significant protest spearheaded by women in the anti-Apartheid struggle. Many of these restrictions wound up hurting women more, restricting their ability to live in cities unless they could prove their employment as domestic workers. At their head the union leader and racial activist Lilian Masediba Ngoyi, affectionately called Ma-Ngoyi by her supporters, led the a chant from a popular freedom song, *Wathint' abafazi,* Strijdom!: "*wathin'abafazi / wathint' imbokodo, / uza kufa!"* meaning "[When] you strike the women, / you strike a rock / you will be crushed!" (thoughtco.com "Women's Anti-Pass Law Campaigns in South Africa"). Ngoyi is not often brought up in conversations about women's liberation and the anti-Apartheid movement in modern times but her impact was felt throughout her entire life.

Much of her activity was concentrated into the 1950s when she worked as a machinist in a clothing factory and began rising the ranks of the Garment Workers Union, eventually becoming the vice-president of the union (sahistory.org.za). Meanwhile, Ngoyi was one of the first vice-presidents of the Women's League of the African National Congress and participated in the defiance campaign of the 1950s, using a portion of the post office reserved for whites. Ezekiel Mphahlele wrote in an article in 1956 after the women's march that,

> Mrs. Ngoyi is a brilliant orator. She can toss an audience on her little finger, get men grunting with shame and a feeling of smallness, and infuse everyone with renewed courage… At a recent anti-pass meeting one masculine firebrand advocated violence as a political solution. Mrs. Ngoyi replied: 'Shed your own blood first and let's see what stuff it's made of.' She denounced violence as stupid

> and impractical. The firebrand spluttered, flickered and sat down to smoulder, feeling embarrassed. (*Drum*, from anc.org.za)

Her powerful oratory was not only notable, but her role was also deeply impactful. To this day, her role in the liberation of South Africa is recognized in street names and monuments and her name sometimes carries the epithet "Mother of the black resistance". Having not lived to see the end of the Apartheid regime, her name is often left out of the narratives of the struggle, eschewed for more prominent figures like the Nelson and Winnie Mandela and Walter and Albertina Sisulu.

Black and African women, particularly the most marginalized among them, have always been at the forefront of the agitation for greater freedoms throughout the world. Their contributions to the progression of history, however, are continually marginalized through the ways in which the narratives of history are recorded within patriarchal and imperialistic texts and archives. This tendency is not simply a phenomenon of the past but persists to this day in our modern interpretations of history. The significant and often pivotal roles of marginalized women in the movement of history, simply put, is rarely a priority in the spinning of narratives of the past and the future, those threads are left loose, to be trimmed in the interest of a cohesive narrative. Distressingly, this is a process which appears strikingly similar to the process of colonial psychological violence designed to erase the traditions, culture, and contributions of colonized people the world over, applied internally to a culture's own women. Franz Fanon described it best in his text *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952):

> Tout peuple colonisé – c'est-à-dire tout peuple au sein duquel a pris naissance un complexe d'infériorité, du fait de la mise au tombeau de l'originalité culturelle locale – se situe vis-à-vis du langage de la nation civilisatrice, c'est-à-dire de la culture métropolitaine. Le colonisé se sera d'autant plus échappé de sa brousse qu'il aura fait siennes les valeurs culturelles de la métropole. Il sera d'autant plus blanc qu'il aura rejeté sa noirceur, sa brousse. (Fanon 15)

> Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul is an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural

> originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness in the jungle. (Markmann 18)

This internalized inferiority is, at its core, one of the main obstacles standing in the way of decolonization. More importantly, however, is understanding that this is a process that is still being applied, on some level, to women in the context of the Global South. In *Imperial Leather* (1994), Anne McClintock describes the removal of agency in terms of writing history from women as a process of putting their narratives into an "anachronistic space" which she says requires that: "Within this trope, the agency of women, the colonized and the industrial working class are disavowed and projected onto anachronistic space: prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity" (40). The removal of agency in this way requires, in essence, that women be removed from the narrative in order for modernity to be able to arrive. It is no surprise, then, that modernity has done little to help women gain agency and find a new voice, instead leaving them in the dust in the interest of progress. The outcome of this eschewing of women's narratives has been, in effect, their silence and the near loss of their knowledge in finding solutions for the sorts of problems caused by patriarchal structures.

This dissertation analyzes three black woman authors whose texts break these silences and imagine alternative futures which push back against the prescriptive futures proposed by patriarchal forces which continue to write them out of narratives and push them from public participation. Novels by Werewere Liking (Cameroon), Paulina Chiziane (Mozambique) and Mayra Santos Febres (Puerto Rico) thus represent an affirmative answer to Spivak's famous question "Can the subaltern speak?" In her now-canonical essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that patriarchy and imperialism negate a space for

these women to articulate themselves as subjects: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (102). Spivak argues that women are often left as objects within discourse, particularly in situations where the women being described are already from racialized groups of people. Women, thus, are further not only deprived of their ability to articulate alternatives, in some cases they are even deprived of the ability to speak according to this framework. However, in this dissertation, I analyze novels that show that the subaltern can speak, affirming the position Spivak takes in the second edition of her article (2010) in which she revises her original position and backs it up with evidence. She acknowledges that in her first edition, “I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark” (Spivak 63). In the wake of 30 years of responses, she reflected on her analysis of the act of Sati by Bhubaneswari Bhaduri and the fact that it represented the inability of the subaltern to speak for herself. She, instead, reframes her lament in the form of a question: “What is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks?” (64). Liking, Chiziane and Santos Febres show that not only can the subaltern speak, but she also has a significant impact on the outcome of history when she takes even the smallest amount of power by leveraging creative re-interpretations of dominant presumptions in narratives. In this dissertation, I explore thus show ways in which women have written against that paradigm. As such, I do not seek to solely describe the position that women find themselves in within these societies so as to critique the injustice of that position, but rather I demonstrate how they write their way out of it.

This project is principally concerned with three main points: decolonial black feminism, the role of black women in the Global South the past and present (and how their influence reaches into the Global North), and how Black writers use their literary narratives allows us to imagine alternative futures and forge new pathways forward. Each of my three chapters is organized around one book about black women in the Global South written by a woman living in the Global South. These authors write black women into the past and present so that their participation in history is legible and as a result, their voice can be heard when they speak for the future. In subaltern spaces, the potential of writing the future only becomes relevant when an author rewrites themselves into history and can thus materially contribute to the future. In each case, these authors amplifying the voices of black women in their novels imagines alternative futures for their communities by refusing patriarchal narratives of the future. This rewriting also serves as an information-gathering exercise: past and present models for agitating for liberation can be dug up and subsequently reapplied to future confrontations elsewhere in the world. In effect, these stories pass on techniques for liberation through an informal network which shares narratives and tactics with each other. These three driving factors organize my argument and demonstrate how these authors imagine alternative futures through their texts by re-introducing women into spaces from which they have been excluded.

The three texts that I examine in this project, *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* (1983) by Werewere Liking (b. 1950); *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* (2002) by Paulina Chiziane (b. 1955); and *Nuestra Señora de la noche* (2006) by Mayra Santos-Febres (b. 1966), all imagine solutions to the limitations placed on women narratives in the Global South. In these novels, each of these authors creates possibilities for women to write themselves back into history and thus, into the future. Each of them describes ways in which they use patriarchal power against

itself to produce parallel social structures which can then be used to reorient society around to create new imagined futures. Rather than simply dreaming of different futures, these narratives seek to trace alternate threads of time in order to find better pathways towards a more equitable future.

Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001) traces such a manipulation of temporal pathways, by arguing that time within the African postcolonial space is:

> not a series [of events] but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones… close attention to its real pattern of ebbs and flows shows that this time is not irreversible. All sharp breaks, sudden and abrupt outbursts of volatility, it cannot be forced into any simplistic model and calls into question the hypothesis of stability and *rupture* underpinning social theory, notably where the sole concern is to account for either Western modernity or the failures of non-European worlds to perfectly replicate it. (16; my emphasis)

The texts with which I engage all succeed in rupturing narratives of the past as a way to engage with the present while at the same time opening pathways for new futures. In essence, these authors refuse to follow prescribed futures and instead generate new ones through their writing which imagine solutions to oppressive forces which close futures off to them. This configuration thus allows these women to imagine different ways of creating the future through engagement with portions of society which are generally deemed disposable or, at best, marginal. The futures they imagine conceive of ways in which Black women are able to contribute to the future and in doing so, change it in ways to give themselves agency; they create these opportunities through the process of writing Black women into both the past and the present to prove that their presence has always been there, but obscured. In the three texts I examine, each author engages with the process of decolonization through creating alternative structures of power which use the past and the present to envision a new way of engaging with social relations. This alternate construction of power allows them to create alternative futures as they create parallel modes of

social organization. All three authors advance a project of liberation which is rooted in the re-centering of women and marginalized people's participation in history to create alternative futures that serve as a curative to patriarchal and imperialist predictions of decline and destitution.

1. Rewoven Histories

Werewere Liking and Francophone West Africa

Werewere Liking is a singular figure in African literary history. While she is deeply rooted in the traditions of Cameroonian literature she has (through exterior forces) had to distance herself from it and create something all her own, being exiled from her home nation in 1977. She was born in 1950 in Cameroon as a member of the Baasa ethnic group which lives on the coast. She was steeped in traditional education practices and initiated into her nation's culture and worldview even from a young age. As a result of having received this style of education, she is often framed as an autodidact. In her text *L'enseignement de l'éveilleuse d'étoiles*, Joseph Mwantuali writes in the preface that:

> Elle n'a eu de la formation de l'école moderne que trois ans de cours primaires. Sa formation fondamentalement traditionnelle à base d'initiations l'a amenée ensuite à s'intéresser aux traditions orales et en particulier aux rituels du Cameroun, son pays d'origine et, plus particulièrement, de son ethnie Bassa. Essentiellement autodidacte, Werewere a pu, nonobstant, faire des accomplissements plus qu'universitaires…(Liking 9)
>
> She did not have more than three years of modern schooling. Her fundamentally traditional education was based on initiation rites which then brought her to her interest in oral traditions and particularly those from Cameroon, her home country, and more particularly, from her ethnic group Baasa. Essentially an autodidact, Liking could, regardless, carry out postgraduate work… (my trans.)

That all being said, her writing does engage with European culture, as is evident in the title *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*. The title is an allusion to the Biblical books of *Job* and *Revelations* while her other most famous piece of writing, *Orphée-Dafric* (1981), is an allusion to the Greek

myth of Orpheus, the essay "Orphée Noir" (1948) by Jean-Paul Sartre, and the stage play *Orfeu da Conceição* (1956) by Vinicius de Moraes[1]. Her unique upbringing and perspective have played into the ways that she engages with literature and culture both within and outside of her home and adoptive countries. The most salient result of this process has been that her story and development of her style has little to do with the history of any one West African nation but instead is deeply intertwined with the greater Pan-African project that she executes at her art institute, Ki-Yi village, itself the direct result of the manifesto she outlines in *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*. Her works engage more directly with the immediate material conditions in Abidjan, both politically and financially, which she responds to through her literary production in a process which she calls *théâtre opérationnel*. I will demonstrate that her texts serve as a kind of ritual initiation for the reader into the problems which she views in West African society and the potential solutions that she is able to read through the ritual-as-text.

By the time Liking had published her first book, a poetry collection called *On ne raisonne pas le venin* (1977), Cameroon had already been independent for seventeen years. Her poetry was particularly critical of the postcolonial government of Cameroon and as a result, the government of Paul Biya began investigating her for seditious activity and criticism of the state (Mielly 31). This led to her being banned from the country after she went on a press tour in Paris with her publisher. Since then, she has never returned to Cameroon and has made permanent residence in the capital of Côte d'Ivoire, Abidjan. There, she was first courted by the Université d'Abidjan where she joined the faculty of letters and where she began her research on a storytelling technique that she named ritual theater. Working with French academic Marie-José Hourantier, Liking toured western Africa and studied the way in which traditional group rituals

[1] Adapted into the film *Orfeu Negro* (1959) by French filmmaker Marcel Camus.

resembled how western theater was performed, suggesting that theater was indeed a traditional African genre which had found a separate expression. Ritual theater, by its definition, was much more participatory and involved the audience being led through the play-acting by the performers which served as a method of solving community problems and dealing with methods of re-integrating people into society. This provides a sort of communal therapy for mental and physical maladies and intracommunal disputes by imagining solutions to the problems in a context removed from the actual event (Mielly and Liking 20).

Over time, however, Liking became dissatisfied with what she saw as the increasing divide between the city's intellectual class and the general populace of Côte d'Ivoire. She published *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* in 1984 as a direct critique of the intellectual community of Abidjan which also laid out the ambitions for a new artistic project intertwined with an initiation process steeped in Baasa traditions. In 1985, she quit the university and set about founding the arts collective Ki-Yi Village. Since then, she has taught initiation rituals into the arts to disadvantaged youth in the city and beyond and has used the space to put on her own plays. While there, she has also developed an extension of ritual theater that she's named operational theater, which focuses on using the concepts of ritual theater to create opportunities for praxis and agitation in order to reform society around the Pan-African, rebalancing ethos that she espouses in the village (Mielly 32). This shift in her writing represents her engagements with the needs of the surrounding society, viewing her literature as a necessary curative to the sorts of historical-social issues that plague postcolonial African society, both because of the legacies of colonialism and outside of them.

Fittingly, the plot of *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* is deeply intertwined with the trajectory of Liking's life and as such, it demonstrates the process which Liking uses to apply her

experience as an initiate in Baasa culture and the developer of ritual theater. The book describes the valley of Lunaï, a place debased and in decline in which all of the residents suffer from sleeping sickness, coating the place in a dreamlike quality that the narrator seeks to exit through ritual. She uses this medium to guide the reader through a process of initiation which the narrator, whom she calls a "misovire[2]," goes on herself. Within the village she explores the idea of using the five points of humanity (Liking 35) as a way to rebalance a person as a curative for the outside world. This rebalancing of society, between men and women as much as between society and its people, becomes central to her proposition in the text that an initiation into a new framework of knowledge, to whit the five points of humanity, is required in order to improve and develop society further. By guiding the reader through the text, she employs ritual theater in *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* for the same ends that she employs it in Ki-Yi village and previously. She thus seeks a rebalance which is rooted in the restoration of traditional practices as a way to restore and fundamentally alter social relationships with which colonial and postcolonial social politics have greatly tampered.

Paulina Chiziane and Mozambique

Paulina Chiziane is, more than anything else, one of Mozambique's most important authors. She is the first African woman to win the Camões prize, the most prestigious international prize for Portuguese-language literature, and the first woman author to publish post-independence. She has said in many interviews that she writes about women's experiences and considers herself a feminine author rather than a feminist one.[3] She grew up in the south of

[2] A neologism which Liking developed to mean "a woman who has not found a man worthy of her respect" rather than rely on the already extant term misandre (the word comes from the Greek *misos* "to hate" and the Latin *vir* "man").

[3] In an interview on the Portuguese television program *As páginas tantas* she stated that "Eu, conto histórias de mulheres porque sou mulher é só isso" ("Personally, I tell stories about women because I'm a woman and

Mozambique in the Gaza province in a household that spoke Chopi and Ronga as well as Portuguese. She participated in the Mozambican war of independence as a member of the FRELIMO[4] party, which won control of the government, but left the party after the nation gained independence, because of her increasing disillusionment with the post-independence FRELIMO government (Gutiérrez 69). After retiring from her work with the government in 1975, she moved north to the city of Zambézia where she resides to this day. Her writing is almost entirely about the feminine experience in Mozambique, describing the conditions of women all over the country, as Patrick Chabal outlines in *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa* (1996). Her works seek to shed the sentimentality for an imagined African past and instead focus on using which parts of the past are deemed salvageable and drawing on both new and old techniques to better build a new future (92). Her literature, in total, is a significant insight into the ways in which African women dream of alternative futures through their own cultural lens while seeking to find their own path.

Since the end of the civil war in Mozambique one of the primary national conflicts has focused on the limited possibilities of challenging the FRELIMO government's hegemony. This has meant that the power of the central government is essentially unchecked, leading to an ossification of power structures where top ministers distribute power outwards. This distribution of power, which I characterize as a phallocracy,[5] is reflected further in the way that power is distributed outwards from men to women in the nation, meaning that very little gets out to

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that's it"; 2009). She has, on multiple occasions, emphasized that she views her work as storytelling about women rather than feminist stories.

[4] Frente de Libertação Moçambicana, Mozambican Libration Front

[5] A government structure centered around the "irrational worship of the phallus" as a sort of hypermasculine dictatorship (Scruton 513).

marginalized people who experienced the most violence. Malin Newitt describes FRELIMO's control as absolute:

> Frelimo is guided by the single determining principle that it will not, under any circumstances, relinquish power, ever… Unlike so many other regimes in Africa, Frelimo has not tried to establish perpetual rule by a single leader… As a political machine it has successfully won elections and secured its control over the state's resources. Party and state remain very close, almost as close as in the days when it wore its Marxist clothing, and in many respects they are still one in the same. (Newitt 184-185)

This situation has led to the conditions which leave women in Mozambique with little potential for exiting their economic and social marginalization. Further, it has led people to a point where the very idea of changing the status quo is almost laughable. That narrowing of possibilities is central to Chiziane's writing and it is the thing she seeks to write against.

The status of women in contemporary Mozambique is fraught and highly dependent on men due to socio-economic factors which lock them out of many jobs and political opportunities. This is rooted in the transition between the colonial and postcolonial eras where FRELIMO maintained many of the patriarchal colonial structures that Portugal had imported after independence. In their article *Edible Encounters*, Isabel Rodrigues and Serena Rivera note that

> Marriage is both a gift and a curse for women. The institution of marriage provides monetary stability for women through the husband's employment as well as through the inheritance (or, *lobolo*) that the husband presents in exchange for the woman's hand in marriage, but only under the condition of their subservience to their provider… While women are made voiceless subalterns, the narrative exposes the ways in which males garner unfair advantages in the realm of economic opportunities and amorous relationships. (13)

While nothing explicitly bans women from participation in education and economics, the preponderance of power in the hands of men has translated to the fact that women are meant to keep domestic roles and manage the household while men make money, a role that they were also meant to play prior to the introduction of capitalism into Mozambique (11). The fact that

many men have to move away for work to find money has exacerbated this problem and often times this leaves women in poverty, leaving them destitute and without support even if their husbands commit to staying with them. This plays directly into the plot of *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia* which describes the life of Rami as she discovers that her husband has been cheating on her with four other women; over time Rami gets to know the women and decides to stop viewing them as competitors and instead leverage their power to form a polygamous relationship so that they can gain both economic and social independence.

Historically, Mozambique has had several groups with highly patriarchal structures which granted women few rights and many of these groups lived in areas where power was concentrated. Others such as the Macua, a group in Northern Mozambique, had highly matriarchal matriclan structures that granted women considerable rights and leeway within their society and the freedom to choose (Chiziane and Wieser "The Angels of God are White to this Day" n/p). Even with the illusion of choice in modern Mozambique, many of the women in the text make choices based on the economic realities that they must respond to in their lives. In *Sowing Women, Harvesting a Nation* Lidiana de Morães describes the situation for Rami as one in which her ability to understand her choices as severely limited by the fact that many of her options and perspectives were obscured from her through patriarchal systems:

> She struggled to understand her female condition, but she learns that there is more to her feminine status than she has been taught by the patriarchic system, especially in Mozambique where there are many ways to understand themes such as love, marriage, and sex. Despite the Catholic conservative speech, through the contact with the women from the north, Rami sees that the "love hexagon" she is in offers more to women than a life of obedience and sacrifice. (116)

These boundaries imposed on women are the restrictions against which Chiziane's writing pushes, by unifying and fostering dialogue between cultures there is a significant potential for women to gain some leverage in society. These dynamics inform the grounds on which the story

unfolds, where women are severely restricted from even fully understanding what opportunities could be made available to them if they were to seek it out on their own.

While polygamy has been outlawed since colonial times, since the end of Mozambique's civil war (1977-1992) the practice has more or less enjoyed tacit endorsement, with no punishment on the books for being caught having engaged in polygamy (reuters.com). Often, this ban created the groundwork for clandestine polygamous relationships—relationships where men had multiple wives they kept secret from each other—which resulted in situations where the men suddenly held more power because they were no longer beholden to all of the women. This is the case of Rami and Tony in *Niketche*, and a real-world situation that Chiziane describes as having given the inspiration for the narrative of *Niketche*. In an interview with Nafeesah Allen, Chiziane said that:

> I was sitting in the window of my house in Zambezia and I saw women fighting over a man... I saw a man coming their way. When he saw that these were the voices of his two wives, he ran away… Every day that I saw him, my neighbor, I would get angry and I wanted to ask him about what happened. When I finally spoke to him, he didn't give the incident any importance. (207)

The experience of these two women demonstrates how contemporary attitudes towards polygamy in the function as a method of social control for women and a way for men to express their power. Chiziane's narrative, then, seeks to write against this attitude and exercise of patriarchal power and demonstrate the potential that using these forces for women's liberation represents. She thus presents an ambiguous attitude towards polygamy as a practice in her writing, in spite of her observations, because she imagines how women can use the institution to leverage greater social power.

Mayra Santos-Febres and Puerto Rico

Mayra Santos-Febres is a prolific author who started her writing in the 1990s and whose work has spanned many genres and styles. *Nuestra Señora de la Noche* is her only historical novel. Her work more generally has been focused on speaking to her own community rather than to any broader audience outside of the Caribbean, which creates the effect in her work of things being left unspoken. In *The Contemporary Spanish-American Novel,* John Waldron describes her perspective as one which remains defiant towards traditional expectations of Latin American literature: "The silence she describes should not, then, be read as acquiescence, but rather as an extreme form of rebellion in which the colonized refuses to continue playing the colonizer's game" (190). This usage of silence is pivotal to my reading of *Nuestra Señora de la Noche,* which uses silence as a way to withhold competence from the reader and stake a private claim for black women to interiority. The novel follows the life of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer (1901-1974) from her birth to her death. An infamous madame from the city of Ponce, Luberza's life was defined by the fact that she, as a black woman, was able to gain power through illicit means, founding a brothel called Elizabeth's Dancing Place which was frequented by the soldiers at nearby Loosey Field and the powerful and famous of Puerto Rico. One of the ways that she employs silence in the text is by withholding Isabel's interiority from the reader throughout the narration as a way to ensure that the reader is not able to step into her perspective as the protagonist. While her work spans genres and deals with many different aspects of Afro-Latinidad and womanhood, her focus on the balance of telling and withholding information is one of the successes of her genre. She is also a scholar whose work has dealt primarily with gender and Caribbean literature as well as philosophy and journalism. She currently teaches literature at the Universidad de Puerto Rico Rio Piedras and is one of Puerto Rico's most

prominent and best-known contemporary writers, particularly outside of the island in the United States. There is often a relationship between her nonfiction and fiction writing, such as her perspectives on genre and the status of women. For example, in 1999 she wrote an essay about why she writes for the magazine *Ábaco* in which she says: "Se suponía que yo supiera que una Negra caribeña para lo único que sirve es para dar placer al otro, erotizar al otro, mover el caderamen masa con masa a traerle frutas exóticas al que tendido por la emoción piensa, escribe, mide y argumenta" ("It was supposed that I already knew that a Black Caribbean woman was only good to please the Other, eroticize the other, move that ass to bring exotic fruits to someone until she is laid out by her emotions can actually think, write, weigh, and argue"; Santos-Febres 65; my trans.), In short, at the same time that she produces narratives on the status of the bodies of Black women in Puerto Rican history, she also writes on the topic in nonfiction spaces as well. This extract demonstrates the perspective that she brings into Luberza's story, to give her greater value than her body and not endorse the narrative proposed by those who wrote about her before and who were able to read about her death firsthand and react to it at the time. This understanding helps inform us as readers what the impact of history (in the case of *Nuestra Señora de la noche*, the US seizure of Puerto Rico) is on the status of black women and how that evolved over time.

For as long as slaves were imported to Puerto Rico and since then, the racial politics of the island have had a significant impact on its development. Like in most Caribbean colonies, Puerto Rico was developed to sustain a plantation system which enriched a few large landowning families and could sustain a trade network through its cities and towns. Once the United States became involved, however, the island began to industrialize rapidly and an explosion in urbanization and migration to major cities on the island followed. Puerto Rico was seized by the

US in 1898 after the end of the Spanish American war and from there was repurposed as a foothold in the Caribbean for US interests in the area, spanning all the way to Central and South America. The shifts in the island and its development were a direct result of the occupation. In Ponce, the setting of *Nuestra Señora de la noche*, the development of Loosey Field as a military base impacted the way that the city developed and has a significant impact on the trajectory of the plot. Further, US occupation impacted the way that race-politics were conducted on the island, but this aspect of Puerto Rican culture remained steadfast; one major impact of the shift, however, was that as the US began to extract wealth from the island directly, this led to the disenfranchisement of the previous *criollo*[6] elite. As a result, wealth began to move around and the previous upper class *criollos* began to be looked down upon by the upper classes who were imported from the US (Ayala and Bernabe 30-31). This shift in wealth had significant impacts on the politics of the region and greatly influenced the perspectives of whiteness present on the island, essentially focalizing the commonalities between the *criollo* class and the new American elite.

The novel tells the story of Isabel "la Negra" Luberza Oppenheimer, a famous and powerful madam who owned the historical brothel Elizabeth's Dancing Place on the shores of the Río Portugués from her birth to her death, exploring her life and how she became both politically and economically powerful. The most important fact about her life to the novel's plot is that there is very little written about her before she was a madame. Much of her life is shrouded in mystery, to the point that there are contradictory sources on why she opened Elizabeth's and how she got so powerful doing so. Fernando Fornaris, Jr, her lover in the novel, was also a historical person and lawyer from the San Juan area and he did seem to associate with

[6] Whites of Spanish descent.

Isabel, providing the seed capital in the form of a land grant for her brothel—an episode Santos Febres recounts. In the periodical *El Nuevo Día,* Jorge Pérez includes the following details about Isabel's life:

> Ya adulta se casó con un norteamericano, al parecer apellidado Lowell, quien luego la abandonó y después, presuntamente, estuvo relacionada con un abogado de San Juan, Fernando Fornarís, quien, allá para 1932, terminó dándole los fondos necesarios para que ella montara su primer negocio dedicado a la prostitución, en el barrio San Antón. (elnuevodia.com)
>
> Now an adult she married a North American, who seems to have the last name Lowell, who later abandoned her and later, allegedly, she became involved with a lawyer from San Juan, Fernando Fornarís who, around 1932, ended their relationship giving her the necessary resources for her to begin her first business dedicated to prostitution in the San Antón barrio. (my trans.)

Additional details of her life still remain obscured. This lack of detail suggests that her narrative only seems to have mattered to most people as it related to the most salacious details of her life rather than the ways in which her life led to those events. Santos-Febres's novel attempts to fill in this historical gap with a more complex narrative of her life, for which Santos-Febres draws on details that were typical of the black experience in Puerto Rico.

Prior to Santos-Febres's rewriting, the only treatments of Isabel's life came from fictional works that had come out at the time of her death and focused principally on her life as a prostitute and madame. There were three major texts which dealt with her life: Ferré's "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" (1974) and "La ultima plena que bailó Isabel" (1974) by Otero as well as the film *Life of Sin* in 1979. All of them portray Isabel in relation to her life as a madam or a prostitute rather than her as a complete person, though each of the readings of her life comes down on the moral questions surrounding her professions differently. At the same time, however, they all focus on her as "La Negra", the imposing and legendary figure that her epithet carried, while Santos-Febres focuses much more on her as the whole person Isabel

Luberza Oppenheimer, a complicated and human figure. Ferré's text pairs her with a white woman and explores how both of them suffer under the yoke of patriarchy, hoping to show unity and "transracial reconciliation" (Branche 154). Otero's narrative, as the name suggests, is about her last day alive and shows her as an embodiment of evil and corruption in Puerto Rican society (158), using her as a foil to critique the exploitation committed by the upper classes of Puerto Rico, including by Isabel herself. These texts contrast starkly with Santos-Febres's interpretation, which focuses on her experience as a black woman and the way that society engages with her and people like her. rather than simply as a direct critique of a social ill, be it sex work or political and moral corruption, Santos-Febres's interpretation represents her as more fully human, turning Isabel into a social actor in the narrative. In this way, both Santos-Febres and Isabel fight back against the ways in which Black people, and women in particular, were treated on the island.

Anti-Black sentiments in Puerto Rico were a common staple from both before and after the takeover of the island by the Americans and broadly reflected the racial anxieties that were common throughout the Antilles during colonial occupation. Like many Hispanic nations and territories in the region, an official ideology of *blanqueamiento* was instituted which encouraged the importation and preference of white immigrants in order to "whiten" the population over time. This is most apparent in the way that the Puerto Rican national myth of the "gran familia puertorriqueña", an important concept within *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*. Defined most broadly as a myth of the national character, the "gran familia puertorriqueña" represents the island as a family which consists of a patriarch and his wife and their children guiding the Island's future. This imaginary has often kept black or even *mestizo* and *mulato* people out of the possible futures of the island by placing them at the margins of the family portrait as domestics, cooks,

and others in the servant class. In his article "Disrobing Narcissus" (2015), Jerome Branche points out that the myth of the gran familia was of pivotal importance: "Given the centrality of the question of the white patriarchal order as it structured the Puerto Rican *gran familia* at the end of the nineteenth century and insisted on women's subordination and cultural and genetic whitening, or *blanqueamiento*, it is clear that Isabel Luberza's life trajectory is emblematic of larger historical processes" (152). Branche explains, then, that Isabel's existence refutes the legitimacy of the myth of the "gran familia puertorriqueña" by demonstrating that power and history were not exclusively driven by these white men in power. In *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*, Santos Febres undermines this concept through the repeated interventions into the composition of the "gran familia puertorriqueña" that Isabel makes, showing the future of the island to actually be in the hands of the marginalized who manipulate and shape the will of those elites in the family portrait.

The tragic reality of how *blanqueamiento* was enacted was not simply limited to the importation of white immigrants to the island and the cultural preference for whiteness encouraging slow miscegenation. Rather, it also resulted in violent policies of eugenics discouraging black women from having children or removing their ability to do so altogether. As Angela Davis points out in *Women, Race and Class* (1983), Puerto Rico has some of the highest sterilization rates among black women in US territories which was instituted in a policy pushed out in the late 1930s (126) but had roots in earlier laws and practices at well. The "Reglamento de Higiene" (1894)[7] was violently enforced on the island during the timeline of the novel and is both mentioned by Isabel and spoken about in her social circles. Santos-Febres portrays how

[7] An anti-prostitution law which placed all women engaged in "illicit sexual activities", or prostitution, would have to be registered and picked up for health tests and often detailed indefinitely. Importantly, Santos-Febres mentions in the novel that this law tended to be used as a method of detaining and illegalizing black women's bodies regardless of their status as a prostitute or not (Santos-Febres 162).

these institutions impact Isabel within the novel, she is sterilized through a forced hysterectomy, supposedly because she has an "inverted uterus", which they remove in the process of her giving birth to her son Roberto. This history shows the extent of anti-blackness on the island and the history against which Santos-Febres writes in her text.

2. Affirmative Sabotage and Generative Praxis

This dissertation analyzes how these three authors engage in creating something new through the usage of hollowed out institutions. In a talk titled "Fanon Reading Hegel" (2012)[8], Spivak explains the ways in which Frantz Fanon engaged with texts by other academics, philosophers, and authors of fiction alike in order to build his worldview. She argues that this type of critical thinking enabled him to build the comprehensive description of colonialism and its effects that he describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), getting him closer to accurately portraying the impacts of colonialism more than responding directly to texts which justified colonialism could. As the title of the talk suggests, Spivak applies this reading most directly to the way that Fanon engages with Hegel. At the same time, however, Spivak also examines Fanon's relationship to both Alfred Adler's work and that of Andrés de Claramonte. Spivak draws two key concepts which resulted from Fanon's reading: that of "governing narratives", which she directly derives from Fanon's work; and "affirmative sabotage," which she defines as a method to extend the relevance of Fanon's work into her own productions of theory. "Governing narratives" as she understands them are the generally accepted interpretations of critical theory and literary texts, while "affirmative sabotage" is a kind of intentional misreading and "hacking" of governing narratives or texts to serve a different purpose. Combined, these two terms serve as the basis for my project. They simultaneously

[8] Given at the University of Pune.

prove the relevance of transcultural engagement throughout the Global South as a means of producing new theories and intentionally misusing institutions to produce alternative, improved outcomes. Writing new histories is, in effect, a way that Liking, Chiziane, and Santos Febres challenge governing narratives as I will explain further and imagine alternative futures as an outcome of their process of affirmative sabotage.

In her reading of Fanon, Spivak utilizes *Black Skin, White Masks* to better understand his interpretation of Hegel. In this work, Fanon pointedly uses the Master-Slave dialectic[9] as the basis for the way in which the colonized man sees himself reflected in the other and how the colonizer, subsequently, cannot see the humanity of the colonized. This dynamic leads to the colonized wishing to become more like the colonizer, thus internalizing colonial assimilationist techniques that motivated them to act more "white", specifically French in Fanon's case, which was enforced through schooling and the treatment of the black man in public life. According to Fanon, this process was used to explicitly prevent recognition between the slave and the master by creating insurmountable social barriers between the two. Spivak then names this process and its outcome a "governing fiction", explaining that:

> The word 'fiction' here does not relate to personal experience but to social evaluation… There are competing and governing fictions. This is what gives him his power and this is what makes him useful. Otherwise, he would be just someone who resembles us. He does not resemble us. We should be able to earn the right to ender, as readers, this unusual double intuition, rather than take Fanon simply as the model of the 'African' revolution or assume that he is describing the postcolonial predicament. He is doing something more: He is combating governing fictions. (Spivak 44)

[9] The master-slave dialectic is the process of becoming aware of oneself and thus one's place in the world by recognizing another self-conscious being that is of unequal rank in the world. In effect, this recognition leads to consciousness and the realization that social relationships are formed through the interaction with the other. Hegel postulates that the self cannot be immediately recognized in the other but that the resolution of this dialectic is the first step on the pathway to liberation.

These fictions are, according to Spivak, what cements the permanent master-slave relationship between the black and white Martinican (or Indian, or African, et cetera). Further, she suggests that Fanon then needs to examine fiction in order to combat these governing narratives because, Spivak argues, fiction gives a window into the distilled abstract of experience in a way that real life can rarely give (Spivak 45). As a concept then, governing fictions apply to my own work because they are the boundaries against which the authors that I examine are grating against to generate alternative futures. Their works constitute a system of narratives which are deployed to propose alternatives to governing fictions which are supposed to foreclose futures and in doing so, serve to imagine broader boundaries for women which they are then able to form without the restrictions of patriarchal power structures.

This reading of Fanon, in turn, allows Spivak to affirmatively sabotage our reading of Fanon—showing how he can be used to hijack institutional sexism and introduce new feminist readings into Fanon that have yet to be extracted. She does this to use Fanon for broader feminist aims by intentionally reading past his interpretations favorably to his analysis, challenging the governing fictions surrounding Fanon's work. Spivak describes what's at stake by claiming that affirmative sabotage is a sort of:

> imaginative activism supplementing the fragility of mere reason. They are not just reading Hegel correctly or incorrectly. And today, I am insisting that all teachers, including literary criticism teachers, are activists of the imagination… There must be, at the same time, the sense of how to train the imagination, so that it can become something other than Narcissus waiting to see his own powerful image in the eyes of the other. (Spivak 53-54)

This imagination, she insists, is how the change of institutions to serve other purposes can take place. The importance of this process is highlighted in the fact that imagination in literary studies is what allows feminist studies to apply Fanon to their own research, a man who rarely centered

the agency of women in his theorizing[10]. Spivak uses this framework to then suggest that those who exist within institutions, such as herself, must remember that they are susceptible to distancing themselves from the very people on the street who are fighting for the same goals outside of the academy. She suggests that "the seduction of obliterating the persistent divide between the fighting vanguard and the anyone in and off the street is too great. Only if this complicity is forever acknowledged, not as tragedy but as farce, do we earn the right to call this affirmative sabotage" (58). In much the same way that Fanon suggests that the revolutionary party in an independence struggle is inherently incapable of propping up a truly equitable and transformative regime (Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*), Spivak cautions that reading Fanon should not be the endpoint, that instead it should be used as a springboard to continue to find new ways of engaging with decolonial thought and pushing postcolonial studies forward. This idea, I contend, carries forward into fiction. Just as Fanon used fiction to inform his notions of the functions of race in French society, so too can fiction writers use this same type of affirmative sabotage to bend both genre and local institutional knowledge to serve their own purposes.

Affirmative sabotage as a concept is central to my understanding of how Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres describe and transmit knowledge as well as operate around and within institutions which are so fraught with blind spots. It is evident that the authors in my case studies use hollowed out or abandoned institutions to be able to carve out a space for themselves to gain power. It is through the positive usage of these systems that women can imagine ways in which the future can be different, seizing on the reins of control to be able to generate new possibilities

[10] This fact becomes particularly crass when we consider that Fanon's legacy is only possible because his wife, Josie Fanon, wrote down his words as he dictated them. A philosopher and academic in her own right, her erasure from Fanon's narrative speaks to the ways in which governing fictions which marginalize subjects play even into liberationist ideologies.

or find older, better settlements which operate in their favor. This is also reflective of how each of these women use styles of writing which come from other academic traditions and bending them to benefit their narrative aims. This process gives them, writ large, the space to create new systems for themselves after figuring out how to sabotage and hijack the old ones.

3. Learning to Retrace history

Much of my project revolves around different types of education. In the case of *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*, education takes the form of an initiation of both the reader and the characters. In *Niketche*, it comes in the form of characters who create an informal information network and share testimony with each other and the readers. Finally, in *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*, the protagonist educates those around her through the power she collected by manipulating men, using her experiential knowledge to ensure that the brutality that befell her as a child and young adult would not have to happen again. We could understand their processes of education through *concientatição*, a concept developed by Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in his treatise *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Critical consciousness, as it is known in English, is a kind of knowledge which allows its recipient to think about the world through a critical lens which forces them to critique the world around them as it is in search of a better one. It teaches a praxis which allows for engagement of people who Freire labels as oppressed[11] with the broader world in order to demand their own liberation. He puts the power of critical consciousness on the line by explaining the importance of it in the formation of praxis:

> One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. (Freire 51)

[11] Which broadly defined means disenfranchised laborers who have little access to the benefits of participation in citizenship.

This idea of praxis creates opportunities for transformation by imagining different possible futures, thereby breaking free of the internalized limitations which restrict the mind and obscure opportunities for escape. To that end, it further represents a thread which unites both Latin American and African (as well as North American) theories on liberation that I explore throughout the dissertation. Critical consciousness is a necessary way to engage in grounded normativity; it is part of the appeal of initiations and the sharing of information.

These educational processes constitute an act of love which reflects the necessary processes of sharing this liberation outward. Freire theorized that it was the job of the oppressed to liberate both the oppressor and themselves, because the act of oppression in itself is dehumanizing. Of course, liberating one's oppressor requires an intense humility and desire to do the right thing. Freire describes this as an act of love, saying,

> They will not gain this liberation by change but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity. (Freire 45)

This false generosity can be understood to be a way of understanding a governing narrative as a benevolent one, even when it works against one's needs. The ability to recognize and name it as such, then, represents a formation of critical consciousness which creates openings where affirmative sabotage can be deployed to generate alternative futures. Through this framework, I analyze how these authors move beyond critique and look towards generative processes in their texts. Through their texts, they share strategies to identify and employ affirmative sabotage by sharing critical consciousness through the narratives that they weave.

The foundation of critical consciousness, as Freire argues, is central to the ability to engage in praxis as a method of paving new futures in the interest of liberation based on the

challenges they view. In this way, each of the authors in this dissertation examines the material conditions within their specific geographical placement, grounding them in a place and time and responding to that specific issue, a process which is called grounded normativity. Glen Coulthard (b. 1974) defines this term as the process of generating ethical frameworks around knowledge that is rooted to places rather than imported in his text *Red Skins White Masks* (2014). I use the definition as it is expanded by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (b. 1971) in *As We Have Always Done* (2019) yet I draw heavily on Coulthard's notion that dispossession is the primary relationship between colonial powers and indigenous people. Simpson defines grounded normativity as not:

> …a thing; it is generated structure born and maintained from deep engagement with Indigenous processes that are inherently physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Processes that were created and practiced. Daily life involved making politics, education, health care, food systems, and economy on micro-and macroscales. (Simpson 23-24)

This engagement bears a striking resemblance to the way in which the transmission of knowledge between people is integral to how Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres define the capabilities of their protagonists to imagine ways out of the oppressive systems which bind them. On some level, the notion of grounded normativity, then, is rooted in the practice of survival as a tactic of engaging in the world in a harmonious manner which emphasizes one's relationality to everything else. For the women portrayed in the three novels, who find themselves in the social position of the subaltern, the reality is that they have to understand their relationality to everything else to make sense of and find ways of thriving within spaces which marginalize them.

Grounded normativity allows for creativity and plasticity in responses to issues as a way of sharing and using/reusing intelligences and techniques shared in different ways to imagine

different pathways out of oppression. Simpson goes further by describing Anishnaabeg[12] grounded normativity:

> The same ethics and values that individuals use to make decisions in their personal lives are the same ethics and values that families, communities, and nations use to make decisions about how to live collectively. Our ethnical intelligence is ongoing; it is not a series of teachings or laws or protocols; it is a series of practices that are adaptable and to some degree fluid. I don't know it so much as an "ethical framework" but as a series of complex, interconnected cycling processes that make up a nonlinear, overlapping emergent and responsive network of relationships of deep reciprocity, intimate and global interconnection and interdependence, that spirals across time and space. (Simpson 24)

This interconnectedness reflects the way in which Simpson as a member of the specific, Nishnaabeg intellectual tradition contributes to the discussions of networked power and resistance in an age in which power is unevenly distributed but in all places at once, who can be understood as one among multiple anticolonial movements in the Global South which resist hegemonic forces. Simpson's description of networks of reciprocity reflects the way in which Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres employ similar networks to engage with their own grounded normativities while using a similar ethical framework to distribute knowledge and share it around for the benefit of their community and the others surrounding them. Simpson alludes to interlocking relationships between time and space upon which these ethics are founded. We can find similarity in this thinking in the way that Mbembe discusses the notion of interlocking pasts, presents and futures which interact with each other (Mbembe *On the Postcolony* 16). There is a parity between these ideas which are developed (nearly) simultaneously in different geographic contexts in response to different situations but always looking towards the goal of decolonization and a more equitable society. Simpson argues that patriarchal and imperial boundaries restrict

[12] A group of interrelated indigenous nations whose primary lands at the time of first contact were located in the Great Lakes region. Simpson herself is a member of the Ojibwe nation whose territory primarily covers Southern Quebec and Ontario provinces.

one's view of grounded normativity, where colonialism/patriarchal imperialism attempt to silo off grounded normativity through assimilation in ways which restrict the ability of these movements and the people who participate in them from seeing each other, devaluing culture as a simple way in which people are distinct from one another rather than using that culture as a tool for survival (Simpson 22), which is another significant thread through my three case studies. In this way, grounded normativity is a pivotal tool to leverage affirmative sabotage and create opportunities to reclaim pasts to write new futures.

4. Generative Praxes

The generative aspect of grounded normativity has gone by several names in the movements associated with American woman-of-color feminism and much like the concept promoted by Coulthard and Simpson. This generative process is rooted in the ideas of critical consciousness and solidarity to create opportunities for praxis to occur. In *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness* (2011), Cherríe Moraga (b. 1952) explores the process of finding opportunities of praxis as a weapon of the weak, a way in which those without power can express themselves and force change or at a bare minimum, recognition. She connects this idea to a broader expression of coordinated activism in the Global South as well, by showing how this movement is, while global, still grounded in a normative space which to which she is rooted:

> Life is a dream in that real sense and as we pass through this sueño may we attempt to reduce suffering on this planet. This is the only practice worth preaching. Some days I've called that practice lesbian feminism, on other days Indigenism; some years it was Chicano nation, other years, radical women-of color activism. But at the heard of each of these movements, perhaps fearlessness was what I sought all along, fearlessness made manifest in the spirit of solidarity; where for an extended moment, the material world of oppression cannot break us because spiritually there *is* an "us". (Moraga 70-71)

Solidarity, thus, becomes a central conceit in the curatives for the kinds of marginalizations that these subaltern women experience, grounded in the idea that these movements are not simply

one thing or another but woven together into a chain of intersecting networks of resistance to power. Moraga, then, demonstrates the necessity of the radical act of love that is solidarity as a way of communicating beyond just oneself or one's social group. Solidarity is a central theme in all three of the case studies in this dissertation and as such, it is at the root of the ability to transmit knowledge and generate enough power to contest the strength of the diffuse network of power which the three authors describe.

5. Reading Women's Literature of the Global South

Despite their varying geographical contexts, this project seeks to examine the three novels through the lens of subaltern voices through Anne Garland Mahler's understanding of the Global South, which I examine in more detail below. Using this framework allows me to conceptualize these texts as entering into dialogue with one another, visible through a shared interest in giving women a stake in writing the future in spite of their geographic distance, while also highlighting how they contribute to each other in ways that would not be visible if they were read only in their geographical contexts. Through this model, I propose that attention to the economic aspect of the women's liberation helps us appreciate the sorts of techniques and traditional practices that women have used to give themselves access to political enfranchisement, which are a focus of each of the novels. The varied but similar techniques that are demonstrated in each of the novels demonstrate that women can write themselves both into the past and the future suggests that these texts are a curative to women's marginalization and disenfranchisement that each text details. The three novels thus propose that it does not have to be this way by revealing how the women build networks of power and information that they share among themselves.

Marginalization takes on a specific form in this dissertation which I understand through Mahler's *From the Tricontinental to the Global South* (2018). Mahler's work shows that reading texts through the lens of the Global South helps us understand disparate liberation movements transnationally. What distinguishes Mahler's interpretation from others is the fact that she explicitly states that the idea of the Global South is not specifically a geographical one, but rather is also economic in nature such that there are Global Souths which exist in the Global North and vice-versa. Within this framework, we can thus understand that the notion of the Global South has more to do with economic marginality than it does geographic placement. This allows for all of the novels I examine to be situated, in one way or another, either within or near the Global South. Because Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres all portray the lives and experiences of black women in the Global South, each novel shows a different way in which women have an inability to access power without manipulating the structures which guard power around them. Mahler states, most broadly, that the Global South is not a place or specific to any racial category, but instead, "captures a deterritorialized geography of capitalism's externalities and means to account for subjugated peoples within the borders of wealthier countries, such that there are Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic south" (Mahler 6). Mahler is expressing that the Global South is not a specific place so much as it belongs to a specific economic and developmental caste. To that end, we can conclude that colonialism has taken a new shape which, on its surface, appears less overtly violent and focused on military-cultural occupation but rather masquerades as a more inviting invitation into a global network of power which exists everywhere and expresses itself throughout all pockets of society, rather than in discrete national forms.

Addressing this history from a perspective which centers the Global South aids in our understanding of how Mahler's critical framework of the global south today draws from the idea of deterritorialized struggle against a globalized system of oppression within a local context. Describing the continuity between the Tricontinentalist movement[13] and the later Global south, Mahler understands the Global South in these terms:

> (1) power is conceptualized as transcendent of individual nation-states, such that those located in wealthier countries also suffer the negative aspects of neoliberal globalization; (2) potential resistance to power is theorized as occurring through global, lateral networks that similarly transcend geographic, national, linguistic, or racial boundaries; and (3), since power is global, there is no outside to it and thus resistance must occur from within. Among these recent theories, the Global South especially has striking resonances with Tricontinentalism in that the "South" functions metaphorically to refer both to a global and decentralized system of inequity that affects diverse peoples across a fluid geographical space and to a transnational resistance that is unified around ideological rather than trait-based affinities. (Mahler 26)

Mahler points to the fact that the Global South is useful in that it allows ideologically similar but geographically distant projects with similar goals to become legible to one another. As a result, the idea of the Global South becomes more clearly rooted in the notion that the collective struggle for equality has its roots throughout varied geographical contexts and responds in different ways to similar conditions, while devising ways of resisting these same oppressive systems based upon individual context. As such, the Global South operates in my project as a conceptualization of how these texts all interact. They all center around the same types of subaltern subjects which have found themselves in a position to dream up and share ways in which women have engaged with resisting systems of power and how to gain power outside of it. They then share this resistance outwardly in service of a more equitable society both within their contexts and globally.

[13] A precursor movement which originated in Cuba and which advocated for anti-imperial network of power flowing through smaller countries to stand up to those imperial forces.

Mahler deftly argues that viewing liberation movements and cultures through the framework of the Global South allows for a richer and broader understanding of how movements across the globe have been united. Reading them in such a way grants scholars broader access to ways in which texts and cultural moments far afield from each other can be comparable both theoretically and historically. Using the example of the Tricontinental, Mahler contends that:

> recognizing a history of Tricontinentalism means explicitly acknowledging the contribution of both Latin American and African American intellectual traditions, which are often marginalized in postcolonial studies, to contemporary theories of power and resistance. This acknowledgement, which does not imply the dismissal of other intellectual traditions represented at the Tricontinental, has important implications for the US and Latin American academies alike… In other words, recognizing the Tricontinentalist roots of the Global South has enormous potential for opening communication between intellectual traditions that has often been stymied under prior rubrics. (245)

In short, Mahler argues that by examining intellectual movements which deal with postcoloniality and decoloniality through the framework of the Global South, we as scholars can find greater connective tissue among seemingly disparate intellectual movements to find richer comparisons. Using this framework, my analysis opens the door for further examination of these connective tissues between African literatures of varying linguistic expressions as well as regionally between Africa and the Caribbean and beyond, even beyond the boundaries and historical threads of the legacies of slavery. As such, the notion of the Global South as defined by Mahler plays an invaluable role in my conceptualization of this project by grounding my comparison in a series of movements which all respond to the status and marginalization of women within their respective texts as a consequence of historical forces beyond the legacies of colonialism as an exclusive driving factor. Instead, examining the texts in this way grants readers the ability to root the texts within their own regions while opening up the knowledge it provides to a broader dialogue.

6. Questioning Feminism and Négritude

Troubling Feminisms

Feminism is simultaneously a very relevant and very complicated subject in this project because two of the authors, Liking and Chiziane, have both expressed some distaste for the term and distanced themselves from it. This dispute is not unique to these African authors, however, many radical feminists have argued that early feminist movements still require the exploitation of black women as a prerequisite for the emancipation of white women, as Audre Lorde expresses in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984). Originally published in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), the essay is an adapted version of a talk given at the Second Sex Conference in 1979 which admonishes the roles that white feminists play in marginalizing more radical feminism-of-color by exploiting the labor of black and brown women to be able to study and advance feminism. She argues this by pointing out that the lack of black feminists at the conference she spoke at was indicative of the fact that brown women still had to pick up the slack so white women could be feminist academics, suggesting that white feminists still benefitted from white supremacist patriarchal hierarchies (Lorde 1). D'Almeida argues that many African thinkers, Liking among them, have a similar critique in that they are wary of what feminism can offer when there are many local strategies and philosophies of women's liberation that predate the Western Feminist movement (Ogundipe-Leslie 317). In short, white feminisms often refuse to engage with the idea that they are advocating for a greater share of control in a patriarchal system rather than seeking to dismantle it (Lorde 2). In this way, this troubling of feminism initiated by women-of-color throughout the Global South functions as a kind of affirmative sabotage. These differing approaches to women's liberation create the conditions to reread feminist theories that are often restricted to specific nations or regions, such as radical

women-of-color feminism in the United States, to better serve broader liberation movements through information and tradition sharing. By sharing techniques that have worked in other places around the world, these varying women's liberation movements can begin building the global momentum necessary to implement alternative futures, such as those proposed by Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres.

There is a long tradition of women's liberation in Latin America and the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico has remained a central contributor throughout its history. In the context of this project, while all three authors contribute to theories of women's liberation through their fictions, Santos-Febres is the only one who would unreservedly agree with the label feminist being applied to her. The connection between Puerto Rican feminism and the US's own stretches back historically and includes a figure who is present in Santos-Febres's *Nuestra Señora de la noche*, Luisa Capetillo (1879-1922). Capetillo was a sugar-worker, radical organizer and early feminist who contributed significantly to the ideas of feminism which still influence Latin America's relationship to feminism. She advocated for suffrage as well as economic and sexual rights for women. Her rejection of gender stereotypes made her well known beyond the labor movement. Years later she would be remembered as the first woman to have "worn pants" in Puerto Rico." (Ayala and Bernabe 66) This also speaks to the historical context of Latin America and Puerto Rico specifically as a settler colonial project in which the culture was dictated by settlers as well as slaves imported to the island. This engagement with women's liberation shares significantly more connective tissue with US feminist movements, which explains Santos-Febres's willingness to accept the term feminist for herself in ways that the other African authors in this project are more reticent to do. In these marginal spaces, the importance of organizing to be able to improve prospects and outcomes is vital to one's continued survival and ability to thrive.

On the other hand, both Chiziane and Liking have resisted any attempts to explicitly name their work as feminist, Chiziane has preferred to call her work *feminine* while Liking has been more emphatic that she does not view herself through the lens of gender while she is writing, so as to seek balance in her examination of gender politics in Africa. D'Almeida demonstrates in several texts that the relevancy and ethics of considering African women's texts dealing with women's liberation to be explicitly feminist is problematic due to of the collective traumas that Africans express in relationship to ideas put forth by colonizers. More explicitly, she claims that the idea of the "misovire" is an explicit challenge towards both men and feminism in an African context (d'Almeida "The Intertext" 274). This is further complicated by the fact that Africa has had a well-documented relationship with women's movements existing before colonization which serve as roots for many modern women's movements rather than western feminism. As a result, folding African antipatriarchal ideas into feminism becomes more complicated when we consider the problematic nature of the historical timeline in which feminism comes to the fore and the ways in which it may then appropriate those ideas of Africans getting their ideas from white feminists rather than the other way around.

What Kind of Négritude?

All three of the authors I analyze identify as black and their writing is evidently informed by that experience and how it relates to the pathways to liberation they outline in their novels. Each of the authors' works shows the influence of a specific pathway of the *négritude/negrismo* movement, a literary movement which cropped up in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Francophone Africa which refuted negative stereotypes of blackness, cultivated pride in blackness, and articulated shared cultural values and expressions across the Black world. Two of the founding authors were Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) and Leopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001).

Césaire's work, much like that of Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén[14] (1902-1989), was understood by his contemporaries as focused on "the lived social conditions of colonized peoples and denunciations of injustice and violence," while Senghor's approach was more rooted in "romantic mythologizing of an imagined common African past" (Millar 1287). All three of the authors in this study particularly follow the track taken by Césaire and Guillén, whose work deeply reflected the idea of shared collective struggle and the interconnectedness of disparate movements. Liking herself explicitly rejects Senghor and his notion of blackness as well as his defense of colonial languages with which it engages. Her position thus mirrors Kenyan Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1938-), who critiqued Senghor's insistence that African writers should use French because their literature was, in some sense, meant for the French people to consume (Ngũgĩ 19). Liking rejects Senghor's argument in a much more explicit way than Chiziane and Santos-Febres because she does not ascribe to the validity of the idea that French is a superior expression, and her usage of the language reflects her distaste with Senghor's idea of how to engage with the language by breaking instead of elevating it. Further, Liking's position stakes out that this literature is not *meant* for an external market, that it is in part designed to be transmitted intracommunally.

Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres each engage with the conundrum of defining their audience in a specific way but crucially, all of them emphasize through their work that their engagement with alternative futures is meant for an internal audience rather than an external, Euro-American one. D'Almeida points out that *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* includes references to Senghor which paint him as being out of touch and using words until they have lost all of their meaning. She argues that the role of the misovire herself is to combat the way in

[14] A major contributor to the Hispanophone accompaniment to négritude, called negrismo.

which men have organized society on their own, demanding that some balance be restored (271). Chiziane also demonstrates the same philosophy of writing to an internal audience in her own work by incorporating Mozambican vernacular and orality into her literary language. This creates the effect of her writing a specific Mozambican register of literary Portuguese. Patrick Chabal confirms her use of orality in his anthology *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa* (1996) where he contends that Chiziane uses an oral storytelling style to reflect the ways in which African language was distinct from standard Portuguese (99). More significantly, *Niketche* is the first novel that Chiziane wrote which required a glossary of terms in the back, as it was written in vernacular Mozambican Portuguese and strongly implies that many of the conversations between women in the text are not actually spoken in Portuguese (Chiziane 316). Santos-Febres brings blackness into the center of her text primarily through portraying the context of the Caribbean and its roots in the African through music, religious tradition and the ways in which slavery and the connection to Africa remain. At the same time, she also refuses to address the colonizer and instead writes for Afro-Puerto Ricans by exploiting the nascent demand for black writers on the island at the start of her career (Waldron 192). Through these theoretical groundings, I have demonstrated that all of these writers seek lateral modes of solidarity that are connected to movements which are still rooted in a past which the writers sabotage for their own gains. This sabotage allows them to break the bounds set around them in order to envision broader and brighter futures throughout their text as a consequence of giving themselves a voice in the present and past.

7. Thematic Organizations

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, including this introduction. Each chapter is divided by text and thus, by region as well as chronologically. Chapter 1, which is centered

around Liking's *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* (1984), deals with a text that was published before the end of the Cold War, the prescience with which Liking wrote her novel shows that she was thinking beyond not only a transnational and Pan African movement but into the future of African politics itself. Chapter 2 is focused on Chiziane's *Niketche* (2002) about the post-Civil War in Mozambique and the long tail of consequences therein for both women and the future of the state as a whole. In Chapter 3, I examine a text placed outside of Africa: Santos-Febres's *Nuestra Señora de la noche* (2006), which deals with Afro-Puerto Ricans at the beginning of American occupation. Each text deals with similar problems in different context and as such, demonstrates the process of imagining ways of creating new boundaries which open the doors to alternative futures in several different examples.

In Chapter 1, titled "How Newness Enters the Word: Werewere Liking's *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* as a Challenge to Postcolonial African Intellectualism," I examine Werewere Liking's song-novel *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail: journale d'une misovire* (1985) which serves as an early example of the sorts of radical imaginations which are at the center of all three of my chapters. The text itself serves as a manifesto for Liking, who at the time left her post at the *Université d'Abidjan* in disgust and chose to use her skills to actually teach the people she viewed as needing it. She had realized that academia was no longer serving the people it claimed to represent and a widening gap was taking place between the university and the rest of the city, creating a landed intelligentsia. The story focuses on a singular person, the Misovire, observing the village of Lunaï, a synecdoche for all of Africa, as it withers before her in a wake-sleep state caused by its infestation of Tsé-tsé people. The Tsé-tsé serve as a metaphor for the parasitic bourgeoisie in African societies, as the tsetse fly is the carrier of African Human

Trypanosomiasis[15]. In the village, she observes two men, Grozi and Babou, argue over the best way to actually get society moving forward again. She, of course, seeks the same outcome as them but does not respect either of them. They argue over simple pedantry, idly masturbating while they do so and never reaching any conclusion. At the same time, the Misovire hears from the Nuit-Noire, the disembodied voice of Africa who provides insights that the two men simply will not arrive at as the Misovire imagines new futures. In this chapter, I argue that this construction is in itself a ritual through which Liking guides the Misovire and by extension, the reader. Liking does this in order to initiate the reader into a critical consciousness which they can then propagate as a means to articulate a better future for their communities. This serves her broader goal of imagining alternative futures for an Africa which is not on the decline by attempting to create the conditions for radical restructuring of social relations, giving women more power and giving men more productive ways to engage with it.

In Chapter 2, "Walking Away Together: Knowledge Transmission and Solidarity in *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia*," I examine Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche* which tells the story of Rami and her five co-wives, who all discover that they are unknowingly married to the same man, Tony, the top police officer in Maputo and representative of the FRELIMO government. As the story unfolds the wives begin to work together to subdue and control Tony rather than fighting each other over him while he continues to hone his tactics in avoiding them. Throughout the novel, the wives begin to open up to each other and learn and understand different modes of being that women experience in other parts of Mozambique and their individual and collective struggles living in a deeply patriarchal and economically uneven society. The narration takes place from the perspective of Rami, the first wife, and begins right at

[15] Commonly referred to as "African Sleeping Sickness".

the end of the civil war (1975-1992) and follows the wives for several years as they formalize and establish their relationship and begin devising ways to aid each other and fight back. After some time, they begin to not need his support and instead are able to cut him out of their relationship with each other but maintain the polygynous network that they used to gain power as a means to support each other.

Niketche is Chiziane's fourth novel and is the first to deal heavily in Mozambican vernacular Portuguese but is a continuation of her exploration of the lives of women in Mozambique's history. It was the first text of hers to receive international attention and marks when her career began in earnest. Unlike many texts which deal with polygamy, it takes a deliberately ambiguous stance on the subject, owing to the same ambiguous stance that Chiziane takes on the notion of feminism as an appropriate word for her style of writing. In my study of the text I argue that Chiziane uses the blending of dialogue and refraction of testimony through Rami's voice to advance a politics of solidarity which demonstrates how women could use their collective power to demand better conditions and new boundaries for their lives within Mozambican society, demanding more stability and security as well as a chance to achieve autonomy even in a loving relationship. She succeeds in demonstrating that the occupation of institutions which are typically seen as patriarchal like polygamy can be an effective tool in breaking the influence of men who have secured their power by other means and by ironically acquiescing to his demands, they are effectively able to demonstrate that he is not actually a competent provider and simply an ineffectual abuser who is obsessed with control.

In Chapter 3, "Truth and Archive: Sentimentality and Secular Consecration in *Nuestra Señora de la noche"* I examine Santos-Febres's novel *Nuestra Señora de la noche* (2005), which tells the story of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer (1901-1974), a famous historical madam in the

early 20th century in the city of Ponce. Her brothel, Elizabeth's Dancing Place, was an actual establishment and her life was sensationalized almost the moment she had died. Santos-Febres, however, is the first writer to give her a full treatment from the time she was young until her death and as a result, is the first major narrative about her that doesn't focus on her death. The text itself is a historical novel and describes the way that Luberza grew up in Ponce and the indignities and difficulties that she had to experience in order to gain the power she needed by cynically exploiting her own body as a conduit for power by manipulating the desires of powerful white men.

Nuestra Señora de la noche is Santos-Febres's second novel and is a historical novel in its stylings but which also challenges a lot of the notions of the genre by attempting to humanize rather than mythologize its primary character. For example, she does not focus on tropes of sociological-anthropological reality when describing interaction and instead using more sentimental, subjective styles of writing which challenge the pure factual nature of history. I argue that Santos-Febres engages in a politics of liberation in which she envisions new futures for Puerto Rico being forged by black people even though they are written into the margins of history. Santos-Febres forces the reader into a position where they must identify and have solidarity with Isabel's struggle without being able to identify with her directly. This allows the reader to envision alternative futures for the island through her contribution by demonstrating that its presence and potential was there from the beginning. Further, but she shows that black women are the crux for forming a potential future solidarity which engages native Puerto Rican elites to make them realize that they have more in common with the black people beneath them than the white Anglos above them. She does this by inverting the purpose of the genre of the historical novel and humanizing a figure to place into the archive rather than making them into a

myth, thus showing the way that complicated, sometimes controversial figures such as Luberza can fit into the greater contributions to Puerto Rican history through their silence and in ways to which the reader does not have full access.

I conclude my dissertation by reflecting on the potential that further examination of Liking, Chiziane, Santos-Febres and others who use affirmative sabotage in their writing to open pathways to alternative futures through re-imaginings of the past and present. I relate this back to Mbembe's argument that time should be examined as happening simultaneously and is thus able to be unwound and rewound in a different pathway by choosing a different interlocking track. I argue that by looking deeper into these re-imaginings, we allow ourselves in the present to find our own alternative pathways into the future by opening ourselves up to other ways of thinking and imagining both the past and the present. Throughout this dissertation, I show both the cultural and material potential that these sorts of artistic choices have and the ways in which they can aid us in imagining a decolonial future.

II. How Newness Enters the Word: Werewere Liking's *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* as a challenge to postcolonial African intellectualism

> Les Aspirants sont alors préparés à la responsabilité et à la créativité afin que s'ils choisissent d'être bénéfiques à la vie, ils deviennent capables de résorber les crises et de ramener l'harmonie en s'impliquant directement à toute activité de leurs communautés où leur talent les incline, au bénéfice de l'ensemble de la communauté vouée au culte de la « construction dans la lumière ». (28)
>
> The aspirants are thus prepared for the responsibility and the creativity so that if they choose to beneficial to life, they become capable of absorbing crises and bringing back harmony in involving themselves directly in all activity within their communities where their talent inclines them, to the benefit of the whole of their community now devoted to the cult of the "structure within the light". (my trans.)
>
> Werewere Liking, *L'enseignement de l'éveilleuse d'étoiles*

The experimental text *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail : journal d'une misovire* marks Werewere Liking's first foray into the novel. Liking's career had focused on theater and poetry prior to leaving the University of Abidjan in 1984 to establish the arts center and model village Ki-Yi Mbok. The text describes itself as a "chant-roman" or song-novel. The novel is divided into nine "pages," or chapters, that touch on specific themes that the protagonist sees as a necessary aspect of the ritual which she dreams of performing an initiation which will give them the skills and perspective to transform reality. The protagonist, who calls herself a "misovire[16]", a term which I will explain further on, portrays her community of the valley of Lunaï as trapped in a debased and listless world without any real sensation of time and movement. These pages/ chapters have three main voices which are shown to the reader in different formats, reflecting diverse co-existing genres within the text. First, there is the actual journal-style prose written in a first-person perspective by the Misovire[17] and directed at the reader. The second is formatted to appear like a play and contains two more named characters: Grozi and Babou, two "academics" who have failed to realize that they are in the same timeless space as everyone else in the valley

[16] A neologism developed by Liking which I examine further below. Briefly, the term misovire is built out of *misos,* to hate in Greek and *vir*, man in Latin.

[17] My analysis of the text requires that I talk about the perspective of any "misovire" and the narrative voice and protagonist of the text, the "Misovire." I distinguish the two by the capitalization of the narrator's name.

of Lunaï. The reader observes these two men grouse in front of the Misovire, though they are unaware of her presence. She in turn interrupts the readers' interaction with them to comment on their perspectives and arguments. Finally, the Nuit-Noire is a disembodied voice presented as a poetic intervention and takes on feminine qualities but remains more ethereal than the other three characters. Liking describes this poetic voice as coming from the night, and which sings about a different possible Africa and embodies the creative force that Misovire seeks to unleash. Combined, these voices constitute a ritual which the Misovire claims to imagine and desire for the future but which the text creates with the participation of the reader. This interaction demonstrates the creative potential that women embody in Liking's cosmology as a force to not only reject governing narratives about Africa's future as being in decline after decolonization, but also as a force that creates new futures through what she calls the *parole-acte*, a creative force which could be spoken into reality through the speakers' understanding and building of the world's meaning.

The Misovire imagines a society that she describes as "rebalanced," one built on the imaginary of those who live inside of it which rejects extractive models of relation. Instead, this new society is supported through a diffusion of power at all levels so that decisions are never made outside of the communities to which they pertain. Using neologisms and meta-neologisms which demonstrate her control over French, breaking its rigidity as a colonial language in order to pass that power of creative language onto her initiates or readers. These initiates can then transform their communities through the imagination granted to them through this re-created language. Simultaneously, her text fuses literary genres to prove the power of *parole* as a force for creation when given over to women. She also creates this effect using intertextual references which link *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* with other texts in the *Bible*, for example, dwelling on

myths of creation and destruction. This technique extends even into the title, which is a reference to the books of *Job* and *Revelations*. At the same time, Liking uses ironic and baroque language which forces the reader to help produce meanings alongside the Misovire. She draws the reader in the ritual. Liking guides the Misovire through as well to demonstrate to the reader, as a participant in the text, how to create new futures.

My reading of the use of linguistic creativity to recruit the reader into the text's ritual is based on Liking's description of her own theoretical practice, which she developed after founding Ki-Yi Mbok. Ultimately, I will suggest that the concepts of *parole* and *verbe* (sometimes combined into the neologism "*parole-acte*") constitute a kind of poiesis which is epistemologically generative on its own terms rather than responding to those provided by exterior sources which would seek to project its own definitions onto it. This transformative quality is a process wherein Liking succeeds in imaging and producing an alternative future which is emblematic of her project at Ki-Yi Mbok. She does this to further an aesthetic and philosophical revolution which seeks to not only break previous gendered and colonial paradigms but to challenge the very nature of reality as it is organized. This challenge stems from her worldview as an autodidact raised in the Baasa culture rather than in the colonialist milieu of the French-influenced school systems of Cameroon. She uses her theater troupe to propagate this worldview. I elaborate on these concepts further below.

Much of the scholarship pertaining to *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* has either centered on the unique generic fusion of theater and narrative which the text uses to create a ritual within a modern context, or the roles that it carves out for women throughout this ritual through the voices of the Misovire and the Nuit-Noire. This fusion, which Liking has called both Ritual Theater and Operational Theater, centers around the notion that theater in Africa was not thought

of as such in pre-colonial society, but rather that ritual took the place of theater in society to act out social contradictions to find solutions. Her approach to ritual theater is informed by her training both as an autodidact and an initiate in the Basaa rituals which she grew up around. My contribution in this chapter is reading her use of ritual theater and her focus on women's roles together to propose that Liking seeks to create a space in which women do not simply have to react to the systems and society imposed by colonialism and the tendency of postcolonial societies to reproduce the social structures left behind by their former metropoles. Liking not only creates this space in the text, but she initiates the reader into the ritual through their interaction with the text itself. She defies these (post)colonial practices by breaking down the form of the French language to shape it into something which permits her to imagine a rebalanced society through her engagement with her use of the word.

1. Werewere Liking, A Million Explosions that Created Ritual Theater

Werewere Liking published her first book in 1977, a collection of poetry called *On ne raisonne pas le venin*. As the book was being published, she was in Paris arranging the release with the publisher, Éditions Saint-Germain-des-Pres. While there, she was barred from reentering Cameroon and has never returned, leaving behind her husband to avoid political persecution. It was while she was at the University of Paris that she met Marie-José Hourantier, her partner on many of her first forays into ritual theater. Michelle Mielly explores the material impact and creative process of Liking at Ki-Yi Mbok in her article "The Aesthetics of Necessity: An Interview with Werewere Liking" (2003). She explains that after Liking was exiled, she spent one year with Hourantier in Mali where she studied the practices of the Bambara healers and during their study, they developed "an ambitious African theatre/ethnographic arts movement that they named the *théâtre-rituel.*" (Mielly 31) Ritual theater, or the application of an African

artistic performance (ritual) to a format generally considered non-African format (theater) creates a new genre which responds both to African ritual's place in modernity which theater makes legible to outsiders. Simultaneously, this combination responds to African social needs that Liking sees as served better through African modalities of expression. Liking developed *théâtre-rituel* and later *théâtre-opérationelle*, both with and without Hourantier. I will examine the texts that they wrote together as well as some that Liking has written more recently on the form and function of Ki-Yi Mbock, or "l'Ultime Savoir de l'Univers" ("the Ultimate Knowledge of the Universe"; Liking 28). The village in its present state, as described by Liking herself, reflects the ritual of initiation that the Misovire imagines throughout *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Roots of *Théâtre-Rituel*

Liking saw some success developing this concept. However, she was only able to develop her own theories of creation after distancing herself from academia and founding the village of Ki-Yi Mbok, and her reasoning for this move sheds light on *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*'s significance. Her work was so unique in the cultural milieu that "[it] has often been dismissed as hermetic and obscure. To readers unfamiliar with the cultural background from which her vision proceeds… reading her work could indeed be an exercise in frustration" (D'Almeida and Morgan 17). After a few years, Liking expressed exasperation with the university because of the widening distance between the majority of people in Abidjan and its intelligentsia (Mielly 31). This dissatisfaction led her to disillusion and to quit her position at the Université d'Abidjan in disgust. Eventually, she started her socio-cultural project the Village Ki-Yi Mbok. It is this realization which also spurred Liking to publish *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* which Mielly notes "documents the collapse of the entire African continent under such a Westernized elite, to whom she refers as "faux-nègres" and "intellectualisants". The utopian dream spelled out in the

novel clearly foreshadowed the events that were soon to follow" (Mielly 32). This passage refers to the creation and management of the Village Ki-Yi in Cocody, the university district of Abidjan. Mielly argues that Liking's shift to directing the Village meant that her prolific publishing schedule up until that point slowed down significantly. Mielly states that this shift also led to the more praxis-oriented *théâtre-opérationnel*, which she viewed as a utilitarian form of artwork that she categorized as drawing from an *esthétique de la nécessité,* an aesthetic of necessity, a term which conveys that the art serves the communities for which it was created, to develop political and social consciousness (Mielly 31-32). As such, this shift seems to demonstrate two important facts for this analysis: first, it demonstrates that *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* sits at an inflection point in Liking's works and can be understood as a manifesto proclaiming her intention to take her work and move it into a more political sphere. Second, it shows that Liking was able to recognize what she sees as a deficiency in her own works prior to *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*, that they still failed to escape Western aesthetic processes which seek to freeze and categorize cultural practices outside of the West as somehow feminized and atavistic. Since publishing the text, Liking has clarified and articulated her position quite clearly that she views her role as one of pedagogy, one which articulates the need for a different kind of creative expression to create new possibilities within African societies.

Liking told Mielly in her accompanying interview that her inability to be classified generically has everything to do with her political purpose. She stated that "Today, no one knows where to classify me, in terms of an aesthetic. But it's according to the needs of the young people with whom I work. My theater is therefore a vital one, it functions according to the needs of the day" (54). She expands on this vitality in her most recent text, a pedagogical treatise called *L'enseignement de l'éveilleuse d'étoiles: Ntôrôl Tchôrôt* (2013). The subtitle is a term that

Liking has taken on for herself in Ki-Yi Mbok: the Star-Awakener (Mielly 55). In her role, she teaches that humans have five points in their being: Body, Emotions, Thoughts, Desires, and Consciousness which each build on each other to create a whole human who is initiated and open, awaked to a critical consciousness which allows them to think about their position in the world. In her text, the five points are superimposed on an image of a Namji, a figure of motherhood and fertility in the coastal regions between Cameroon and Nigeria. She explains that "L'étoile dont il est question dans cette section représente l'Homme Initié scintillant de manière équilibrée sur ses cinq points, capable de créer et responsable de sa création" ("The star which is in question in this section represents the sparkling initiated person who has found balance in his five points, capable of creating and responsible for his creation"; Liking 35; my trans.). She points out that this is similar to the epistemological symbology present in Vodoun, that shows that life springs forth from spirituality and thus all creation is seen as a way to commune with a divine force. It is religious in the sense that it appeals to the sense of spirituality that her works produce, attempting to unite Africa through dialogues between people who do not see a potential future in the status quo. She attempts to initiate them into a self-reflective way of thinking which demands an active participation in shaping the world through the use of creative speaking-into-being. Through this process, she demonstrates that she wants to draw in not only the actors but the observers, a phenomenon which also takes place in *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* and thus connects this work to the many texts that she has published since.

Irene Assiba d'Almeida and John Conteh-Morgan explain this phenomenon in their compilation text *The Original Explosion that Created Worlds* (2010) which aggregates all 20th and early 21st century scholarship on Liking, as stemming from the fact that Liking's process does not conform with the

> then dominant conception of literature… the literary text did not necessarily draw attention to itself as artifice; instead, it pointed transparently to its social and political referent. When formal innovation was harnessed at all, it remained *subordinate* to extra-artistic imperatives, usually the need for social and political transformation… It is this emphasis on literature and art as "poiesis," the art of creating and bringing into being new worlds and forms of consciousness, that distinguishes Liking's work. (D'Almeida and Conteh-Morgan 16)

D'Almeida and Conteh-Morgan thus suggest that Liking's principal concern, in creating new words, forced her to recognize the inability of extant genres to achieve what she sought to accomplish through théâtre rituel. The title of the village Ki-Yi, where Liking initiated the practice of ritual theater, means "place of Universal Knowledge" in her mother tongue of Basaa. It thus reflects the Basaa tradition of Mbokok, the philosophical substrate of Basaa thought which views energies like sound, movement, thought, and expression unify humans to their natural world. Understanding, thus, flows through all things from all things in a sort of inter-cultural exchange.

The creative process in *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*, as a result of Liking's Bassa cosmology, fits into a poeisis which results in the ability to transform reality. This transformation, as Liking explains, within Basaa cosmology, stems from the *parole-acte* or *verbe*, which D'Almeida explains forms part of a general trend in women's writing in Africa. The *parole-acte*:

> is an act that, because it is mediated by the creative process, does not reproduce reality but nevertheless does produce through fiction a kind of social reality, one having the power to expose, to modify, and even to subvert preexisting reality. Self-representation is also the very fact of writing the self, of restructuring experience to make room for a new self-definition. It results in self-constructed identity contextualized within politics and history. (*Francophone African Women Writers* 22)

D'Almeida shows that there is a distinct way in which the *théâtre-rituel* and its social process are used to bend reality to better suit the needs of women. The ritual itself

becomes, over time, affixed to reality through the force of will, what is in essence a combination of praxis and speaking. She elaborates further that the social implications for this reality-bending activity are vast:

> Thus having achieved their prise d'écriture—"taken" writing, laid hold of it—women are capitalizing on this new medium to see and represent themselves in a femino-centric perspective. They portray themselves as actors instead of spectators. They are at the core instead of the periphery. They explore, deplore, subvert, and redress the status quo within their fiction. They contend with the problems arising from sex, race, and class even as these exist within patriarchal, "postcolonial" societies. (D'Almeida 22-23)

The generation to which Liking belongs seeks to completely redefine language and take it for their own. The act of taking the vocabulary itself becomes a way to mold it into their own uses. Liking practices this linguistic innovation, and entirely molds French around her worldview through her use of neologisms and poetic intervention. Her texts thus create what becomes—much like the race of people she anticipates—a new mode of speaking, which in turn gives the text the power to reform the world around it. It thus in essence performs the same ritual theater she explored in Ki-Yi but through a text which places the reader in the space of the spectator-participant.

Hourantier describes the role of ritual theater process and the purpose of this structure in her text *Du rituel à la scène chez les Bassa du Cameroun* (1979) which describes a play written by Liking called "Djingo". Hourantier describes this kind of ritual which "désigne à la fois le rituel et le thérapeute de ce rituel" ("at once designs the ritual and the therapeutics of this ritual"; 13; my trans.). As this passage suggests, the ritual is a therapy for a member of the community, which requires the other members to take part as directors of the ritual who answer to the guide, called the Djingo, and also take part in the collective bearing of the issues of the individual. In

this case it is implied that the "maladie" in question is something like depression. She explains that while the music warms up, the Djingo does not participate in the dance and thus

> Son pas de danse, particulier à chaque guérisseur, imprimera désormais le rythme au rituel et permettra à chacun de découvrir à travers son corps les marques de la maladie. Ses articulations et parties du corps étaient jadis investies d'une signification précise qui devait agir sur le malade. Il ne subsiste plus aujourd'hui qu'une gestuelle « déspiritualisée », purement esthétique. (14)
>
> Its pace, particular to every healer, will henceforth imprint the rhythm of the ritual and will permit each participant to discover the source of the sickness through their body. The Djingo's articulations and corporeal movements were formerly vested with a precise meaning which could work on the sick person. It no longer persists today as anything but an aesthetic, a "despiritualized" gesture. (my trans.)

The combination of music and the role of the Djingo, along with the movement and participation of the audience, who repeat after the Djingo, give the entire group the ability to connect with the words:

> Pour l'Africain et le Bassa en particulier, le verbe fait partie du domaine du secret, sa force en dépend ; on rencontre ainsi de nombreux chants ésotériques compris des seuls initiés. Dans ce langage sacré des dieux, l'intonation et le geste qui l'accompagne revêtent plus d'importance que la signification du mot. La Parole s'affranchit, s'affirme en un être propre, devient la messagère de l'ancêtre qui à son tour transforme, rétablit l'équilibre rompu. (16)
>
> For the African and the Basaa in particular, the verb is part of the spiritual [secret] domain, its force depends on that; thus, we encounter several esoteric songs made up only of initiates. In this sacred language of the gods, the intonation and gesture which accompany it put on more importance than the base meaning of the word. The *Parole* breaks free, it asserts itself as its own being, becoming a messenger of the ancestor who in his visit transforms, reestablishes and balances that which is broken. (my trans.)

The restoration Hourantier describes comes through an act of collective spirituality which allows the imagined outcome to materialize through participants in order to produce a new reality out of the ritual—in the case of this Djingo, one which heals a mental disorder and reintegrates the individual into the collected group. Thus, it behaves halfway between a ritual and a sort of therapeutic court which rejects notions of fairness and instead symbolically solves the issues to

restore a form of balance. This balance is what Liking describes as liberation from the current order of things, it is a restoration not of some idealized past but of the balance that that past was able to provide through rituals which are reconstituted through this new medium.

While Liking was certainly revolutionary in the way in which she presented these ideas and the extremes to which she saw their necessity, ideas about escaping Western influence and reintegrating African society had been floating around postcolonial and decolonial circles for decades. Frantz Fanon's most famous work, *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), examines the process of decolonization and the dangers Fanon observed in its process while bearing witness to the Algerian Revolution in the 1950s as a leader of the FLN. One of the central concepts he proposes is that of the "New Man", wherein the act of decolonization should become a fundamentally humanizing activity for both the colonizer and the colonized. He argues that,

> La décolonisation ne passe jamais inaperçue car elle porte sur l'être, elle modifie fondamentalement l'être, elle transforme des spectateurs écrasés d'inessentialité en acteurs privilégiés, saisis façon quasi grandiose par le faisceau de l'Histoire. Elle introduit dans l'être un rythme propre, apporté par les nouveaux hommes, un nouveau langage, une nouvelle humanité. La décolonisation est véritablement création d'hommes nouveaux. Mais cette création ne reçoit sa légitimité d'aucune puissance surnaturelle : la « chose » colonisée devient homme dans le processus même par lequel elle se libère. (Fanon 40)

> Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The "thing" colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation. (Philcox 66)

Werewere Liking's notion of the race of Jasper and Coral, the descendants of the initiates who she seeks to guide in their transformation of the world, strongly reflects Fanon's process of rehumanization. As I will explore further, the Misovire finds herself face-to-face with a valley infected with sleeping sickness which is listless and futureless, filled with men and women

turned into Tsetse flies, literally dehumanized by their conditions and infecting others with that dehumanization.

I contend that this construction of the valley, called Lunaï, reflects a politics of death. Best described by Achille Mbembe in the essay and later book titled *Necropolitics* (2019), he argues that a trend which was thought to be Africa's backsliding turned out to be the world's future; the politics of death spread with a tendency towards foreclosed futures. This pervasive politics of death is omnipresent in a period of interlocking crises. This dehumanization results, unsurprisingly, in a larger and larger population deemed able to die. Thus, as Mbembe argues,

> The colony served as a pressure relief valve for all the undesirables for the categories of the population "whose crimes and debaucheries" could have been "rapidly destructive" or whose needs would have driven them toward prison or forced them to beg, while rendering them useless for the country. The scission of humanity into "useful" and "useless" – "excess" and "superfluidity" – has remained the rule, with utility being essentially measured against the capacity to deploy a labor force. (11-12)

The notion of superfluidity, the excess of population deemed disposable, seems to permeate the way in which Lunaï is characterized throughout the text. The reader first hears of the village through the narrator in the beginning, where the Misovire is setting the stage. While she wants to dedicate the text to something, she can't think of anything in Lunaï that she deems valuable: "Tout paraît si banal à Lunaï… Or en vérité tout y est plutôt peu commun et somme toute très singulier : Lunaï est un village merdeux et merdique" ("Everything seems so commonplace in Lunaï… But in reality everything is really rather different here and in fact quite out of the ordinary: Lunaï is a village that is shitty to the core."; Liking 13; Jager[18] 8). Much as Mbembe says above about the class of undesirables in the Global South, Liking identifies Lunaï as simply

[18] All translations of *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* are from the only Marjolijn de Jager's 2000 translation.

being “shitty and useless,” a space that she views as inherently valueless. Liking, thus, identified this trend within her own society early and succeeded in articulating it.

Mbembe suggests, then, that the curative for an era in which war is shifting in its definition to be a pervasive, low-level violence is thinking on a global scale which rejects the dividing lines and shrinking of the world that capital (a fiction in our own time that has continued to impact the present as much as it impacted Liking when she published *Elle sera*) proclaims is the only way forward. Instead, Mbembe suggests that this must rest on Édouard Glissant’s term “Tout-Monde” wherein globalization is not a predetermined force but instead a set of tendencies that are the result of the interacting and interlocking of cultures to produce creole societies which, unlike what their governing metropoles think, are not a predetermined social possibility that they dream comes with conquest. Mbembe explains this by stating that “This doing, it endeavors to break with the spirit of the times, which, we know, is about closure and demarcation of all sorts, and in which borders between here and there, the near and the distant, the inside and the outside, serves as a Maginot Line for a major part of what passes as “global thinking” today” (Mbembe 9). To that end, standing with the new wretched, Mbembe seems to suggest that rejecting the social forces which keep society tied to these 19th century logics of governance, left behind by the colonial regimes which sought to “civilize” Africa and its styles of governance. This requires a prioritization of humanity rather than technologies of regulation and mediation which prefer capital, subjugating humans to the reproducibility of capital rather than submitting capital to the interest of humans and the continued habitability of the planet. While these problems have come into much sharper focus since the end of the 20th century, Liking’s work brings them into relief by producing an African model for centering

humanity through the ritual that she creates in her text. Her text, thus, serves as a vector through which alternatives to the politics of death can be acted out and articulated.

Much like in Liking's play *Djingo*, *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* is described in the Avant-Verbe as a curative but far from a silver bullet. However, the value that Liking does see comes from the fact that it demands that the reader participate in the play she is laying out. In the introduction, she declares that

> Jouons pour une fois à être prophète, chacun chez soi, pour changer… Il y a assez de malheurs de misères sur chaque continent actuellement pour que tous les prophètes de malheur puissant demeurer chez eux sans chômer… Dans notre jeu, il n'y aura pas de solution magique ni de dogme. Nos héros nous laisseront sur notre faim : ils n'iront pas assez loin (pensez donc la nouvelle race serait déjà sur pied !) Ils tâtonnent papillonnent ronronnent et ronflent ! Et avec eux une femme incroyable, fragile dans sa chair, les suivant juste du regard de l'oreille et de loin, à l'affût du mot-force qui formulera et manifestera son rêve, un rêve chaud dans un corps qu'elle craint n'être que de « la viande »… Une misovire quoi ! ... (Liking 8-9)

> Yes. For once, let's play at being a prophet, each in his own place, for a change.… There's enough wretchedness and woe on every continent now that any prophet of doom can stay home without risking unemployment… In our game there will be no magical solution no dogma. Our heroes will leave us unsatisfied: they won't go far enough (imagine the new race already there!). They're groping, they're fluttering, purring and snoring! And with them an incredible women, frail in flesh, following them only with her gaze her ear and from afar, stalking the power-word that will formulate and give shape to her dream, a fiery dream inside a body she fears is nothing but "meat."… A *misovire* in short! (3-4)

By framing herself as a prophet in the introduction as a direct challenge to the so-called *prophètes de malheur* that make claims about the bleak future of Africa, Liking allows us to suspend reality in order to imagine and thus create a better one. She insinuates that we as the participants in this ritual theater can play the same roles as those who predict misery for their own game. In this framing, she can create the figure of the Misovire, a role that she proclaims she will take on for the duration of the text. She ironizes who has in general been considered a hero in African discourse, the architects of movements like Négritude who sought to be

recognized by the outside world which would project its own thoughts onto Africa. Liking, in this characterization, views them as little more than pedants who stumble wildly, mumbling and making a lot of noise in vague academic gestures, and whom she will parody brutally throughout the text as they prove their inability to do more than argue. This allows Liking to contrast these men against the Misovire who, from our understanding in this description, is trying to engage in the full social transformation that Fanon describes as the "hommes nouveaux". She thus invites the reader to participate and initiate themselves into this cadre through the process she outlines in the text, which allows her to produce new stories through this ritual, and thus to imagine a new future.

3. Neologisms and New Genres

Liking's ritual is communicated through a new genre, the Chant-Roman, which is a composite genre. This genre is made from not only local African cultural practices like poetry and oral history, but also from genres such as what is traditionally thought of as "theater" in Western Culture that have been imposed on Africa as a product of its colonial relationship to Europe. The Chant-Roman, to work best for Liking's process, requires the production of new ideas which can flourish and take shape in the verb-space that the ritual produces. To create these new ideas, Liking centers the use of neologisms in multiple ways throughout the text: the creation of new words, the juxtaposing of verbs in sentences, and the baroque piling on of words to generate new meanings and interconnections between words through association. She creates new words such as the titular "misovire" coming from the Greek *misos* "to hate" and the Latin declarative noun *vir* "man"; on first blush this could simply mean something as simple as "Man-hater". In an interview with Bernard Mangier in *Notre Librarie,* a now-defunct quarterly magazine about African literature, Liking explains the term "misovire":

> … C'est une femme qui n'arrive pas à trouver un homme admirable. Elle se déclare « misovire ». *[Magnier :] Pourquoi « misovire » ?* Certains m'ont critiqué en disant que ce mot n'existait pas. Ils auraient préféré « misandre » ou je ne sais quel autre terme. Je préférais un terme plus proche de misogyne. *[Magnier :] Que lui arrive-t-il, à cette « misovire » ?* Ce qui peut arriver de pire à une femme : ne pas trouver un homme qu'elle puisse admirer. Elle se sent entourée par des « larves » uniquement préoccupées par leurs panses et leurs bas-ventres et incapables d'une aspiration plus haute que leur tête, incapables de lui inspirer de ces grands sentiments qui agrandissent… Alors elle devient misovire… (Magnier 17)

> … She's a woman who cannot find a man worthy of her respect. She can call herself a *"misovire"*. [*B. Magnier:*] *Why "misovire"?* Some people have criticized me, saying that this word doesn't exist. They would have preferred "misandrist" or whatever other term. I preferred a term closer to misogynist. *[Magnier:] What happens to this misovire?* The worst thing that can happen to a woman: she can't find a man who she can bear to admire. She feels that she is surrounded by worms who are primarily concerned with their paunches and their libido and incapable of any aspiration higher than their own heads, incapable of inspiring those big feelings that grow… So, she becomes a misovire… (my trans.)

This definition implies that Liking's approach allows her to take her new words and force already-established words to take their meaning from her neologisms rather than the other way around. Further, it clearly reflects her characterization of Grozi and Babou as weak-willed men masquerading as revolutionaries. This becomes clear in the way in which the misovire expresses her desire for a respectable man: she wants one who finds it difficult to find a woman worthy of his respect, as she finds that not only the men are unworthy of respect.

The misovire also finds the women of Lunaï to be distasteful and debased, as when she says that:

> Les femmes tsé-tsé de Lunaï qui vont m'entendre prôner l'art de plaire vont en profiter pour ruiner leurs époux se prostituer s'offrir bijoux fringues produits de beauté. Elles trouveront tous les moyens pour exalter leur superficialité sous prétexte de vouloir plaire… mais je suis bien tranquille elles étaient comme ça avant que je n'ai dit un seul mot Lunaï m'en est témoin ! (Liking 23).

> The tsetse women of Lunaï who will hear me extol the art of pleasing will take advantage of it in order to destroy their husbands prostitute themselves buy themselves jewelry clothes beauty products. They will find every method to exalt

> their superficiality under the pretext of wanting to please… But I'm not worried they were that way before, long before I ever said one word, Lunaï is my witness! (15)

The Misovire, then, demands a change in women just as much as she demands a change in the men, noting to the reader that there are few in Lunaï who are worthy of any respect. As Yvette Balana points out in her article "La parole du Mbombock" (2010), her conception of an African feminism does not reflect western conceptions of destroying or castrating men's power. Instead, "s'il y a des misovires à Lunaï, il y a aussi des « misogynes » qui cherchent la femme admirable et qui ne trouvent que des tsé-tsé" ("If there are misovires in Lunaï, there must also be "misogines" who are also looking for an admirable woman but can only find tsé-tsés"; Balana 98; my trans.). This reflects a general trend that I will explore later in this chapter wherein in Liking's interpretation, African feminisms demand not only women's liberation by their own hands but the active participation of men who understand the benefit of a liberated society and empowered women. What Liking finds, as the interviews and her interactions at the University of Abidjan show, is that postcolonial Africa is foundationally debased and unable to continue on its current trend without a total revolution of social relations rooted in a redress of the self and its relationship to the world around it.

In the passage above, Liking also shows us another of her many neologisms, that of the *tsetse* as a metonymy, already taking root in the fact that she refers to men that a misovire finds distasteful as "larves". The insect itself, the Tsetse, is a species of fly that is native to Western and Central Africa between Sierra Leone to the Congo River. The fly is a carrier of the parasite which causes human trypanosomiasis, sleeping sickness. However, Liking uses it to describe the "parasitic" ruling class which not only carries this disease of idleness but acts as a vector for its proliferation. The use of the tsetse metaphor for the inhabitants of Lunaï, then, shows the lack of

respect that she has for these figures. They contribute to the listless, stagnant feeling which permeates the air in Lunaï and that Liking describes to Magnier in her interview. She implies, then, that the *tsetse*-people bring little than death and decay to the village; an idea upon which she expands later to continue to describe the horrible situation in Lunaï.

In the Avant-Verbe, itself a neologistic term referring to the prologue which Liking crafts to highlight the creative potential of the ritual, the writer begins by describing actual discourse about the state of Africa and showing it to the reader as a dominant idea against which she is fighting. She lists them using a poetic format which reads:

> « L'Afrique noire est mal partie »
> « L'Afrique étranglée »
> « L'Afrique en danger »
> « L'Afrique trahie… » …
> Des mots pour dire l'Afrique gangrenée et prédire les temps où il n'y aura plus à manger que des criquets migrateurs, et à la bonne saison encore !!!... Pour dire que « l'Afrique colonisée n'avais pas d'avenir et l'Afrique indépendante va mourir »… etc… etc… C'est peut-être vrai tout ça. Mais il y a d'autres vérités. Certainement… (Liking 7)

> "False start in Africa"
> "Stranglehold on Africa"
> "Africa in Danger"
> "Africa Betrayed…" …
> Words that express a gangrenous Africa and foretell times when there will be nothing left to eat but migratory locusts, and that only in the good season!!! Words that express that "colonized Africa never did have a future and that independent Africa is going to die"…. And so on… and so forth… All that may well be true. Buth there are other truths. Certainly… (3)

The opening four quotes, which all begin with a declaration about Africa, suggest to the reader that these suppositions are external. Indeed, this is reflective of Mbembe's observation that "In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity" (Mbembe 2). The broad, sweeping

characterization of Africa proposed as the prevailing discourse by Liking, rather than acting as a form of speculation, seems to generate the very problems that it expresses much in the same way that Africa's self-image is generated outside of itself. By placing each of these speculations about Africa's situation into quotes, Liking makes clear that they come from external sources, as she uses quotation marks to express extradiegetic actions, in this case referring to words that don't come from Africa itself and are simply applied to it. It is significant that she doesn't deny the essential truth in the propositions, carrying them further by poking fun at common solutions provided outside of Africa, such as using crickets instead of meats for protein, proclaiming that postcolonial Africa has little to look forward to and has been essentially stunted by the ways in which colonization has harmed its ability to reproduce society on its own. However, by placing this supposition in the Avant Verbe and proclaiming that there are other truths to be found, she opens the possibility for her text to generate new truths for Africa.

One of the ways that this becomes clear is the mix of prose and poetry that she uses, such as the rhyme "partie / trahie," that forces the reader to pay specific attention to the structure of her writing as a new sort of founding document. Even the title *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* is a reference to the book of *Job*, famously a story of Job's redemption after a capricious and unknowable god takes everything from him in order to settle a bet with his nemesis. In the New International Version of the Bible, the mention of the two precious materials of jasper and coral takes place in an interlude about acquiring wisdom, when Job says that "Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies" (Job 28:18). In this framing, Liking's challenge against the *prophètes de malheur* takes on a sort of apocalyptic bent while simultaneously proposing that the future beyond this apocalypse does not have to simply trend downward into oblivion, repeating to herself that there are certainly other truths throughout the

Avant-Verbe. Further, she implies through the title that the blue race, while perhaps her goal at some point, may not actually be the solution to the problem, much like she implies in the *Avant-Verbe*, there are not any magic solutions. At the beginning of the text, though the narrator states that:

> la tribu la race ne signifient plus région peau mais communauté de Vision et d'Aspiration / Et l'Homme de la prochaine Race se présentera dans un corps sain plus fort et plus harmonieux avec des Emotions plus riches plus stables et plus affinées. Sa pensée sera plus rigoureuse et plus créatrice sa volonté plus ferme et mieux orientée sa conscience plus ouverte… (Liking 22)
>
> The tribe race will no longer mean region skin but community of Vision and of Aspiration / And the Man of the next Race will appear in a stronger healthy body that lives in greater harmony with richer more solid and more refined Emotions. His thinking will be more rigorous and more creative his will strong and better directed his consciousness more open… (14)

Thus, instead, it is the people themselves that have become precious by the end of the text. Liking shows how she creates a verb-space by seeking other truths using parole which suspends the reality around it and where she can imagine new worlds while she observes the valley of Lunaï in its wake-sleep state. By producing this space in which reality is completely suspended, she also forces the reader to join in on her verbal productions, as the meanings of the neologisms require not only her production but the participation of the reader who must be within this space to be able to understand the meaning that Liking is creating. In this way, her neologistic genre produces a space within which she can create new roles and redistribute power outside of the restrictions placed on them by governing narratives of decline which hang over the text and that Liking and her Misovire are fighting against the entire time.

I argue that Liking's use of neologistic vocabulary and a very loose syntax creates a power structure inversion whereby French is subjugated to the epistemological forces of Mbombok, generally seen as an inversion of the norm which tends to see language usage

restricted in colonizing languages. For example, she repeats sounds, words, and phrases several times to create a sensation of terms piling up and crashing into each other. Rather than losing the sense of the words involved, the reader is granted a totalizing vision of the scene in the excess of it. Liking exemplifies this technique in a passage that takes place after a new character, Monsieur le Ministre, nearly destroys the village during one of their sacred ceremonies by treating it as a tourist attraction:

> La nuit pas une femme ne refusa la honte de gémir sous des sexes sans couilles : aucun homme n'avait eu le courage de parler de l'inqualifiable conduite de Monsieur le Ministre et aucun homme n'avait trouvé en sa femme le miroir qui aurait pu lui renvoyer une image de lui impossible à accepter une image qu'il aurait refusée quitte à tenter l'impossible quitte à rechercher la difficile voie qui mène vers le monde des dieux. (Liking 89)
>
> That night not one woman refused the shame of moaning beneath the cock of a male without balls: not one man had had the courage to speak up about the unspeakable behavior of the Minister of State and not one man had found his woman in the mirror that could have reflected an image of him that would be impossible for him to accept an image he would have refused even if it meant trying the impossible searching for the difficult road that leads to the world of the gods. (64)

This text is presented to the reader as a paragraph but only has one piece of punctuation in it before the end of the statement and its use is to present a list or a scene. Without any punctuation, the phrases take on a totality by characterizing the impotence of the men without explicitly stating it. The repetition of sounds and words, meanwhile, misdirects the reader's attention into finding a possible dividing line in the list which will signal the next item. Instead, this usage of French demands that the readers drop their preconceptions around antecedents and examine the text carefully: nouns and verbs are implied rather than explicitly stated and without punctuation, the syntax begins to matter less than the totalizing image. As such, Liking demonstrates how her command of French gives her the resources to subjugate it to her will and use it to build images out of new forms of the language rather than prescribed methods.

By using poetic license in an entirely new genre, Liking circumvents the criticism of using colonial languages proposed by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o in his text *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). While I tend to agree with Ngũgĩ's assessment in the text and I think that Liking argues the same point as he does, namely that language is one of the main forces which continues to subjugate African cultures to Western thinking. They take two different approaches to the same issue. Ngũgĩ argues that the colonial languages cannot be used for the purpose of epistemological decolonization and states plainly that "I believe that my writing in Gĩkũyũ language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people. In schools and universities our Kenyan languages… were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation, and punishment" (28). Liking's approach takes on a different form, perhaps because of her status as an autodidact of non-African literatures and themes rather than a western educated individual (Liking *L'enseignement de l'éveilleuse d'étoiles* 9): she is first and foremost trained in the Basaa traditions of Mbombok, "un initié à la philosophie « mbok », qui se traduit par « l'univers organisé » ou « l'univers arrangé »" ("an initiate into the "mbok" philosophy, which translates to "the organized universe" or "the arranged universe"; 16; my translation). Thus, Liking's origins lead her to the same space to which they carried Ngũgĩ but from different directions: rather than emphasizing local language as a decolonial tool, she instead seeks to make French suit the needs of the Africans using it, essentially removing the restrictions that the colonizers use to limit the imaginations of the people trapped within it. To this end, while Ngũgĩ sees the recapture of struggle and the language of solidarity through the use of local languages, Liking seeks to create a different vision of Pan-Africanism, one which bends the language to the needs of African

philosophical thought by creating new words and different meanings through the inversion and destruction of syntax.

Anne Adams expands on the linguistic characterization of the text and suggests that not only does the structure of the novel reflect a ritual, but the text is also an adaptation of the ritual itself. In her text "To W/rite in a New Language: Werewere Liking's Adaptation of Ritual to the Novel" (1993), she explores how Liking's work primarily focuses on transgression of rules and the re-writing of tropes to foster new meanings under those same structures. She examines two of Liking's novels*: Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* and *Orphée Dafric* (1981), both of which use ritual to break the novel's structure down and imbue it with the new forms of being that she proposes. In essence, Liking wants her work (*Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* in particular) to be read as a model for a social healing ritual that mimics her other play rituals. However, it differs from her plays because of the multiple voices which intervene in the text—Adams describes this as a reflection of the Basaa healing ritual: "A type of social psychotherapy, this process is based upon the principle that the group must heal itself, that it participates in the revolution of its problems… It is through the language provided by the artist to the inform group that the latter receives the material to articulate the prescription for its self-healing" (4). These rituals and their introduction into the novel as well as the structure of Liking's writing function as the production of a wholly new language rather than one that can simply critique. The ritualistic aspect of this text, much like in the *Djingo* above, comes from audience participation in the spectacle, which in this case is created through the Misovire's engagement with the play put on by Grozi and Babou. As such, the reader is provided a mediator who produces meaning in the text and provides it to the reader, who observes alongside her. In the following passage, the Misovire both opens and closes the dialogue between Grozi and Babou, which also includes an interlude from the Nuit-

Noire about the futility of their dialogue. In a conversation about education, the dialogue devolves into an argument about the inevitability of class systems:

> Babou – Je suis d'accord avec toi que c'est contradictoire. Si le pion n'a été créé pour indiquer la position de la pensée active du stratège démiurge qui manifeste sa créativité en le poussant, il n'y a aucune raison qu'il se reproduise des lors que la reproductivité est déjà stratégie et création en elle-même. Un pion qui se reproduit a nécessairement un plan…
> Grozi – Quel genre de pions sommes-nous donc à Lunaï, à nous reproduire sans savoir le pourquoi et le comment ? (Liking 140-141)

> Babou: I agree with you that it's a contradiction. If the pawn had been created only to mark the position of active thought of the strategist-demiurge who demonstrates his creativity by moving him around, there would be no reason whatsoever for him to reproduce given that reproductivity is already a strategy and creation in itself. A pawn that preproduces itself inevitably has a plan…
> Grozi: What kind of pawns are we then in Lunaï, we who reproduce without knowing the why and the wherefore? (103)

The Misovire, exasperated, responds with a question : "Quel genre de pions sommes-nous ? Et ils admettaient donc qu'ils étaient des pions. Le problème était le genre… Et chaque fois que je m'arrête sur eux j'en perds le désire de parler" ("What kind of pawns are we? And so they were actually admitting that they were pawns. The problem was what kind."; 141; 103). This initiation serves as an education which brings the reader awareness to the challenges facing Lunaï, but also begins to suggest the solutions to it by following the responses the Misovire has to the failings of Grozi and Babou. Her ideas are generative, and thus function not only as an initiation for the characters therein but also the reader who is drawn into the text by the genre. As such, this text seems to be another in a long list that Liking has created that seek, as their first step before fixing societies' problems, to restore balance to the community through ritual that is reified through the renovation of an imposed, but useful, language.

If we return to the *Avant-Verbe*, one of the ways that this becomes clear is the mix of prose and poetry that she uses. Her technique forces the reader to pay specific attention to the

structure of her writing as a new sort of founding document. As the creator of these words, she claims herself to be near-supernatural through her use of the parole and as such she can imagine new worlds while she observes the valley of Lunaï in its wake-sleep state:

> Lunaï est un village brûlé et las. Hélas !... Les corps y paraissent vieux étriqués repoussants incompatibles avec le dialogue. Les gens y sont vraiment seuls. Alors ils achètent ou vendent leur compagnie (à vil prix et pour cause) quand les instincts deviennent plus forts que l'indifférence… Car les émotions-moteurs à Lunaï se réduisent à l'indifférence et à la jalousie. Et l'on a inhumé tout besoin de formulation bien sûr. Comment alors espérer secréter le goût de responsabilité et un esprit d'initiative ? La volonté est dispersée aux quarte coins des futilités et les énergies sont gaspillées. (Liking 23-24)

> Lunaï is a burned-out and weary village. Alas! Bodies seem old scrawny revolting incompatible with dialogue. The people here are truly alone. So they buy or sell their companionship (at a cheap price and rightly so) when their urges become stronger than their indifference… For the driving emotions in Lunaï are reduced to indifference and jealousy. And of course any need for articulation has been buried. How then can they hope to secrete the zest for responsibility and a spirit of initiative? Willpower has been scattered to the four corners of futility and all energies have been wasted… (15)

Through this characterization, we can see the nearly automatic life in the village that seems nearly like play-acting. In difference is the primary emotion that the Misovire can identify and beyond that, people there are left in a state where they cannot hope to trust one another. The neologism "émotion-moteur" further highlights the way that the village nearly seems to be sleepwalking while under the influence of the tsetse fly. By juxtaposing the indifference within the village with the primary vector for African Trypanosomiasis, the characteristics of the village begin to seem sicklier than simply that of a space in decline, implying, on some level, that there is a curative for the village's malaise.

The Misovire proclaims that "Jouons à accumuler toutes les faiblesses les blocages les placages les laideurs et les velléités. Superposons. Entassons. Mélangeons. Ça ne va pas loin certes. Mais c'est un jeu. Voilà : La parole n'a plus de sens. Le regard, le plaisir, l'amitié sont

figés dans le mitigé. Les désires originels sont pervertis" ("Let's play a game in which we amass every weakness every blockage every veneer every bit of ugliness and every stray impulse. Let's superimpose. Let it pile up. It won't go very far that's for sure. But it's only a game. There it is: the word no longer has any meaning. Looks, pleasure, friendship are congealed in ambivalence. Original desires have become perverted." Liking 7; 3). By producing this space in which reality is completely suspended, she also forces the reader to join in on her verbal productions, as the meanings of the neologisms require not only her participation but that of the reader. Using the first-person plural, Liking involves the reader directly in the text, they must be within this space to be able to understand the meaning that Liking is creating. In doing so, the reader follows the Misovire's transformative path. In this way, her neologistic genre produces a space within which she can create new roles and redistribute power outside of the restrictions placed on them by governing narratives through the use of the reflective power of the parole as Liking understands it.

4. Misovirist Poeisis

In *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (1994), d'Almeida frames misovirism as a kind of central conceit of how African feminisms work in general, though like many African thinkers (including the two in this dissertation, Liking and Paulina Chiziane), she is hesitant to label works traditionally considered as feminist by Western standards as such. Instead, d'Almeida suggests that African women have been much more comfortable advocating for their own rights in society because they have traditionally taken much larger public social roles than their western counterparts, particularly before colonialism. It also means that in their marginalized positions in the postcolonial era, they find writing and creation in particular to be a necessary process, which makes poeisis itself a central function of

African women's writing. This is exactly the way that Liking has centered it. D'Almeida suggests:

> No doubt these women *are* marginalized not only as women but also as blacks, Africans, and members of the so-called Third World. Yet as they demonstrate, writing means empowerment and can serve to undermine the marginalizing project and move from margin to center. Becoming their own *créatrices*, women use a poetics to reject representation by others that they view as mere construction, an invention of the African woman the same was as Valentin Mudimbe speaks of the "invention of Africa". (d'Almeida 22)

This construction of the African woman, ultimately, leads to the conceptualization of women as Liking portrays them, as women who are exhausted from having to fight a double colonialism, first by the European colonizers and then by the men who benefitted from that social system. It makes sense that they would not yet have seen a man worthy of any respect, in spite of the fact that they may still be looking for one.

This desire for a respectable partnership is, as d'Almeida suggests elsewhere, a significant paradigm in African feminisms. Rather than wishing to jettison men in favor of creating a feminine-dominated society, African feminisms have generally recognized the need for collaboration with men to create a more just society rather than fantasizing about a world without them[19]. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a feminist thinker who works in the US and Nigeria. In her writings on feminism she is chiefly concerned with the ways in which cultural shifts can be brought about through generational pedagogy which passes on the notions of humanism and imagination to the next generation of women as they grow up. Her text *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) explores this generational pedagogy through an epistolary that Adichie carried out with her childhood friend, Ijeawele, who just had her first child. In this sense, Liking and Adichie are approaching a common problem through two

[19] d'Almeida, Irène Assiba. Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence. University Press of Florida, 1994.

different but intersecting perspectives: while Liking is concerned with generating new subjects through her ritual theater, which is to say a form of artistic and creative expression which allows for the imagination to dream up new futures, Adichie is concerned with a role that women already play with or without a patriarchal intervention to regulate it: motherhood. In framing her suggestions as a pedagogical model for a new generation, Adichie is achieving much the same goal: she is creating a reproducible space in which feminist thinking can expand outward and create new subjects that themselves are equipped to combat governing fictions and imagine alternate futures. These subjects, however, are not exclusively women and as such, this framework demands that men and women work together to foster these alternative futures.

The frame which Adichie provides to Ijeawele in the text provides some clarity on how she conceives of her own black feminism as it relates to men. In describing the role of Ijeawele's husband, Chudi, in raising their daughter Chizalum, Adichie argues that,

> Chudi does not deserve any special gratitude or praise, nor do you—you both made the choice to bring a child into the world and the responsibility for that child belongs equally to you both. It would be different if you were a single mother, whether by circumstances or choice, because "doing it together" would then not be an option. But you should not be a "single mother" unless you are truly a single mother.
> My friend Nwabu once told me that because his wife left when his kids were young, he became "Mr. Mom," by which he meant that he did the daily caregiving. But he was not being a "Mr. Mom"; he was simply being a dad. (Adichie 13)

Tinged with the same sorts of gestures at irony and subtle disdain for the way that men think they can behave, Adichie shows that the way to raise a proper feminist for her friend in Nigerian society has just as much to do with the way that her husband engages with the child as it does with her engaging the child. As a result, we can see the tendency that d'Almeida describes, that feminism in an African context demands better from the men around it. We can see here the same sort of tendency which we see in Liking's writing: that advancing a feminist and ultimately

liberatory social movement has everything to do with creating not only new female subjects but male as well, a restorative to balance rather than a mimicry of the works of men.

The sort of bland listlessness that came out of governing narratives in Lunaï is apparent in the way that Liking describes it, not only as a debased place but one with very little true passion or emotion, one where the humanity and vibrancy has left the environment. This animating force that is lacking here is what Liking suggests is part of the central problem in Lunaï. She describes it by saying

> Et je crois que c'est un problème sérieux le manque de désire à Lunaï. Car ici on n'est plus jamais fou de quoi que ce soit : ni d'amour ni de haine. On n'aime même pas l'argent : on est pris dans son engrenage et l'on tuerait pour lui mais sans passion !!! On ne déteste même plus la misère mais on se vendrait pour en sortir sans aspiration sans autre but. Les Tsés-Tsés ont vaincu le Combat ! (64)
>
> I believe this lack of desire to be a serious problem in Lunaï. For her nobody is ever mad anymore no matter what it concerns: mad neither with love nor with hate. They don't even like money: they're caught up in the system and they'd kill for it but without any passion!!! They don't even despise wretchedness anymore but they'd sell themselves to get out of it without any longing without any further goal. The Tsetses have vanquished the will to Fight! (46)

Again, she uses the metaphor of the tsetse fly coming into central form here and this equivalency between the complete economic, social, and political disenfranchisement and the actual disease of trypanosomiasis: a disease which places a wake-sleep sort of state on the entire valley. This creates a listlessness which prevents even the imagination from breaking out of the dream-state in which Africans find themselves.

Even the Misovire's tone becomes desperate as she declares this problem. Liking demonstrates this in the way that she begins to talk with little punctuation, repeating herself until the pace of the reading becomes frenetic:

> Depuis que j'ai rêvé d'un petit nègre aux yeux bleus j'exulte et j'attends j'attends et je prie. Mes yeux s'ouvriront et je saurai et je ferai des enfants qui seront de jaspe et de corail vrais de souffle et de feu qu'il en suit ainsi ! Qu'il en soit ainsi

> avant que je n'atteigne la page huit de mon journal d'hors de bord d'or quand viendra le moment de parler de l'équilibre du monde des enfants de de leur éducation moi qui n'ai plus ni éducation ni enfant… (Liking 146)
>
> Ever since I've been dreaming of a little black boy with blue eyes I'm rejoicing and I'm waiting waiting and I pray. My eyes will open and I'll know and I'll make children who will be out real jasper and coral of breath and of fire and may it be so! May it be so before I reach page eight of my golden logbook when the moment comes that I must speak out the world's equilibrium about children about their education I who have no more education or children… (106)

This passage clearly shows the narrator becoming desperate to escape the cul-de-sac of history that the valley represents. She dreams of her own motherhood as something that can save the valley from extinction and then moves on quickly to describe all of the things that the child will have because of its passage on to become a part of the new race. It is the discourse of Africa being strangled and it is thus framed as a desperate cry, of being betrayed that is manifest in these tsetse-people. What Liking seeks to do, then, is to not only bring the Lunaïques out of the state of wake-sleep, she also aims rearrange their social relations through the ritual which converts them from outsiders to initiates. One of the main ways that she envisions this on the masculine side, then, is to relinquish their roles as the sole patriarchs, giving room for a matriarchal creativity to participate in the formation of something new. Fearing that Grozi and Babou will only ever talk if left to their own devices, she dreams of the outcome of their initiation, saying,

> Il faut compenser il faut rééquilibrer peser de toutes nos masses d'atouts rassembler l'hérédité et les héritages rajouter de la progéniture prévoir des relais des retraites rallonger les vies prolonger la vie se maintenir debout sous peine de néant-éternelle !!! (Liking 134)
>
> We must compensate we must find our balance again bring all our weight our trumps to bear gather up our heredity and inheritances engender progeny anticipate the next generation and retirements lengthen lives extend life remain upright under the penalty of everlasting-nothingness!!! (98)

The rebalancing that she proposes here permits the reader and the narrator to engage in the potential of the process but also lays out what is ultimately at stake. Allowing men and women to take on new positions and thus restore a form of balance to African societies through the redefinition of said roles would not just be a nice outcome, it would mean the continued survival of Lunaï. As a synecdoche for Africa itself, Liking lays out her theory that bringing postcolonial African society into balance again is the best bulwark against the predictions of Africa's eventual end.

5. Men's Initiation

As a misovire, the narrator cannot only find a detached contempt for the people she's watching, the two false academics who represent a westernized elite, simply talk without taking any tangible action. Her description of them takes on an oral quality which seems to interrupt the action going on in their inherently performative discussion, remarking that her wake sleep state is also caused by their constant bickering. Formatted within the text to appear as a play that is being observed, the Misovire notes that she falls asleep watching them talk and remarks "Mon problème c'est que Grozi et Babou parlent trop… S'ils agissaient en accord avec leur dire je n'aurais pas de scrupule à leur dédier mon journal d'or-de-bord et je n'en serais plus la…" ("My problem is that Grozi and Babou talk too much… If they'd act according to what they say I wouldn't have any qualms about dedicating my golden logbook to them and I'd be in much better shape…"; Liking 54; 38). By interrupting the action in this play, the Misovire controls how we can interpret Grozi and Babou's words and actions. She suggests that they are more obsessed with the pedantic nature of words than the force that they can carry, looking backwards towards an imagined or re-created tradition. By seeking to recreate tradition in this manner, Grozi and Babou fail to understand the generative force of *parole* as Liking's work defines it.

She demonstrates this by creating two neologisms from the start and end points of their desires as far as she understands them as an outside observer to demonstrate the inherent contradictions in their approach to their own decolonization.

This is also apparent in the way that Grozi is constantly masturbating in front of the misovire and Babou; he seems to not realize that he is doing so until he is finished. When she first introduces Grozi in the text, she points out:

> GROZI s'est encore masturbé.
> Et le voici à nouveau la queue – devant basse molle une goutte honteuse pendouille là hésitante : tombera pas…
> - Je voulais… Je voudrais… J'aurais voulu… Une aventure… Non ! une situation…, une rencontre c'est ça ! J'aurais voulu une rencontre initiatique…
>
> Il hésite… puis il se détourne furieux. Que lui ai-je encore fait ?
> - Ça va, ça va ! Tu me méprises, je sais ! Tu méprises tous ceux qui sont comme moi, tous les tsé-tsés de Lunaï. Allez va ! Joue les supérieurs, ça te va si bien…
>
> Et il s'enfuit. Me voici seule encore une fois seule toujours seule jusqu'à quand encore ? (Liking 11)

> GROZI has masturbated again.
> And there he is again with his tail-in-front hanging low and slack a shameful drop dangling shilly-shallying: will fall won't fall…
> "I wanted… I would like… I would have liked… An adventure… No! Something else,… an encounter that's it! I would have liked an initiatory encounter…"
> He hesitates… Then he turns away furiously. What did I do to him now?
> "All right, all right! You despise me, I know! You despise all those who are like me, all Lunaï's tsetses. Go ahead! Pretend that you are superior, that suits you to perfection…"
> And he takes off. Here I am alone again still alone how much longer must that go on? (6)

Simultaneously grotesque and parodic, the fact that he continues to masturbate in front of her while seeming to practice his French grammar as he strains to get the words out suggests that he finds some pleasure in the fact that he can conjugate with the French language so well. In addition, he focuses on both himself and desire (conjugating the verb "to want", *vouloir*), further drawing a connection between his word games and his masturbating. Meanwhile, the Misovire's

grammar bends the rules of the French language nearly to the point of breaking in order to inject ambiguity into its interpretation and produce alternative understandings. Using such phrases as "Me voici seule encore une fois seule toujours seule jusqu'à quand encore?" plays with the root of "voici" which is, technically speaking, a verb but is rarely used as anything other than an expression. By attaching the direct object "me" to the verb, the narrator presents herself to the reader. Further, she repeats both "seule" and "encore" to underscore her loneliness; finally, the remainder of the sentence is made up of adverbs and one interrogative, meaning there is no subject pronoun and technically no verb. That said, the meaning of the phrase remains not only communicable, but deeper than simply expressing solitude. The narrator generates the deep sense of solitude through this writing; this technique creates a piling-up of words and images which distinguish the humanity of the Misovire from the lack of humanity that the tsetse-people demonstrate.

This grammatically dense wordplay contrasts starkly with the way that the men Grozi and Babou are portrayed in the text. While they often speak with high-minded ideas or at least a certain level of critical consciousness, their physical actions suggest a certain idleness which contradicts how badly they want to change. Of course, they are afflicted with the same tsetse worldview as everyone else in Lunaï, including the misovire, but they have yet to come to the same conclusion about women, that the misovire has come to about men. Namely, that they ought to seek out for a woman who is worthy of her respect. The Misovire denies the reader any physical characterization of the two men. Instead, we only know that they've aged while they've argued. On top of the fact that we know that Grozi is still masturbating, it creates an image of two pathetic and self-satisfying worms:

> Devant l'impasse de l'histoire des temps Grozi et Babou ont amorcé un transfert de personnalité et réussi un auto-rejet mal assimilé…

> Babou (à Grozi). -- Tu n'évolues pas, pauvre con…
> Grozi (à Babou). -- Tu régresses, espèce de fin de race…
> Et Ségar de leur parler de métissage. Eux de se proclamer pour ou contre visiblement dans la seule intention d'endosser la paternité d'un nouveau mot… Encore un ! Lorsqu'ils vivent la substitution… Babou rêve d'Emotion-Nègre… Grozi vise l'Intellect-Blanc… Ils voient tout en termes de carrés de croix… Ils ont vieilli et n'en sont pas conscients. Ils ne sont certainement pas les germes d'une Nouvelle Race. Qu'ils enfantent un sang qui veuille aller plus loin. Qu'ils le préparent à aller plus loin : ils auront fait un travail. Ils auront dit la prophétie… et ils pourront naturellement laisser la place au rythme mental… (17)

> Faced with the dead end of history's course Grozi and Babou have embarked on a personality transfer and have managed to achieve an ill-absorbed self-rejection…
> Babou (to Grozi): You're not evolving, you poor jerk…
> Grozi (to Babou): You're regressing, you specimen of a dying race…
> And Ségar keeps talking to them about *métissage*. And they declare themselves for or against their only intention clearly to assume paternity for the new word… Yet another one! While they're living the switch… Babou dreams of Black-Emotion… And Grozi aims for White-Intellect… They see everything in terms of squares, of crosses… They've grown old and they don't know it. They are certainly not the seeds of a new race. May they at least sire a bloodline that will want to go further. Let them prepare it to go further they will have done their job. They will have prophesied… and, naturally, they will be able to make room for mental rhythm… (10)

Rather than having a distinct idea for how the valley could improve they toss ideas around and use a western racial-scientific vocabulary to describe each other like "l'Intellect-Blanc". Evolution and degradation are used as metrics by which to judge the goodness or badness of certain peoples—"tu n'évolues pas"; "tu regresses, espèce de fin de race"—while in a stroke of situational irony, they are literally devolving as they age into convalescence without noticing: "Ils ont vieilli et n'en sont pas conscients." Grozi calls Babou the end of the race, a figure either so whitened or so degraded that it can no longer claim to represent the people of the valley while they sit at an impasse of history. Here, the Misovire suggests, they are standing in the way of history while they argue about the way forward. Instead, she suggests that her own initiation may be the way forward.

Fanon aptly describes these figures as well when he discusses the problems that the postcolonial state could encounter in the chapter "Mésaventures de la conscience nationale" of *Damnés de la terre*. He fears the role of the well-colonized city dwellers, whom he describes as a proletariat which could turn itself into a bourgeoisie after ejecting the colonizers. The danger, thus, is that the nation which sought to decolonize simply repeats the structures which led to their oppression, hardly changing any of the fundamentals which caused it in the first place. He explains that

> On pense qu'il suffit au leader ou à un dirigeant de parler sur un ton doctoral des grandes choses de l'actualité pour être quitte avec cet impérieux devoir de politisation des masses. Or, politiser c'est ouvrir l'esprit, c'est éveiller l'esprit, mettre au monde l'esprit. C'est, comme le disait Césaire, « inventer des âmes ». Politiser les masses ce n'est pas, ce ne peut pas être faire un discours politique. C'est s'acharner avec rage à faire comprendre aux masses que tout dépend d'elles, que si nous stagnons c'est de leur faute et que si nous avançons, c'est aussi de leur faute, qu'il n'y a pas de démiurge, qu'il n'y a pas d'homme illustre et responsable de tout, mais que le démiurge c'est le peuple et que les mains magiciennes ne sont en définitive que les mains du peuple. (Fanon 187)

> It is commonly thought with criminal flippancy that to politicize the masses means from time to time haranguing them with a major political speech. It is thought that for a leader or head of state to speak on major current issues in a pedantic tone of voice is sufficient as obligation to politicize the masses. But political education means opening up the mind, awakening the mind, and introducing it to the world. It is as Césaire said: "To invent the souls of men." To politicize the masses is not and cannot be to make a political speech. It means driving home to the masses that everything depends on them, that if we stagnate the fault is theirs, and that if we progress, they too are responsible, that there is no demiurge, no illustrious man taking responsibility for everything, but that the demiurge is the people and the magic lies in their hands and their hands alone. (Philcox 207-208)

Simply creating a political discourse, the way that Grozi and Babou do, does not achieve decolonization as Liking has outlined in the interactions between Grozi and Babou. Instead, it creates a stagnant listlessness just as the reader can witness in Lunaï because it takes the power of creation out of the hands of those who could use it best. She thus accuses the two men which

she quickly wrote off as part of the group of "Intellectualisants". As a curative, Liking suggests a corrective cultural shift after she observed her own nations of Cameroon and the Ivory Coast (along with much of Africa) fall into the same traps of national consciousness, using a localized epistemology which interacts with other alternate epistemologies. This is to say that Liking seems to recognize that Africa's nations have fallen into a trap that Fanon outlined in *Les damnés de la terre,* wherein he feared that a revolution led by those in the urban centers without the participation of the most marginalized at the center of the movement would necessarily require falling into western patterns of nationhood.

Grozi and Babou thus become a caricature of the "faux-nègres" that Liking disdains so much, the narrator finds them both boring and self-important. Listening to them argue about art, the narration trails off and begins again after a division in the text with the Misovire shouting: "Ah Zut! Je me suis encore endormie… chaque fois que je pense aux digressions de Babou et de Grozi je m'emballe ou je m'endors…" ("Oh darn! I fell asleep again… Every time I think about Babou's and Grozi's digressions I get carried away or I fall asleep…"; Liking, 63; 45). In essence, she expresses to the readers that she comes up with better ideas than them or they bore her to sleep. In a way, she is signaling that the western knowledge system is the main vector for the spread of the tsetse way of being produces an individualist trap which leaves its victims unable to organize their way out of such an alienating and dehumanizing society. This fatalism essentially seals their fate as the end of the race which eventually allows them to arrive at the point that they are—only discussing potential futures by talking about the past, as Grozi only uses future and past-tense verbs to refer to his desires, referring to how things were or how they can be in the future. Discussing the Mask, a significant part of the Basaa creation myth and a point of re-creation over which Grozi and Babou debate, he talks about what it was and what it

can do with Babou. First, he says "Le masque nous *y aidait* : il nous *révélait* la parole sacrée. Il nous *renvoyait* l'image grinçante de notre faiblesse dans l'ignorance et il nous *dénudait* devant l'initiateur…" ("The mask was *helping* us with this: it *revealed* the sacred word to us. It *reflected* the grating image of our weakness in our ignorance and it *stripped* us bare in front of the eyes of the initiator…"; Liking 102; 74, my emphasis). Later, he proposes that the mask can do the same in the future "On *obtiendra* le même résultat sans burler le masque, tu *verras :* / On le *portera* sur la scène théâtrale / On *grossira* son fixisme…" ("We'll accomplish the same thing without burning the mask, you'll see: / We'll wear it on stage / we'll magnify its fixed gaze…"; 104; 75, my emphasis) and so on. They can slip into their sleepwalking state and continue acting like intellectuals while simultaneously no longer producing any new knowledge, only vaguely aware of the shame that the Misovire feels when she witnesses him engage in such debasing activities and there is already semen dripping down the tip of his penis. This is portrayed as a major deficiency in the capability of the men to liberate themselves, they become defensive at the recognition that they are being judged, despised as he puts it towards her (Liking 11). This social impotence encourages the Misovire to imagine and produce a new space which first prioritizes women as a creative force, not as an admonishing of the men's efforts but as an attempt to proliferate a new type of balance through her own femininity, a space which is created within the theater-space of the chant-roman itself, generated through her desire to play within the space (Liking 6).

This interpretation of the text allows for its terrain to become a nested sort of ritual theater within the topography of Lunaï and allows the misovire to create a space wherein all of the participants can take on broader social roles like those of Grozi and Babou. Aside from the misovire, they are the only two other named and consistently present characters, two figures who

the misovire says are centuries old but unaware of their age. This is of particular importance because while their desires are in line with those of the misovire, she does not view them as helpful interlocutors in her quest for a re-balanced world which is more open to roles for women beyond their marginal status as reproductive vessels and homemakers. Grozi (who the misovire characterizes as seeking "d'intellect Blanc") is so named from a Basaa slang term for 'gros-zizi' or quite literally fat-prick (Batchelor 294) or possibly a corruption of *grougui,* 'a vendor of cheap goods' (Adams 159) while Babou is possibly the cheap goods themselves (Adams 159). On the other hand, Babou was also the name of surrealist artist Salvador Dalí's pet ocelot, evoking the idea that Babou (described by the misovire as representing "d'émotion nègre") is something of a collectable oddity, an object of fascination for an outsider.

To that end, Sara Tagliacozzi suggests that Liking's writing responds to what is in front of it rather than conform to some sort of imagined past—instead the forms are made to fit the needs of the time much the way that Liking had described théâtre-opreationelle to Mielly. Tagliacozzi states that

> A la critique de l'ordre masculin postcolonial responsable de la crise africaine, Werewere Liking fait correspondre une recherche formelle tout à fait originale qui entraine dans l'écriture un bouleversement de la distinction entre genres littéraires, un changement continu des registres linguistiques, une totale indifférence a la ponctuation du texte, le recours à des tournures de style caractéristiques de l'orateur, produisant une «écriture réflexive », «qu'il est difficile d'accepter parce qu'elle travaille sur elle-même en tant que forme d'art ». (Tagliacozzi 337)
>
> In criticizing the postcolonial masculine order for its responsibility in the African crisis, Werewere Liking matches a completely original research project which generates a generic disruption within literature, a continual shifting of linguistic register, a total indifference to punctuation, the recourse to the turns in the characteristic style of her oratory, which produces a "reflexive writing", which is ultimately difficult to accept because she works through herself as much as she does through her art form. (My trans.)

Tagliacozzi thus suggests that Liking is challenging the notions of African art in its totality as too attached to the form rather than the figure. By breaking the form, Liking draws the readers' attention to the ability of even well-established genres like the novel to produce different imaginations when they are made to follow a multitude of forms within themselves that attempt to strike balance rather than attempt to re-establish a duality which repeats the western pitfalls of cultural production.

On the other hand, Womanhood in the text is construed mostly through the words and acts of the misovire, but importantly, they also come from the poetic voice of the Dark, what Liking names "La Nuit-Noire", what d'Almeida argues implies itself to be the voice of Africa, the all-important fourth character which helps produce the new Africa that the Misovire articulates. The poetic voice, while never directly attributed to anyone, seems to be feminine in nature and deeply connected to the physical territory in Africa through its grammatological construction as the night, which is a feminine noun in French. The Misovire, however, does not always refer to it with an article, leaving its gender somewhat ambiguous. Describing its role and what is missing from Lunaï, she says: "A Lunaï depuis la mort de Nuit-Noire, il est impossible de concevoir la Beauté de rêver d'Amour d'entrevoir de Vastes Horizons bref il y est impossible d'accéder à la Vision… Et finalement on pourrait s'intéresser à n'importe quoi n'importe qui et trouver suffisamment de misère intérieure pour se vouer à l'apostolat" ("Since the Black-Night's death, it is impossible to imagine Beauty in Lunaï to dream of Love to glimpse Vast Horizons in short it's impossible to attain Vision here… And in the end you could be interested in almost anything or anyone and find enough inner misery to dedicate yourself to the apostolate…"; Liking 14; 8). This lack of Nuit-Noire shows the ultimate problem in Lunaï according to the Misovire: there is no voice to carry its desires and as such the people don't have any. On some

level, she expresses that collectivity has been completely eschewed without a unifying voice. She is the only character which is able to interact with this poetic voice while the men in the text are left to their own devices, to be observed and disdained by the Misovire. In this way, the production of gender is inherently connected to the idea of the New Race for the Misovire. She acknowledges, however, that she requires her *misogyne* which, much like the term misovire, is twisted to mean "a man who has not found a woman worthy of her respect. It is her induction into this knowledge that allows the men into the same knowledge-space, not the other way around. This seems to suggest that the only way to restore balance is to give the creative force in this new race to its women who are initiates, allowing for the redistribution of roles and power as a result, allowing for alternate futures to form in the new distribution of selfhood presented in the text. This produces not only a new woman but a new man, separate from the men that the misovire observes and critiques.

One of the ways that this voice constructs this creative force and places it in the hands of women is through intertextuality which juxtaposes the desires of the misovire with other women who have been marginalized through historical forces. One of the most important is in the poem about Bathsheba, the woman bathing on the roof in the story of King David, who ultimately "steals" her, by force, from her then-husband Uraia. The poem describes the interiority of this figure who is only seen as an object of desire in the biblical telling, as such:

> Les années ont passé à donner tu t'est donnée
> Sans rien demander sans rien recevoir à donner tu as trop donné Bethsabée
> Car personne ne t'a appris qu'à trop donner 'on inonde
> Et qu'au départ et dès toujours l'inondation est fait pour annihiler pour détruire
> pour anéantir
> Et tu t'es anéantie Bethsabée
> Et tu t'est retrouvée sans force aucune
> Sans grand beauté
> Les mains vide-tout vides de tout
> L'intelligence traînante.

Mais tu t'es souvenue : « demandez »
Et qu'as-tu demandé Bethsabée
Qu'as-tu demandé ?
Les chaleurs après l'inondation seront toujours malsaines
Les grandes eaux retirées il ne reste des enfants de l'union que les mare froides de l'indifférents
Des passions la boue humide des rancunes
Et de amours l'épaisse poussière de l'oubli
Alors ?
Qu'as-tu demandé Bethsabée
Qu'as-tu demandé
Que désires-tu ?
Et je suis là à ne savoir que demander
Clouée au pilori
Suspendue en équilibre instable où mon tort fut
de n'être que la femme de l'autre…
Au fond des flôts les limbes me guettent… (92-93)

The years for giving went by you gave yourself
Without asking for anything without receiving anything for giving you gave too much you gave to much Bathsheba.
For nobody ever taught you that by giving too much you become deluged
And that from the very start and forever more the deluge is there to annihilate to destroy to obliterate
And you have been obliterated Bathsheba
And you found yourself to be without any strength whatsoever
Without great beauty
Your hands empty totally emptied of everything
Your intelligence dawdling
But something you did remember: "ask"
And what did you ask Bathsheba
What did you ask?
The hot days after the flood will always be unhealthy
Once the heavy waters have turned back all that is left of the children of the union are only the cold ponds of indifference
Of passions only the humid mud of rancor
And of love only the thick dust of oblivion
So?
What did you ask Bathsheba
What did you ask?
What did you desire?
And here I am not knowing what to ask for
Nailed to the pillory
Hanging in a delicate balance me my only fault being that I am merely the other one's wife…
At the bottom of the streams limbo lies in wait for me… (67)

Bathsheba's figure, as is pointed out here, seems to be completely passive— "sans rien demander sans rien recevoir." Her role is reduced to an object of David's desire, but that role is contradicted by the fact that the Misovire uses apostrophe here, thus placing agency in Bathsheba's hands through this poetic intervention. In the biblical telling of her life, her abduction leads to the continuation of the Kingdom of Israel as she is the mother of Solomon, David's heir. In these stories, however, she is given no desires or interiority. This is the beginning of the Misovire's journey into the idea of what womanhood should be after putting it through this ritual. By drawing this parallel to Bathsheba with the Nuit-Noire and placing it interdiagetically with an argument between two men (Grozi and Babou) about the role of women in the future, the misovire takes note of the continued lack of agency given to women under the framework proposed by Grozi and Babou for decolonization. The irony is clearly not lost on the Misovire, who draws the juxtaposition to Bathsheba clearly: while she is made Queen Mother of Israel, this role requires her complete and utter submission to the Kingdom and thus to the power that her second husband, David, produces. Rather than accepting this reality, however, the Misovire interacts with Bathsheba laterally, skirting around David, Grozi, and Babou to be able to speak to her directly. In this way, she is speaking new pathways into existence which recharacterize the roles of women and subvert the merely ceremonial expectations and instead center her in the story, laying out the stakes for what true decolonization has to look like.

The Misovire also takes time to speak directly to the reader in a sort of intimate confession to the audience which sees the men reduced to their animal characteristics, as a way to contrast their behavior with that of the misovire, but also to acknowledge the seductive way of thinking that comes with exposure to Grozi and Babou, stating that

> Vraiment depuis que je fréquente Grozi et Babou je me comporte comme un mâle : jamais je ne m'évalue ne me remets en cause. A-t-on jamais vu un mâle se juger indigne d'un morceau de roi ?... A la différence de l'homme la femme multiplie toujours les efforts pour plaire pour toujours offrir plus et être à la hauteur du compagnon…
> Et au contact des machos de Lunaï on en perd l'humilité de se jauger juger et de réagir en cherchant ce qu'il y aurait à faire si vraiment on voulait participer à la naissance de la prochaine Race. On en perd la fierté de vouloir offrir quelque chose de valable qui puisse peser sur la balance des relations. (150)
>
> Really, since I've been spending time with Grozi and Babou I'm behaving like a male: I never assess myself question myself. Did you ever see a man think himself unworthy of what's fit for a king?... In contrast to the man woman always does her best to please to always offer more and to be at the level of her companion…
> But through contact with the machos of Lunaï you lose the modesty that makes you gauge yourself judge yourself and react by searching for what might actually be done if you really wanted to participate in the birth of the next Race. You lose pride in wanting to give something of value that might weigh in the balance of relationships. (109-110)

Why does the Blue Race require women to usher in a new future, to "participer à la naissance de la prochaine Race"? It seems, according to the misovire, that the men who can do something simply don't do enough and she can see why after observing Grozi and Babou along with the audience. She scoffs at "mâles," using a term which is, in French, suggestive of the more animal-like qualities of the gender. Simply put, they calm down after too little has been given to them. Women, she contrasts, would rather make sure that everyone is getting more: "la femme multiplie toujours les efforts pour plaire pour toujours offrir plus," but she argues that men are too focused on not evaluating the things that they are being given. According to the text, they lack the humility to notice that there is a better project going on elsewhere, one which suggests a brighter future for a new generation rather than suggesting piecemeal material improvements for themselves at that very moment. In a way, she suggests that males would see the project of the Blue Race, so called because blue is untainted by any racial stigma and is thus a safe zone for a new race to start, as ignoble because it would risk them losing their positions at the top of

society, fearing that they will no longer be valued after the balance that she seeks is brought to this next generation/new race.

While thinking about the role that women will play in the new race, the misovire struggles while she writes in prose to articulate a specific sort of idea for their role. Her struggle shows the limiting tendencies of this sort of writing and demonstrates the need to produce and blend new and old genres together to properly articulate the space that women could occupy. Speaking to herself, she asks,

> Oserais-je parler de la fécondité de la femme alors qu'elle n'en veut plus ? Pendant qu'elle parle d'une émancipation difficile à définir au moment même où elle perd la conscience de sa valeur et ne désire plus que devenir l'« homme », pire que le mâle… à l'heure où elle se laisse entretenir tout en se gargarisant de mots creux : égalité émancipation féminisme vais-je pouvoir chanter l'Être ? Me lever et dire : je suis femme. (93)

> Would I dare speak of woman's fertility when she wants nothing further to do with it? While she is talking about a hard-to-define emancipation at the very moment that she is losing awareness of her worth and wants nothing but to become "man," worse than the male… at the time that she allows herself to be kept as she indulges in hollow words: equality emancipation feminism will I be able to sing of Existence? Rise and say: I am woman. (67)

Here we can see her discussing a major contradiction in a society which proclaims equality, that the ways in which equality are offered to women often negate their personhood or are completely insufficient ways of finding liberation. In essence, she seems to suggest that the "égalité," "émancipation," and "féminisme" that she is offered by the broader society do not actually offer her much more than the sensation of being a man in a patriarchal society, having the power to order others around her rather than control her own destiny on her own terms. This is tangled up in the value that women see in themselves according to the misovire. The feminism on offer by outsiders is characterized as deeply ironic, using vacant terms like "égalité" to give an illusion of progress that cannot be proven materially. She worries that by accepting this sort of feminism she

will be made to lose her Africanness, her ability to "chanter L'Être," a word play which could mean singing herself into being or singing a greater "Être" into being through her femininity and proclaim to that being that she is in fact a woman: "je suis femme." In this way, Liking seems to suggest that this incantation can be understood as a kind of spiritual desire that is denied by the way in which the patriarchal, westernized world has reduced things to their fecundity in order to better control them.

However, the misovire has yet to define womanhood, or trouble the ways in which womanhood are defined directly beyond proclaiming herself a misovire. The difficulty of explaining exactly what women want, she proclaims, should be simple as proclaiming that you are a woman, but as she explores, the contradictions of the role of women make it difficult to define a space for women which also serves them rather than the patriarchal interests of society. Even as far as wanting a child is concerned, she sees the contradictions in wanting one just to define yourself as a woman along patriarchal lines. In examining the role of women as life-givers as a form of restriction under patriarchy, she realizes that women can produce power through the same life-giving force if applied in different directions, such as towards social and political transformation; it would then allow for the proliferation of power to come out of this creative force.

It is the poetic voice in the text which describes this possibility, producing an abstract but concrete way of conceiving of the roles and potential that women would have in a wholly new society. The Nuit-Noire sings that

> Je suis l'atome primordial qui ne saurait se contenter d'une côte masculine pour Être
> Je suis la Matrice – Mère où sont en gestation et les Idées et les Formes et le Souffle de vie afin que tout soit parce que je suis.
> Et tout est.
> Je suis femme des hommes et des femmes qui viennent de la femme.

Je marche devant et je suis.
Je marche derrière et je précède.
Je suis tout ce qui va de l'avant et avance vers le divin.
Je suis la femme du jour et de la nuit.
Je donne la Vie et reçoit la Mort pour toujours renaître.
Je suis le Vide qui attire le Plein.
Je suis l'Impossible pour rendre tout possible.
Je suis femme aujourd'hui.
Femme de demain.
Femme de la lumière du Grand Sentier… (94)

I am the primordial atom that could never be content with a masculine rib in order to Exist.
I am the Matrix Mother in which Ideas and Forms and Breath of life are in gestation so that all may be because I am.
And everything is.
I am a woman of men and of women who come from woman.
I walk ahead and I am.
I walk behind and I precede.
I am everything that moves ahead and advances towards the divine.
I am the woman of the day and the night.
I give Life and receive Death in order to always be reborn.
I am the Void that attracts Plen ty.
I am the impossible that makes everything possible.
I am woman today.
Woman of tomorrow.
Woman of the light of the Great Path…(67-68)

Once again, this poetic portion of the text seeks to define the capabilities of womanhood. Here, the reader can see that the misovire rejects the notion that masculinity is the only way of being—that, much like described above, she has no desire in becoming a male to be able to attain better conditions in her life. Instead, she suggests that her being is tied to her ability to create. She uses a lot of terms like "gestation", and "Matrice" and "Mère" but instead of speaking simply of the creation of other humans, she suggests that her creativity forms in much the same way as a child, that she is engendered with the ability to be creative and productive on her own in the same way that a woman can gestate life: "Mère où sont en gestation et les Idées et les Formes et le Souffle de vie afin que tout soit parce que je suis." She draws on the notion that she can both "donne[r]

la Vie" and "[recevoir] la Mort" in order to create new life, recycling old things to produce a new form much like she produces this text by recycling the French language and mixing Bassa and European genres. By suggesting that she can "attirer le Plein," "attract fullness" it becomes clear that the Misovire seems to view the role of women as a productive irrespective of their ability to produce children. She proposes a productivity that is centered around a new notion of what is valuable, replacing the consumptive metaphor that the Tsé-tsés inhabit. Thus, she relates that the act of creating this new race is not simply one of creating new people but instead creating a new culture for these new blue people to be born into. In this way she argues for giving women a place to produce that is not only similar to the space that men occupy but gives women the space to lead and create a space for themselves. This new reorientation of power as diffused among the women and decentralized allows for the production of a new path forward which rejects the governing fictions which open the text, that Africa is sliding into oblivion, that dictate how women's desires are interpolated in the society of Lunaï, a path that the misovire herself claims to be on.

The text ends in a strange way, it seems from the outset, as the misovire reflects on the writing that she has produced and seems to doubt herself. At this point, however, she begins to take over the voice of the Nuit-Noire, speaking in the same poetic style of the disembodied voice. The only reason we know for certain that it's the Misovire speaking and not the Nuit-Noire is that the text of the poetry is no longer italicized. She asks,

> En bonne fille de mes ancêtres arrive au chiffre 9 je me dois une pause : ici je dois savoir qui je suis. Ce que je vaux. De quoi suis-je capable.
> Dois-je vraiment écrire un journal de bord ? Serai-je capable de l'écrire ? Est-ce utile ? N'est-ce pas trop de toupet de prétendre faire quelque chose pour la Race Bleue de jaspe et de corail ?...
> Et moi ?
> Quelle sera ma part d'action ? … (Liking 149-150)

> As the good daughter of my ancestors I owe it to myself to stop at the number 9: here I have to know who I am. What I am worth. OF what I am capable.
> Do I really have to write a logbook? Will I be able to write it? Is it useful? Am I not too presumptuous to expect to be doing something for the Blue Race of jasper and coral?...
> And I?
> What will my contribution be? (109-110)

The final few pages of the text transition slowly from this prose-style of writing to poetry, and it becomes clear that while she is imitating the poetic voice that interrupts the action in the other chapters, it is the Misovire who is speaking this time. This becomes clear because of the transition between the two parts of the chapter, where she proclaims that she has spent too much time around Grozi and Babou and loses the purpose of her mission when she does but continues to use the "je" form of speaking as the transition takes effect as above. Dryly, she seems to suggest that men are the root of the problem as they have taken over a process which she seems to claim belongs to women. Without women at the helm of this creative process, "A la différence de l'homme la femme multiplie toujours les efforts pour plaire pour toujours offrir plus et être à la hauteur du compagnon…" ("In contrast to the man the woman always does her best to please to always offer more and to be at the level of her companion…"; 150; 109). It is this lack of proliferation and multiplication that separates men and women according to Liking and thus seems to imply that the role of building and creating the governing narrative should not be in the hands of men. When men control the governing narrative, they fail to properly amplify and project the liberatory potential of the culture because of the limitations of imagination that Lunaï's broken society has forced them to take.

Finally, this meditation takes on the form of the initiation that she has imagined throughout the text. Much like the Misovire, Grozi does not seem to know how to take on the role of initiate. For her, the initiate will reject and reconstruct culture in a different way as a form

of resistance to the governing narrative. This resistance is not only as a form of liberation for women but for everyone:

> Ce qu'il me faudrait…
> Ce qu'Il nous faudrait à nous
> C'est une Initiation
> …
> Pour désenchaîner l'Art du bavardage
> L'Initiation des bondieuseries
> Les Organismes de la corruption
> Le Pouvoir de la bêtise
> La Richesse de la laideur
> Une Forme
> Qui restituerait ses mille nuances à la lumière blanche
> Sans la balkaniser
> Oui
> Ce qu'il nous faudrait à nous
> C'est une forme d'initiation capable d'alchimie
> Nos sociétés redeviendraient intitiatiques
> Et nos initiations sociales
> L'Initié serait à nouveau… (Liking 151-2)
>
> What I would need…
> What we would all need
> Is an Initiation
> …
> To unfetter Art from empty chatter
> Initiation from religiosity
> Organisms from corruption
> Power from stupidity
> Wealth from ugliness
> A Shape
> That would bring its thousand subtleties back to white light
> Without balkanizing it
> Yes
> What we would all need
> Is a form of initiation capable of alchemy
> Our societies would once again become initiatory ones
> And our initiations would once again become social ones
> The Initiate would once again be… (110-111)

In this passage, the Misovire dreams of the redistribution of social and political capital, specifically through the act of "désenchaîner l'Art du bavardage". By dreaming of a sort of

redistribution of cultural and social capital through this initiation, the misovire dreams of a sort of generative refusal of the status quo in art and intellectual development, both stagnant and completely rooted in the sorts of logics left behind by the colonizers. This refusal will help amplify the redistribution by initiating more and more people. This idea is materially reflected in Liking's project of Ki-Yi: many west African artists have spent at least some time at Ki-Yi, particularly before the outbreak of war in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002. The misovire's attempt to "désenchaîner l'Art du bavardage / l'Initiation des bondieuseries" is a way to express that any art produced in this context, regardless of its intention, can only help to maintain the status quo, leaving the tsetses unharmed. As such, restoring balance requires first restoring women to their rightful role so that they may better help distribute this new form of being, creating "d'autres verités" out of Africa's sleepwalking confusion.

This reality, however, forces the Misovire to reckon with her own shortcomings and the true value of her original goal: to create a new race. She seems to ask if her attempt will be helpful to the new race or simply another item in the baggage of human history, "Si j'écris le journal comptera-t-il parmi les actes efficaces ? / Je ne vais tout de même pas léguer mon journal de merde moi qui ai eu la prétention de le dédier à la prochaine Race sans m'être assure de sa valeur… ! / Alors ? / Vais-je l'écrire ou non ? En tout cas certainement / pas maintenant car je suis encore trop imbibée de merde et de pus" ("If I write the journal will that count as an effective act? / But still I who claimed to want to dedicate this to the next Race I'm not going to pass this shitty journal on unless I'm quite sure of its value…! / So? / Am I going to write it or not? In any event not now that's for sure I am still too sodden with shit and with pus"; 150-151; 110). As we have seen throughout this analysis, her solution is the ritual as a way to clear herself and make way for the new race. It is only at this point, however, that she realizes the futility of

trying to write this text for a new epistemology without first considering how incompatible this new race would be with her own.

The misovire's critique of herself results from her contemplation of the incompatibility of her race and the new one she dreams of, and thus she starts to wonder if simply presenting this text to the new race is even a helpful thing. While she seems to anticipate the new race needing some guidance she still views herself and her peers as inferior to the Blue Race that comes after them. She comes to realize that her work is expressing a desire to become different; she thus initiates herself into a new way of being, shifting culture as a way to welcome the new Race. However, she takes a harder line on the ultimate fate of her text for the blue race. she states in the very last poem that

> Ce que je vais faire maintenant…
> C'est brûler ce projet de journal ou le cacher
> Et à mots couverts
> Indiquer une fausse direction
> Ainsi tout le monde pensera que j'ai brûlé la connaissance dans un accès de folie vous savez
> On pensera que j'ai caché des trésors fabuleux
> qu'il faut absolument retrouver
> Pour faire avancer le monde d'un bond ![...]
> Car enfin j'aurais légué au moins un beau mythe !... (154)
>
> What I shall do right now…
> Is burn this journal project or hide it
> And in hidden terms
> Suggest a wrong direction
> That way everyone will think that I've burned knowledge in an attach of madness you know
> That madness that is born from the pain of birthing a genius…
> They will think that I've hidden fabulous treasures that must be found again at all cost
> In order to make the world take one leap ahead! […]
> For at last I will have bequeathed a beautiful myth at least!... (112-113)

In this final poem, the misovire suggests that the text will be much more effective if it is only partially understood in the future. The passage from Job from which the title of the book is

derived, “Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies” (Job 28:18) comes into focus. The Blue Race, the race of jasper and coral, isn’t actually coming to rebalance things. It rests on the initiate to fix these problems herself. Much like the misovire, Liking thus wants her readers to bend and manipulate patriarchal narratives to find other truths out of them and forge their own way forward without having to follow her words as if they are law. This allows for the further decentralization of power, thus for Liking, restoring balance. To modify patriarchal narratives, first women who have the ability to proliferate this new consciousness must take power. As women gain this power, she hopes it will further find its way into the hands of everyone— “pour faire avancer le monde d’un bond”—as a new way out of the seemingly inescapable desperation that is present in Lunaï under the Tsetses.

6. Conclusions: Dreaming Her Way out of the Wake-Sleep

When Werewere Liking founded the Village Ki-Yi Mbok in the late 1980s, it quickly became a major center for cultural exchange and artistic production in Western Africa, taking displaced youth from the street and putting them in an intensive training program that operates for upwards of sixteen hours per day, with rigorous pedagogical and social conditioning being an important part of village life (Mielly 52). Ki-Yi has been the central showcase for Liking’s later pan-African works such as *Un Taoureg s’est marié avec une pygmée* (1993), wherein she showcases two Africans from different parts of the continent travelling around to find each other and marry. All the while, they exchange different notions of what it means to be African, making their marriage a site for lateral transcultural and transnational exchange within the continent in a way which celebrates them and their cultures as they create a new one together. Indeed, Liking has said often that her work takes to task a grave imbalance in society which she names as inequality, be it between races, economic access, or gender. This imbalance is part of why she

rejects the label of Feminist so curtly and why instead she chose to create a new word to describe the perspective of her semi-autobiographical figure in *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail*: the Misovire. The radical figure presented in the text proves a decided deficiency in narratives of the future through her very existence: she carries alternatives to the degraded, starving, catastrophic vision that the future is "said" to hold by those who predict it. Thus, this figure uses her critiques not only in the way that Grozi and Babou make theirs, to themselves and without a clear intention to relinquish what little power they have as men in a patriarchal system, but to produce a new way of being for everyone by first finding her own way.

This new way of being is rooted in the Basaa traditions which Liking received growing up in her community, and thus she has seen the potential of initiation in the transformation of humans into new sorts of spirits, a ritual of initiation which takes the form of the book itself. That said, why, then, does gender become central and critical to this text if Liking and the Misovire both seek to restore a sense of balance that is lost in the modern patriarchal societies of Lunaï and Africa more broadly? The text suggests that women need to take hold of creative potential and use it to proliferate liberation to their sisters and the men that have proven themselves incapable of achieving true liberation. The grousing and idle masturbation of Grozi and Babou represent this misdirected potential, while the Nuit-Noire's imagined futures articulate a rejection of the destitution proposed by the (male) "experts" on Africa.

While early in the dialogue in Global Southern Feminism, Liking's work demonstrates the potential of combating governing narratives at the source by rejecting her post in the Academy, denouncing the "faux-nègres" that she observed as her peers. The Ki-Yi Village has managed to produce an entire generation of artists in many fields throughout Africa, mostly from groups of children left destitute and abandoned in Abidjan, who have gone on to have fruitful

lives outside of the village[20]. In demonstrating this potential to the world, in spite of the disruptions caused by the Civil War beginning in 2002, Ki-Yi Village remained untouched and was never disturbed throughout the conflict, its value recognized by all sides who sought to take control of the reins of power in the Ivory Coast. Her text helps articulate what sort of cultural shift is necessary to articulate alternatives to destitution, which gives women the space to engage in cultural production rather than simple biological production, their reduced state in Lunaï under the Tsetses, which allows them to demonstrate the transformative potential of redistributing power laterally. This is an act which seems radical in Lunaï but simply seeks a rebalance by giving some force *back* to women to show men how a better society can be imagined through the rupture with patriarchal structures.

[20] According to an article from tellereport.com on Liking's partial retirement in 2021, actress Bacome Niamba, playwright and artist Rey Lema (who co-wrote several plays with Liking), and musicians Didi B and Black K and his group Kiff No Beat are all recent graduates of the program, which is now run by Liking's successor, Jenny Mezile.

III. Walking Away Together: Knowledge Transmission and Solidarity in *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia*

> Estas mulheres ocuparam um lugar tão secundário na História, que só lhes deram a graça de ter o nome ao lado do imperador. A História foi sempre machista. É chegada a altura de se criarem outras narrativas, outros ângulos de observação, outros olhares à História.
>
> These women occupied such a secondary space in History, that they were considered lucky to have their names next to the emperor's. History has always been chauvinist. The time has come to develop new narratives, new angles of observation, other visions of history. (My trans.)
>
> -Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa, in an interview with his publisher Kapulana (2018)

In the aftermath of Mozambique's war of independence (1964-1974) and subsequent civil war, the nation was left with a fragile political agreement that had hardly solved any of the problems that had led to the civil war in the first place. Important reforms such as how the government engaged with its people and the role of women had been left basically unchanged even in the wake of the promise of change just after the Mozambican Civil War (1977-1992). The ruling government headed by the same political party as before the start of the war, FRELIMO[21], continued to rule with an overwhelming majority. Opportunities for people who lived outside of the capital, Maputo, were limited and people were much more likely to be disenfranchised from their government. While FRELIMO claimed to represent all of the people of Mozambique, an extremely diverse nation in Southwestern Africa, it primarily represented the population of the capital and ignored the peripheries. It was in this context that Paulina Chiziane (1955-), Mozambique's most significant woman writer after the colonial period, wrote her second novel *Niketche: uma história de poligâmia* (2002). The novel traces the relationship between a group of women who discover they've unknowingly married the same man and their quest for justice in the face of his attempts to control them through depravation. While the text begins with them arguing with each other about who has rights to Tony, their husband, soon they

[21] Frente de Libertação Moçambicana, Mozambican Liberation Front

realize that they would be better off working together, and thus they form a coalition for greater stability and protection from their husband. The alliance, however, leads them to a greater independence despite their husband and not because of him.

Throughout *Niketche*, Chiziane reveals how the patriarchal structure of Mozambican society intertwines with the failure of the central FRELIMO government to live up to its obligations to everyone who lives outside of the capital, and who are not members of the cultural and political elite. Using the unofficial polygamous marriage by a high-ranking FRELIMO official to women of multiple ethnic groups from all over the nation as a metaphor for the national character itself, *Niketche* reveals the social immobility of women throughout society. Further, it focuses on the particularly unequal treatment of those ethnic groups who live farther away from Maputo. The reality that Chiziane reveals is in direct contradiction to FRELIMO's discourse surrounding Mozambique's national character. In its own self-image, it defines post-Civil War Mozambique as a pluriethnic nation united under the banner of FRELIMO who claims to represent all of them. In reality, Chiziane shows that FRELIMO fails to represent any group outside of the *assimilado* elite adequately, particularly if they do not work directly or in concert with the central government.

Throughout the text Chiziane describes solutions devised by five women married to the same man to bring him under control. While Chiziane shows they ultimately fail in this endeavor, that outcome is irrelevant as the process to defeat him allows them to create a broad solidarity with each other which remains after Tony disappears, and which gives them the opportunity to gather and share power. This outcome obviates their need for a central breadwinning figure to support their continued thriving. This solidarity is demonstrated through Chiziane's use of oral storytelling and the collective testimony. *Niketche* uses a first-person

perspective told through the protagonist, Rami, who speaks up for the other women of the story in a style which over time makes their testimonies blend together into a polyphonic chorus, shown through dialogue which is laced with ironic acquiescence to the power of the patriarch. With the combination of these two techniques of the first-person narrative voice and dialogue, the testimonies of women bleed into one another as they recount similar tales of oppression and marginalization. Meanwhile, the women's oral storytelling constitutes a deeply ironic voice which quietly mocks the men they encounter. This allows Chiziane to describe potential ways for portraying social constraints of women, drawing from the collected wisdom of the many different groups of women in the highly diverse, plurinational state that FRELIMO claims to represent. In doing so, the wives find effective tactics and explore multiple solutions to the same problem.

This style of problem solving allows Chiziane to combine and shed and both modern and traditional solutions to issues of patriarchal domination such as polygamy, wealth sharing and the inversion of rituals of punishment into rituals of joy. Simultaneously, she encourages the reader to let go of preconceptions of polygyny[22] through the testimony of many who practiced and consider it as a potential pathway for liberation. This journey, which can also be read as a national allegory of postcolonial Mozambique, describes a potential future for the nation, through a practice of lateral solidarity. Thus, Chiziane proposes that collective resistance would obviate the need for a centralized FRELIMO government embodied by their husband, Tony, as it currently exercises its power. Through this process, Mozambique could then determine its own future. The text achieves this through its portrayal of collective resistance through a kind of disobedience which is inherently generative, meaning that it refuses to accept the dominant

[22] In the context of Sub-Saharan African societies, the primary polygamous relationship practiced is polygyny, where one man is married to several women.

narratives of FRELIMO's benevolent representation of all of Mozambique as the inheritors of a nation which should be homogenized under a singular central culture emanating from the capital on their face and instead propose a new logic which refutes their status as hegemonic. This structure and style successfully advance a politics of redistribution of power within Mozambique through internecine solidarity as a curative for the post-civil war malaise. The narrative style serves to redress the terms which restrict power in Mozambique to those in the capital who have access to power in order to better distribute them throughout the nation by using women's collective voice channeled through the protagonist to seek a greater share of power.

This chapter seeks to assess the way in which solidarity in a multiethnic country, having just gone through a civil war, can advance a type of reconciliation which challenges a status quo which began during the colonial period and had survived both decolonization and civil war. It centers around the idea that rather than a direct refusal, something which the women are not in a position to offer, they instead give an ironic acquiescence. Chiziane portrays their refusal as a surrender. Rather than a full retreat, this surrender lays a trap: by lulling the patriarch into a false sense of security, the women destroy him by giving him exactly what he wants but on their own terms. This is a unique style of refusal which ironizes the demands of the patriarch shows the women ways to generate power within the bounds of their material conditions while also allowing them to redraw those boundaries from the inside. In essence, this is also the purpose of the polygamous union: it forces their husband in a position where he is responsible to all of them rather than simply himself. The text, then, serves as a direct testimony spoken through characters who represent the women of Mozambique and their distinct form of oppression and constraint.

1. Historical Contexts

Mozambique's postcolonial history is primarily informed by both its time under Portuguese colonial occupation and the subsequent 30 years of war near-constant war between its war of decolonization (1964-1974) and the ensuing civil war (1977-1992). While Mozambique was formally centralized under a single national government, regional differences remained; even prior to colonization no empire had firmly controlled the entirety of the territory. As a result, local languages dominate over Portuguese in much of the country, and experience uneven intervention from the central government. Many different ethnic groups make up the nation, but the ethnic groups living in and around the capital city of Maputo just prior to Portuguese colonization formed the backbone of the *assimilado*[23]*, mulato*[24]*,* and *mestiço*[25] classes, which would inherit the reins of the nation from Portugal after decolonization, including the Ngoni, Xona, Tona, Chopi and Tsonga/Ronga (Newitt 20). Portugal had a difficult time controlling the interior or even the area outside of the cities, so the vast majority of power, wealth and colonial development was put into the (mostly coastal) cities which the Portuguese used to control trade and import goods from the interior of the nation. The rulers of Southern Mozambique's Gaza empire (1824-1895), the Ngoni, practiced a ceremonial polygamy in which the hosi (king/emperor) would marry members of each ethnic group within his territory as a symbolic means of control over that group. These groups would make up the vast majority of those who would have the opportunity to join the "assimilado" class after colonization and could receive a Portuguese education, granting them greater access to wealth and power. Practically speaking, the southern group's more patriarchal social structure made them more adaptable to patriarchal

[23] Literally "assimilated", referring to black Africans who adopted Portuguese culture and received a Portuguese education.
[24] Mixed, of black and white descent
[25] Mixed, of Indian and black descent

colonial rule and many polygamous arrangements simply became unofficial after the imposition of western culture and Christianity. As a result, they were more able to access power more quickly after the war of independence and thus help perpetuate the systems which the Portuguese had put in place (Rodrigues and Rivera 11). In the north, Swahili traders on the coast interacted with the Makua, Makonde and Yao groups which occupied the plateau in the interior and carried their own practices. These groups practiced both Islamic polygamy on the coast and a matriarchal polygamy in which marriage between matriclans assured transfers of power and centered social influence around the wives. The Portuguese had significantly less influence over the North than the South, so these northerners are to this day more regionally integrated than nationally integrated (Newitt 25).

Over the course of the civil war, the parties on the side of independence began to shrink through attrition and internal divisions within FRELIMO were eventually eliminated. After Mozambique's independence in 1975, the party failed to break the status quo of the colonial period and foster a broader national unity. Samora Machel, Mozambique's first president, charged straight into modernizing and homogenizing Mozambique without regard to historical ethnic or linguistic rivalries. Instead of resolving the interethnic and historical tensions within the nation, FRELIMO's plan was to flatten these differences and create a cohesive nation through the imposition of a singular culture maintained through Portuguese as a common language while modernizing the nation, effectively outlawing local cultures to do so, including a blanket ban on the practice of polygamy. As Newitt points out, Machel was an *assimilado* (Newitt 155) and thus had a strong connection to power even prior to his rise in FRELIMO. Newitt further points out that:

> Very few Mozambicans went through the difficult process of acquiring the legal status of *assimilado* and those who did were usually closely connected to the

> regime. Nevertheless, by the 1950s there were a number of writers and intellectuals who had begun to describe their experiences and to articulate a narrative that was very different from the official ideology of the regime. (136-137)

This class, while not directly identifying with the Portuguese state, still represented a well-connected, bourgeois class that is reflective of the limitations of national consciousness described by Fanon in *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), which I explore in the first chapter of this project and which carried over into the postcolonial state. The anti-communist group RENAMO[26], in turn, led a 15-year campaign against the FRELIMO government which destroyed what infrastructure Mozambique had connecting its different regions, thus severing the nation's already fraught connectedness (162). The end of the war came essentially because both sides could no longer economically sustain the conflict and thus collapsed, leading to RENAMO gaining political recognition and space in Parliament.

During and after the civil war, FRELIMO primarily controlled Maputo and the surrounding regions in the south of the country. Even after they took control of the country at the end of the war in 1992, this dichotomy remained as the central government did little to develop its ties with the north and instead continued to focus on the south, a phenomenon observable even in education. While Portuguese is the official language of the government above all others, to this day more Portuguese speakers live in and around Maputo than the rest of the country combined. In addition, while RENAMO now holds about 30% of the legislative seats in government, they only once came close to establishing a plurality sufficient to break FRELIMO's ascendancy in 1999 (179). This combined with the fact that FRELIMO did not have to reform their party or the government at the end of the civil war beyond recognizing RENAMO as a legitimate political party has meant that the *status quo ante bellum* continues, save for the

[26] Resistencia Nacional Moçambicana, Mozambican National Resistance

fact that FRELIMO relaxed its policy of cultural imposition by informally allowing regional cultures and traditions to be practiced without government intervention.

Meanwhile, FRELIMO's disposition as the ascendant ruling party has not changed from the war of independence through to the present day. In essence, according to Newitt, the government claims itself to be a representative of a unified, multiethnic, pluralistic democracy, a claim that is problematic on its face since, at least in part, RENAMO waged the civil war claiming to represent the more disenfranchised parts of the populace. Newitt states that

> The new government was not presented with a *tabula rasa*. There were strong elements of continuity to be found, among which were many inheritances from the colonial era including the geographical constraints that resulted from the position of the capital in the extreme south, isolated from the rest of the country and embedded in South Africa, and the infrastructure which bound areas of the country to their inland neighbours rather than to each other. Important also was the way that Mozambique's history had created deep divisions between the north, the central Zambezi valley, and the south. Nor could the new government escape the vagaries of the climate that continued to deliver drought and flood with a careless hand and seemingly at random. (Newitt 176)

The methods that the central government has to resolve these sticking points continue to fail due to the restrictions its history and present have bound to it. This furthers the political divisions which caused the dynamics which lead to the civil war but which at this point have become basically insurmountable. In the text Luísa, the third wife, describes the effects of this disconnect as creating dynamics in which women are left behind without any resources or support because these disconnected regions require men to move to find work, only for them to never return or remit money. She tells Rami that "Venho de uma terra onde os homens novos emigram e não voltam mais... Tenho oito irmãos, cada um com o seu pai. A minha mãe nunca conseguiu um marido só para ela... Desde cedo aprendi que homem é pão, é hóstia, fogueira no meio de fêmeas morrendo de frio..." ("I come from a region where young men emigrate and never come back… I've got eight brothers, each one by a different father. My mother never managed to have a

husband just for herself… From an early age, I learned that a man is bread, the communion wafer, a fire surrounded by women who are dying of cold…"; Chiziane 57, Brookshaw 79[27]). To that end, Chiziane proposes a radical curative to this interlocking series of problems which proposes an entire rearranging of social relations to imagine a different way forward. This then further justifies the notion that both the state and men are failing women and thus that women will need to band together if they want to be able to claim a future that includes them as equals and with their own right to determine that future.

As a result of these economic and social dynamics, women's status in Mozambique remains restricted. This is particularly true in relation to their access to the formal economy because of the traditional roles of women as agricultural workers outside of the cities (Newitt 223-224) but also because of the lack of stable employment that is offered to women in the cities (Rodrigues and Rivera 12). These restrictions cause women to remain dependent on finding a husband who will provide for them in order to continue to survive, leading to the sorts of situations that men like Tony are able to exploit. Even though FRELIMO has provided modest and cursory rights to women (such as laws against physical abuse) since the civil war their ability to gain any independence remains elusive (Newitt 208). These limitations are indicative of the fact that while the nation itself has become independent, in that time the status of women within that context has not moved significantly. This reality speaks to the necessity of writers like Chiziane to speak out against the way that women are silenced and marginalized both in their personal and civic lives.

These historical points are relevant because they point to the fact that Niketche takes place in a very specific post-civil war Mozambique at the end of the twentieth century. In the text

[27] All translations of *Niketche* are from David Brookshaw's 2016 translation titled *The First Wife: A Tale of Polygamy*

and in contemporary Mozambique, social relations between men and women are structured as what is termed a "phallocracy," or rule by the phallus. Specifically, a phallocracy is a feminist term used to describe a specific form of patriarchal hegemony which implies the "irrational worship of the phallus" as part of the social system (Scrouton 513). As Mbembe explains it in *On the Postcolony* (2001),

> During the colonial era and its aftermath, phallic domination has been all the more strategic in power relationships, not only because it is based on a mobilization of the subjective foundations of masculinity and femininity but also because it has direct, close connections with the general economy of sexuality. In fact, the phallus has been the focus of ways of constructing masculinity and power. Male domination derives in large measure from the power and the spectacle of the phallus—not so much from the threat to life during war as from the individual male's ability to demonstrate his virility at the expense of a woman and to obtain its validation from the subjugated woman herself. (Mbembe 13)

Thus, the phallus has become, according to this analysis, a means through which power is exercised. Domination and virility, thus masculinity and a grip on power, all become intertwined in this set of signifiers and thus, a phallocratic system of governance is one where subjugation to a central authority is the means through which power justifies itself.

This power dynamic is evident in the novel when Luísa, Tony's third wife, describes why she came to Maputo and decided to marry Tony by telling Rami, "Isto aqui está cheio de homens por todo o lado, homens só para vocês, mulheres do sul. É por isso que nós, mulheres do norte, quando apanhamos um homem do sul não o largamos, vingamo-nos da solidão da falta de amor e ternura" ("It's full of men here everywhere you go, men that are only for you southern women"; Chiziane 58; 80). In essence, Luísa is describing a process by which men are able to manipulate the movements of women simply because they relocate to a new part of the nation. Phallocracy, then, can be described as a system where power is distributed outward from a central figure, an empty signifier that the government can use as a stand-in for a genuine hold on power, who

controls the wealth and resources. This image is reflected in the text by the central masculine figure in the text, Tony, who uses the power his position as a representative of FRELIMO affords him to control the wives within the text and who, in turn, give him great deference and ascribe power to his position at the beginning of the text. The polygamous relationship that Chiziane describes, as a result, is a countermeasure to that deference which challenges the importance that is ascribed to him before the wives figure out how to sustain their own power. Rami confirms this after the wives and their cabinet meet for the first time in their conjugal parliament, after noting that they should give Tony the best of everything, she remarks to herself that: "Ah, Tony. Já não estou sozinha no teu encalço. Agora somos cinco. Quero ver se nos escapas com a tua esperteza de rato" ("Ah, Tony! I'm not the only one on your trail now. There are five of us. Let's see if you can escape us now, you cunning little rat!"; Chiziane 127; 186). Here, Chiziane shows the reader that Rami is using her position to trap Tony. This shows that her perspective is that the group has potential to transform their relationship to their husband by revealing him for what he is.

2. Chiziane: African Feminism and its Discontents

Niketche is a simultaneously tragic and comedic text about the lives of five women of different ethnic groups with varying degrees of access to power who are all married to the same man, Tony, the chief of police of Maputo, but who are not aware of each other. The story begins right at the end of the civil war and carries on for some years after though the exact amount of time that passes is never completely elucidated. It takes place in Maputo and is told as a first-person narrative by the woman who married him first, Rami, an *assimilada* from the Ronga tribe who received a Catholic education. The novel traces the ways in which the women learn how to fight against Tony by sharing information with each other, thus forging ideas together on how to

control him. The text follows them as they get to know each other and form deep bonds which help them grow and become independent, confident people who are connected to their traditions as a means of gaining control of their own lives. Meanwhile, their husband Tony continues to find ways to best them by essentially continuing with the same behavior as before in order to assert his dominance over them, he holds that men are the bastions of absolute purity so nothing they ever do is wrong, going as far as to claim that "Só as mulheres podem trair, os homens são livres, Rami" ("Only women can betray, men are free, Rami"; Chiziane 31; 38). The women abandon the effort to defeat or subdue him and instead they figure out how to thrive without him. By the end of the story, all of the wives have grown tired of Tony. The women become economically independent enough at this point that they leave him and start their own families, in effect (and legally within the polygamous tradition) declaring him impotent. As they each leave, they ensure that he hears stinging words about his inability to care for them, that the children they have may not be his, and that there are more desirable and useful men out there. The story concludes when Rami declares she is pregnant with Tony's brother's baby after the *kutchinga*[28] purification ritual, which she had to perform after Tony faked his death to escape his commitments. This journey demonstrates how, ultimately, the polygamous relationship in which they engage creates the conditions through which the wives create a network of solidarity which continues to exist after Tony is no longer useful, allowing the wives to keep and maintain power amongst themselves.

Paulina Chiziane is undoubtedly one of Lusophone Africa's most famous and significant writers. Beyond the fact that she is one of the most important and accomplished authors in postcolonial Mozambique, with massive influence on the culture, she was the first African

[28] A ritual involving rape of the widow by her husband's next-of-kin which results in her inheritance by the oldest brother.

woman to win the Prémio Camões, the most important award given to Portuguese-language authors. She was a supporter of the FRELIMO government during the War of Independence, where she participated as a fighter. She found herself becoming disillusioned with the government as the civil war faded into the rearview mirror and dedicated herself to writing in 1975 (Gutiérrez 69). While she was born in the south of the country, she has lived in the central province of Zambézia for some years now. She published her first book, *Balada de amor ao vento*, in 1990. Chiziane seeks to understand how the baggage of the past influences the lives of people living in Mozambique's present, while consistently centering the struggles of women. In addition, according to Chabal in *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa,* she makes the argument that any sentimental view of the precolonial past, a tendency of the central government, ignores both the historical and contemporary status of women as second-class citizens throughout the many political bodies that have occupied what is today Mozambique (Chabal 92).

The impact that Chiziane's writing has had on Mozambique's literary canon is hard to overstate and she has become a national icon for the creativity and unapologetic nature of her work. Nafeesah Allen describes Chiziane's position within Mozambique's literary canon as such:

> Chiziane considers herself both an understated patriot and a vocal critic, each position vital to broadening freedom of expression and promoting national progress. For her, the writer's value is in presenting counter-narratives to accepted social norms. Like other mothers of African literature, Mariama Bâ (Senegal) and Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Chiziane confronts concepts of social power, dismantles the untouchability of traditions and humanizes those who uphold them. (Allen 203)

In the context of *Niketche*, Chiziane confronts the status quo in the traditions surrounding polygamy as exclusively being ways for men to accumulate power as is the tendency in the southern traditions. At the same time, she challenges the legitimacy of the

westernized supremacy of the *assimilado* society imposed by FRELIMO on the rest of Mozambique. Allen argues that she develops this idea further:

> …With her uncanny ability to translate individuals' idiosyncrasies with intimacy and to capture complicated cultural narratives in plain language, she brings a literary mirror to the faces of her compatriots, demanding social critique and new ways of being and belonging in post-colonial Mozambique. As of now, she is the only female Mozambican writer occupying this literary space. (203)

Writing against state-sanctioned conceptions of history, Chiziane undoubtedly takes an antipatriarchal stance in her writing. Like Liking before her, however, the most complicated aspect of Chizane's work is her reticence to call herself a feminist in interviews, instead referring to her work as feminine.

While her audience makes constant comparisons of her work to the broader feminist tradition, she seems intent on resisting the term. In a 2009 interview on *As páginas tantas*, an interview program on Portugal's state television network RTP, Chiziane answers the question on her own feminism and her perspectives on the movement: "Eu, quando escrevo, escrevo da condição da mulher mas não no feminismo tradicional europeu, nada disso. Eu, conto histórias de mulheres porque sou mulher é só isso." ("When I write, I write about the feminine condition not about traditional European feminism, nothing like that. I write stories about women because I'm a woman and that's that."; *As páginas tantas* 2009; my trans.) Here, she rejects the idea that her writing is somehow feminist just because of the way that she discusses women in her texts. Elsewhere, in an interview with Doris Wieser in 2019, she is much more direct about her feelings towards feminism:

> For one like me who lived among the Macuas, when I follow the global feminist movements, I say to myself, "But we had it all." Feminist movements, even in Mozambique, adopt the European model when they fight for women's rights and do not reference the practical experiences of their own culture. This is not to say that we have feminism, but that we have a tradition, various traditions. Even in the harshest patriarchal system women have some rights. In Europe women were

> totally disregarded. European Christianity arrived and destroyed everything, rendering women worthless. ("The Angels of God Are White to This Day, Interview with Paulina Chiziane")

The Macua, a northern ethnic group in Mozambique, is widely known to have strongly matriarchal cultural practices which require balance between men and women and in which women don't only have political rights, they maintain rights to pleasure and happiness. Mauá, the fifth wife and a Macua, explains to Rami that "A nossa sociedade é mais humana… A mulher tem direito à felicidade e à vida. Vivemos com um homem enquanto nos faz Feliz. Se estamos aqui, é porque a harmonia ainda existe. Se um dia o amor acabar, partimos à busca de outros mundos, com a mesma liberdade dos homens." ("Our society in the north is more humane… A woman has a right to happiness and to life. We live with a man as long as he makes us happy. If we're here, it's because a state of harmony exits. If our love comes to an end one day, we leave in search of other worlds, with the same freedom that men enjoy"; Chiziane 175; 259) This passage, then, sheds some light on why Chiziane may be resistant to the term feminist for a personal label: Why would she need a movement which has no indigenous roots in the nation when she has perfectly good and enviable models of being for women to emulate already? This perspective reflects the arguments made by academics like d'Almeida who argues that the Western term "feminist" is insufficient to describe the project of liberation within the African continent, which borrows from traditional modes of engagement on the continent which sought to defend the space that women historically held in society (Ogundipe-Leslie 317). Rebuilding Africa takes a revolutionary revision of social relations like the one that she explores in *Niketche* just as much as it takes the reconstruction of the state to serve its people, further layering the symbolic way in which the social interactions of the text relate to the political and social realities outside of it.

The subtlety in Chiziane's ambivalence to polygamy is best expressed in the way that she talks about it in two first person perspectives between *Niketche* and her first book, *Balada de amor ao vento*. According to Patrick Chabal, *Balada de amor ao vento's* clear acrimony towards polygamy reflects Chiziane's feelings towards the institution without considering the possible historical context which informs that character's lament. The Narrator says:

> A poligamia tem todos os males, lá isso é verdade, as mulheres disputam pela posse do homem, matam-se, enfeitiçam-se, não chegam a conhecer o prazer do amor, mas tem uma coisa maravilhosa: não há filhos bastardos nem crianças sozinhas na rua... Com a poligamia, com a monogamia ou mesmo solitária, a vida da mulher é sempre dura. (Chiziane 158)
>
> Polygamy has all sorts of negatives, that's completely true, women fight for possession of the man, they kill each other, they hex each other, they never know the pleasure of true love, but it *does* have one brilliant thing: there are no bastards or only children in the street… With polygamy, with monogamy or even alone, a woman's life is always hard.

Chabal thus argues that Chiziane, while critical of the postcolonial present, also critiques the status of women prior to colonization by the Portuguese as having hardly been any better (Chabal 92). While I would not dispute this second claim entirely, Chiziane's own words in *Niketche,* a text which is often interpreted as at least partially autobiographical, also undercut the idea that she explicitly views polygamy as the evil her character describes in *Balada*, in which Rami exclaims,

> Que sistema agradável é a poligamia! Para o homem casar de novo, a esposa anterior tem que consentir, e ajudar a escolher. Que pena o Tony ter agido sozinho e informalmente, sem seguir a normas, senão eu teria só consentido em casamentos com mulheres mais feias e mais desastrosas do que eu. Poligamia não é substituir mulher nenhuma, é ter mais uma. Não é esperar que uma envelheça para trocá-la por outra. Não é esperar que uma produza riqueza para depois a passar para a outra. Poligamia não depende da riqueza ou da pobreza. É um sistema, um programa. É uma só família com várias mulheres e um homem, uma unidade, portanto. No caso do Tony são várias famílias dispersas com um só homem. Não é a poligamia coisa nenhuma, mas uma imitação grotesca de um sistema que mal domina. Poligamia é dar amor por igual, de uma igualdade matematicamente exacta. É *substituir o macho por um assistente em caso de*

> *incapacidade: um irmão de sangue, um amigo, um irmão de circuncisão...*
> (Chiziane *Niketche* 96, my emphasis)

> What a pleasant system polygamy is! For a man to get married again, the previous spouse has to give her consent and help him choose. What a pity Tony acted on his own and informally, without following the accepted norms, because if he had, I would only have agreed to him marrying women who were uglier and more disaster-prone than myself. Polygamy isn't about substituting any woman, it's about having one more. It's not a question of waiting for one to grow old and then exchanging her for another. It's not about waiting for one to produce wealth to then pass it on to another. Polygamy doesn't depend on wealth or poverty. It's a system, a program. It's one family with various wives and one man, so it's a self-contained unit. In Tony's case, it's various families scattered around with only one man. It's not polygamy by any stretch of the imagination, but a grotesque imitation of a system that's almost out of control. Polygamy is about sharing love equally, an equality that's calculated with mathematical precision. *It substitutes the male for an assistant in the event of incapacity: a blood brother, a friend, a brother in circumcision*… (135-136, my emphasis)

The inherent contradiction between the praises sung and the evils lamented in polygamy can only be explained through the historical contexts in which each of these examples is being experienced. In the case of Rami and her allies, polygamy becomes a way to mete out control over her husband in a situation where he feels that he can act with impunity because of his status as the central figure that has obscured the nature of his relationships from everyone. Chiziane, then, is not staunchly in favor of polygamy but at the same time she will not completely disavow it as a social practice. Rather, I think the two views she offers *in Balada de amor ao vento* and in *Niketche* are indicative of the fact that she views it more as a tool for liberation among many tools which fall in and out of usefulness over time and in differing contexts, even within the same narrative. This relationship to polygamy reveals that Chiziane presents it as a means to an end rather than an inherent good in itself, demonstrating the ways that traditional culture can be reclaimed to push against the postcolonial realities that women still face in spite of the supposed liberation of their country.

The contradiction in Chiziane's opinions about polygamy is hardly the only contradiction in the way that she engages with feminism as a broader concept and her writing's relationship to the movement. For example, in "*Niketche*: As diversas facetas do ser mulher em Moçambique" (2012), Isabelita Crosariol and Stefânia Diniz mention that Chiziane has explicitly resisted the idea that *Niketche* is a feminist text and claims it is instead a feminine one. As a result, "esse posicionamento nos revela claramente o ponto de vista adotado na elaboração dessa obra que, antes de buscar promover uma crítica ao 'ser masculino', destina-se a abrir um espaço para que a mulher moçambicana saia de seu silenciamento." ("That positioning clearly reveals the adopted point of view in the layout of this work which, before looking to mount a criticism of the "male being", it sets itself to open a space for the Mozambican woman to leave her silence"; 111; my trans.) Whereas Adelto Gonçalves contends that the term "feminismo negro" is sufficient to understand the difference between Chiziane's discourse and that of her peers (Gonçalves) and Russell Hamilton unequivocally states that "the novel can legitimately be labelled feminist" (153) because of the interrelations of male and female characters and the way their interactions unfold. However, I contend that while the terms feminism and feminist are not the correct label to ascribe to this text or Chiziane's writing overall, they remain legible in a feminist tradition but are distinct enough to resist that label, Chiziane's self-assessment as a feminine writer is the best way to understand her writing. That said, feminist theory remains a useful framework because while I believe the term to be insufficient, Chiziane's work still completes what can be read as a feminist objective from an outsider's perspective. At the same time, however, her work functions in a distinct way from the western feminist framework and instead functions more like Liking's concept of misovirism.

This arrangement allows for a flexibility which permits Chiziane's work to be engaged through feminist lenses while allowing her work to sit outside of a strict categorization. Eleanor Jones argues that because of the particularly disjoined state of dialogue in African gender studies due to linguistic and cultural barriers. It makes sense to use a broad net of theories as tools rather than blueprints as a way of understanding African feminisms while cautioning that these texts should be used for critique without trying to impose cultural context. She threads this needle in her text *Battleground Bodies* (2017) by comparing the context in which texts by Black and Xicana feminists within the United States were producing discourses on difference and against universality in the 1970s and 80s. She suggests that

> Western feminist theory, in privileging gender difference as a point of analysis, has itself all too often fallen into a universalizing pattern wherein the experiences and theories of women of colour and particularly women of colour in the 'Third World' are either elided into the 'universal' realities of white women or are subsumed under the single, monolithic heading of 'other'. The works of black and Chicana US women writers were among the first to begin to recognize and expose the implications of this tendency, albeit specifically for women of colour living in the US and attempting to work within mainstream US feminist movements… The message of Chicana and black feminists was clear: that the discourse and practice of gender difference is fundamentally inseparable from oppression on the basis of race, ethnicity, class or sexual orientation. (Jones xxvi-xxvii)

This underlying fact that these theorists from the US identified a problem with a different shape but a universal root across much of the world suggests that what their interpretations of these issues are not necessarily exclusively rooted to the context in which they are written if they are handled with care. Jones herself suggests that this is a useful way to engage with theory outside of Mozambique, stating that "Treating theories critically, as tools rather than as blueprints, can facilitate a dialectic and symbiotic relationship between literature and theory that situates the literary text within wider global discourses while at the same time interrogating and evaluating the theoretical framework" (Jones xxix). I agree with Jones that applying feminist theory and

thinking to Chiziane's writing is a useful and necessary way to understand her contribution to Mozambican literature. However, I argue that much like Werewere Liking in my first chapter, Chiziane, in fact, explicitly maintains that she is not a feminist. She frames her work, and *Niketche* in particular, through a decolonial, antipatriarchal position, which is distinct from western feminism. To that end, the theorists that I intend to use engage with blackness and feminism at different levels and through different lenses with the understanding that the notion of feminism, while useful, is incomplete for discussing Chiziane's aims.

One of the most important aspects of this insufficiency comes down to the social history of gender politics in Sub-Saharan Africa, which differ greatly from western contexts, causing many African women writers to feel a reticence towards the imposition of western feminist standards on their projects of women's liberation. One of the ways that *Niketche* moves beyond critique is the way in which it engages joy as a form of resistance, particularly framed within the context of feminine generosity. As such my analysis here requires a kind of anti-pessimism which is a trend with newer scholarship on this text. Anti-pessimism, in my view, does not necessarily signify optimism so much as it suggests that the anti-pessimist subject can challenge the tendency for things to get worse by default. *Niketche* is full of tragic and harrowing descriptions of gendered violence and destitution at the hands of men but it does not, conversely, portray the women in the text as victims even when they are at their lowest points. When Tony flees during his own birthday party, Rami responds that they do not need him in order to be happy at his party:

> Meninas! Convençam-se de uma vez. Este passo dado não volta atrás. Destruímos o manto da invisibilidade, celebremos. Obrigámos o Tony a reconhecer publicamente o que fazia secretamente... Não se assustem com o Tony. A ausência do rei não é o fim da vida. Comamos à grande e bebamos à francesa!

> Divertimo-nos como nunca. A Lu e a Saly contavam anedotas e gargalhávamos. A Ju e a Mauá ouviam, sorriam… A festa prolongou-se até aos confins da madrugada. (Chiziane 111)
>
> Girls! Rest assured once and for all. Now we've taken this step, there's no turning back. We've destroyed the mantle of invisibility, so let's celebrate. We've forced Tony to acknowledge publicly what he did in secret. Girls, why are you so scared? Have you ever attended Tony's birthday party before? Have your children ever sat on their uncles' and aunts' laps, surrounded by love, like full members of the family? Don't be scared of Tony. The king's gone, but it doesn't mean it's all over. Let's eat our fill and drink to our heart's content.
> We had great fun. Lu and Saly told stories and we howled with laughter. Ju and Mauá listened and smiled… The party went on into the early hours of the morning. (160)

This proves that even with the knowledge that Tony is going to pull out every stop in order to ensure that he can hold onto his power and taking the most humorous option: simply ignoring and leaving the women to ignore the problems they have just created for him. The women do not care and instead celebrate the victories and camaraderie that they do possess now that they are working together. They all hold out hope for something better, demanding of themselves that they seek to improve their lives, the lives of their children, and the other wives. The dance that the text is named after, the Niketche, is a dance which celebrates love and which Rami uses to celebrate moments of love and pleasure that she encounters on her journey (Chiziane 160). To that end, critics have traced two main critical threads analyzing Chiziane's novel: one which focuses on the centrality of Tony and the restrictions he places on the wives[29], and another which focuses on the ways in which the wives generate their own futures through their rebellion[30]. In total, tracing these two critical threads will demonstrate the potential that the polygamous arrangement that Chiziane proposes has to challenge the masculinist order and allow the women

[29] See Azevedo, Chabal, Hamilton, and Tigre.
[30] See Martins, Rodrigues, Rivera and Rodrigues, and Corsariol and Diniz.

to forge their own future, which in turn serves as a model for the state to examine ways of looking forward.

3. Orality and Knowledge Transmission

One of the primary ways that information and learning takes place through the text is through dialogue. The women in the text all share their experiences to each other and in doing so, transmit knowledge which they can use to gather power for themselves. Chiziane gives the testimony that she took from the discussions she had with diverse women of Mozambique. This is revealed in the text through the form of the polyphonic discourse which surrounds the topic of polygamy and womanhood in the nation and how it relates to women's relationship with men and the state (Allen 206). Orality is, of course, a significant feature of African literature that draws from the traditions of oral storytelling common in many cultural practices throughout the continent. Chiziane's style of orality within the text relies heavily on Mozambican vernacular Portuguese to signal that her language is not the European "standard." As such, *Niketche* includes a glossary of Mozambican vernacular terms at the end of the story and layers them into the quotidian use of language. The principal example of this is the use of definite articles to refer to people in the third person, meaning that when Rami refers to Tony, she often calls him "o Tony" and refers to Julieta as "a Ju", a non-standard usage of the language which ties the text to Mozambique's specific vernacular geography. Further, by adding a layer of polyphony, or the effect of voices coming from multiple directions simultaneously Chiziane complicates the text, giving it a kind of broader perspective as told through several voices being spoken through the same conduit. For example, when Rami solicits information from other women, she later on becomes the conduit for their words. She asks women: what do they think about polygamy in

general and what do they think about Rami's predicament? Presenting what the women think about her arrangement, she says:

> No teu lugar mataria as concubinas todas. Ferveria um pote de óleo e metê-las-ia lá uma a uma como na história de Ali Babá e os quanta ladrões. Outras dizem: ignora essas mulheres e os filhos delas, faz de conta que nada sabes. Preserva o teu estatuo de cascada, garante apenas que o homem não fuja para teres sempre em dia a tua quota de amor, nem que seja uma vez por mês. (Chiziane 104)
>
> If I were you, I'd kill all the concubines. I'd boil a pot of oil and put them in it one by one like the story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves. Others said: Ignore those women and their children, and pretend you know nothing. Keep your status as a married woman, and just make sure your man doesn't run away so that you can get your share of love, even if it's only once a month. (149-150)

This testimony is presented without quotes or attribution, creating the effect of hearing all of these voices through the same source. The use of the verb construction "metê-las-ia" is unique and non-standard Portuguese in which the conjugation is split into the infinitive and the conditional, divided by the direct object. Additionally, this entire section is not presented with quotes. It is difficult to discern and differentiate Rami's own thoughts from those of her peers. The combination of these two effects demonstrates how Rami is construed throughout the text as the channel of the voices of Mozambican women, speaking in their language and projecting it outwards through her own voice.

Chiziane's semi-autobiographical voice, through Rami, reveals the stories of the women of Mozambique. This is achieved through her ability to speak for others through a voice which amplifies many voices, using Rami as a conduit for the experiences of women in the nation. In "A experiência flutuante de Paulina Chiziane: Exílios internos e escrituras de si em 'Niketche'" (2016) Victor Azevedo argues that one of Chiziane's most potent tools as an author is the use of orality and the fact that her writing effectively collapses the distance between Rami and Chiziane herself, which allows for Chiziane to name the implicit problem with the way that women are

fenced in within modern Mozambican society. Azevedo argues that, “Rami reconhece esse sentimento em cada uma das mulheres, com as quais se une, e busca a tradição ancestral dos povos autóctones de Moçambique para ressignificar a infidelidade. Dessa forma, a protagonista expõe a falsa monogamia da moderna sociedade ocidentalizada e o sofrimento a que são impostas as mulheres pela tradição” (“Rami recognizes the feelings of every one of the women, with which she unites herself, and looks for the ancestral traditions of the autocthonous peoples of Mozambique to redefine infidelity. In this way, the protagonist exposes the false monogamy of the modern westernized world and the suffering that are imposed on women by this tradition”; Azevedo 104; my trans.). This experience gives the reader the effect of reading the testimony of other women through Rami as a stand-in for Chiziane, in effect as a method of generalizing the experiences to which Chiziane bore witness (Allen 206). Azevedo further argues that this experience is reflected in the way that Chiziane engages with the bodies of Mozambican women in the text: “Ao mesmo tempo, impõe-se destacar que a escrita de *Niketche* (2004) acerca da sexualidade, em particular sobre a identidade e o corpo feminino, se propõe como releitura do papel atribuído socialmente à mulher, que é o de ser objeto do desejo e estar sempre ao lado do homem” (“At the same time, *Niketche*’s writing distinguishes itself through its approach to sexuality, particularly around identity and the female body, and proposes itself as a rereading of the socially attributed role of women, which is traditionally to be the object of desire always at the side of the man”; 104; my trans.). In this way, Azevedo demonstrates how the collapse of the protagonist and the narrator into one through the text permits a specific reading wherein Chiziane inhabits this character who has borne witness and testifies on behalf of women. This blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography in such a way that it gives her the space to create this imagined network of solidarity to continue to work through the proposition of how exactly to

solve the problems after gathering the ability to discuss the problems in themselves through this technique.

Putting herself in the position of Rami, however, does not necessarily require that Rami remain in the center after the narrative ends. Rather than view Rami as the stand-in and mirror for all of Mozambique's women and the author (104), I instead view her as a mediator for the polyphonic testimonies that she collects. She ultimately steps aside from her role as the first wife so that someone else can take up the role where she leaves off. At the end of the novel, Luísa, after she leaves Tony and marries again, offers Rami a position as the second wife, acknowledging that it will be significantly less difficult than her role as Tony's first wife, effectively offering to shoulder the responsibility that Rami had taken (*Niketche* 289). This process of ceasing to speak for the other women of Mozambique instead renders Rami into a conduit through which she can channel the different experiences of the diverse women of Mozambique. I contend that Chiziane's story of how she came up with the idea for the novel contradicts Azevedo's reading that the text is purely autobiographical even though it does share some commonalities with events that Chiziane herself has witnessed—while she places herself in the position of Rami as the witness to the other events of the text, she begins her novel with a scene she witnessed outside of her window while she was writing. Chiziane explained in an interview that:

> When I wrote *Niketche* it was a story that came to me in the street. I was sitting in the window of my house in Zambezia and I saw women fighting over a man. I heard the snarls of these angry women. I saw a man coming their way. When he saw that these were the voices of his two wives, he ran away. So the women kept up their war. I got angry about this. And I didn't like seeing it. Every day that I saw him, my neighbor, I would get angry and I wanted to ask him about what happened. When I finally spoke to him, he didn't give the incident any importance. From there, I started to look for information about monogamy, polygamy, the traditions of the people from the North, and how women there express themselves… I confess that I did not invent the female characters. I would

> meet with women. We would start talking and they talked and talked. The things each woman said would touch me and in the end she ended up becoming a character… But, she told me these stories without knowing what I would do with them. I never said that I was listening to a testimony that I would use to write a story. It was from there that the book was born. It's almost always that way. (Allen 207-8)

By drawing from experience in this way, Chiziane is able to speak for others who experience the events of the text. As such, I contest the idea that the text is completely autobiographical as Azevedo argues, but instead is a kind of ethnography, told through a first-person perspective which grants Chiziane the distance necessary to break silence without breaking the confidence of the people from whom she heard in which she has inserted a part of herself into a stand-in.

This testimony reveals the ways in which the lived realities of women are told through the text and the ways in which they are forced to engage with both men and the state. Maiane Pires Tigre portrays the plight of women within the text as something that is the sole and exclusive issue at play, neglecting to notice the playful irony that comes with the transmission of the harrowing tales that are being shared. According to this reading, there is little to be gained within the text for women beyond the fact that they dispute Spivak's originary claim, that she claims she had made out of despair, that the subaltern cannot, indeed, speak. She argues that

> Torna-se evidente que, Rami, em maior ou menor grau, ao lado de todas as personagens femininas da narrativa, é o resultado do exercício do poder simbólico insidio sobre o dominado. Vistos meramente objetos mercantis, corpos e falas consistem com o poder hipnótico da dominação, a não ser que deixam romper com a usurpação de seus corpos e falas ameaçando a pretensa viridade masculina. A grosso modo, percebido como capital social, o corpo da mulher, destituída do poder, supõe um lucro de natureza simbólica. (Tigre 59)

> It becomes evident that Rami, to a greater or lesser degree, beside all of the feminine characters of the narrative, is the result of the exercise of the insidious symbolic power over the dominated. Seen as simple merchandise, bodies and speech consist of a hypnotic power of domination, the non-being that decides to break with the usurpation of its body and speech, threatened by the pretense of masculine virility. In an abundant way, perceived as social capital, the body of the woman, deprived of power, presumes a lucrative natural symbolism. (my trans.)

While I would argue that this is a reasonable interpretation of the beginning of the novel, I think it fails to see the ways in which the transmission of knowledge within the text demonstrates the potential for women to combat their situation through solidarity and continues to appear as Tony continues to attempt revenge against Rami and the other wives. For example, when Tony threatens to divorce Rami because she reveals the other wives at his birthday party, she becomes aware of her precarity in that moment: "Ele fala e fala. Não o escuto. Estou no future, estou na lua. Estou no mundo que me espera quando o divórcio se consumar. Serei uma mancha de lama no lençol imaculado da família maternal... Uma marginal." ("He goes on and on. I'm not listening. I'm in the future, I'm on the moon. I'm in the world that awaits me when my divorce goes through. I shall be a spot of absolutely indelible cashew juice on my father's white shirt… An outcast"; 165; 244) This demonstrates that Chiziane makes the lived realities of women in Mozambique clear to the reader. At the same time, however, she also highlights many of the joys not only of the feminine experience individually, but as a group.

At the start of the text, Rami takes a vindictive stance against her peers, who she constantly refers to as her "rivais". Speaking to the mirror, who is gently suggesting to her that she should examine Tony's wrongdoing, she comes to the conclusion that she can dance the Niketche when "Dançar a derrota do meu adversário. Dançar na festa do meu aniversário. Dançar sobre a coragem do inimigo" ("To dance to the defeat of my adversary. Dance at my birthday party. Dance upon my enemy's courage"; 18; 19). While Tigre correctly identifies the issue at hand, that Rami is limited by her status as a woman and that this oppression speaks through the way that she is characterized, particularly at the beginning of the text when she is most fragile. I propose that she fails to hear Chiziane's undertone of sarcasm when referring to the caprices of men or the small moments of capturing joy between the wives as they grow

together and become more confident. This is evidenced as early as Rami's confrontation with her mirror-image at the beginning of the text which teaches her to challenge Tony and join with the wives in the first place. Looking at herself in a mirror, her image tells her that "Celebro o amor e a vida. Danço sobre a vida e a morte. Danço sobre a tristeza e a solidão. Piso para o fundo da terra todos os males que me torturam. A dança liberta a mente das preocupações do momento. A dança é uma prece. Na dança celebro a vida enquanto aguardo a morte. Por que é que não danças?" ("I am celebrating love and life. I dance upon life and death. I dance upon sadness and loneliness. I stamp into the ground all the misfortunes that torture me. Dancing frees my mind from life's passing concerns. Dancing is praying. When I dance, I celebrate life while awaiting death. Why don't you dance?" Chiziane 18; 19). From the beginning of the text, while she is initially blinded by Tony's power to fail to see his wrongdoings, that masculinity is "pureza", the women around her beg her to not only speak to women's experiences but help her change them. Rami's neighbors, much like Chiziane's, tell her stories of their men also being basically absent: "Deliramos em murmúrios de nostalgia. Nos olhos de todas nós, miragens do marido que foi e não volta mais... Eu sou a única que ainda vê rosto de homem de vez em quando – só para vir comer e mudar de roupa. Não há homens neste bairro…" ("Our minds wander in nostalgic murmurs. In the eyes of each of us, there are images of a husband who has gone and will never come back… I'm the only one who still sees her man's face from time to time—but only when he comes home to eat or change his clothes. There are no men left in this area…"; 15; 14-15) The transmission of experience and knowledge between women, then, is not simply speaking for themselves as subalterns but finding a way to shift their alterity and not simply survive through an information network which provides them with the space to compare notes. As a result, it is important to keep in mind that Chiziane is writing towards creating a future for women, not

simply accepting the one that we have and writing a lament for its inevitability and the inevitable decay of the nation.

Thus, Chiziane proposes a way in which these sorts of polygynous relationships can help inform ways of generating power through the ways in which it connects women to each other. In her article "Polyphonic Disconcert around Polygyny" (2015), Catarina Martins complicates the outside observer's perception of polygamy (and more specifically, polygyny) and the many social contexts from which it springs in African societies. The fact that women writers do not always reject polygyny as a socio-political practice to achieve feminist ends stems from the fact that it is not perceived as directly unfeminist in many African cultures, but instead is viewed as a tool which is not above patriarchal abuse. However, this means that it is an available tool for women to use in a fight against patriarchy like in the above quote when Rami reports the sentiments of the other women, which all contribute to perceptions around polygyny. As Chiziane stated in no uncertain terms, in Africa, even the most patriarchal of systems granted women's rights that she did not observe in Europe (*The Angels of God Are White to This Day, Interview with Paulina Chiziane*). To further the conflicting dialogues and opinions on polygamy which circulate in Mozambique (and by extension, throughout the text) Martins states that

> Here, again, polyphonies around polygyny arouse questions that do not have simple answers. According to the author in an interview I conducted with her in 2011, she went to a lot of bars in Maputo, the Mozambican capital, to listen to the stories of women that she gathered in her novel. Indeed, there are so many voices in *Niketche*, of women of so many origins, with so many different life paths that the novel seems to build what we may consider a feminist national narrative: first, because the author rescues these women and their lives from the silence they had been condemned to by the official History and the collective memory. The official national narrative of the past excludes the private and domestic sphere and is androcentric and teleological in the sense of the coronation of the Mozambican New Man. Second, because the novel is built as a complex weave with infinite tonalities and uncountable perspectives that interrogate both the cultural practices of different regions of the country (as a sort of national ethnography of intimacy) and historical processes (colonialism, wars) from the point of view of the power

> relationships between the sexes…. [Rami] finds her double not only in her own mirror image… but multiple doubles in the stories, life experiences and feelings of the many women she encounters as she struggles to find a sense for what is at stake—the place of women in the many forms of affective and sexual relationships with me. (Martins 803)

Martins argues that having such a broad perspective and range of opinions undermines the passivity of women in polygamous societies and offers instead the idea that these systems can be used for their gain. It deprives polygamy of the androcentric past which she argues plays into masculinist tropes of the past which erase the social and matrilineal lines that polygyny in particular carried in many African societies before colonization, effectively erasing the roles of women which were numerous and prestigious within these social arrangements. Chiziane does not suggest that a simple return to precolonial traditions would solve the issue, however, and proposes that these polygynous relationships can be modified to suit Mozambique's current political reality.

Chiziane, then is among a group of African women writers who look warily at the benefits of a western feminism for their own needs. The theories and terms themselves, it seems, are insufficient. This is reflective of the first text that I analyzed in this project, *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* (1984). The figure of the misovire, the woman who has yet to find a man worthy of her respect, is present in the characterization of Rami as she progresses through the text. She starts out nearly in a state of fear when she is in Tony's presence, begging for recognition that he's done any wrong to her. She ends the text nearly exhausted with his capricious and rapacious attitude. Toward the end of the novel, in an exchange in which seems to show Tony trying to provoke his wife into a fight by threatening to punish her with divorce, Tony tells Rami,

> Hoje queria dizer-te palavras de arrependimento. Mas um homem não se arrepende. Tudo o que faz é sempre bem feito.
> – Ainda bem.

– Gostaria dizer-te que és uma grande mulher. Também não posso. As mulheres são sempre pequenas.
– Eu sei, meu Tony.
– Eu adoro-te. Quero adorar-te, mas não posso. Adorar é ajoelhar. Um homem com H maiúsculo não se curva, é erecto.
– Ai, sim?
– Queria também dizer que cofio em ti, mas também não me é permitido. Os homens devem desconfiar sempre das mulheres, e as mulheres devem confiar sempre nos homens.
– Já sei. (Chiziane, 327)

"Today, I'd like to speak words of remorse to you. But a man cannot show remorse. Everything he does is well done."
"Just as well."
"I'd like to tell you you're a great woman. But I can't do that. Women are always small."
"I know, Tony."
"I adore you. I want to adore you, but I can't. To adore is to get down on your knees. A real man doesn't bow, he remains erect."
"Really?"
I'd also like to say I trust you, but I'm also not allowed to. Men must always suspect women, and women must always trust men."
"I know." (487)

Here, Chiziane shows Rami, a woman who is generally loquacious and excited to be heard because of her many years of isolation, to be bored by the comically misogynist tropes: he proclaims that women cannot be grand, that they can never be trusted and that men are defined by their erectness. Tony is pulling this bait out in front of her to get the upper hand again by forcing her to react. This interaction shows Tony for who he is, a man who is not worthy of anyone's respect, a man who is so obsessed with his virility that he cannot stand the idea that he had been declared impotent by women whom he had recently controlled. Beyond that, however, the fact that the women all leave him for other men (and the fact that Rami is about to reveal she is pregnant with his brother's baby) proves that he is, in fact, spiritually impotent. Their interaction further demonstrates the ways in which Chiziane's stance is better read as a decolonial and antipatriarchal one rather than strictly feminist, as it shows that same trope that

Liking demonstrated in her text: the man in front of her is nothing more than a worm (Magnier 18), worthy only of her disdain rather than even being worthy of her critique. To that end, the women of the story then create situations in which they no longer need the man but can maintain the network of power and support which they cultivated for one another in order to create a brighter future for themselves and prove to the state that it has not provided what they need to thrive. For example, Luísa offers Rami the role of second wife in her next marriage, giving her the option to maintain her ties to the wives while also being able to take a step back from the responsibilities of first wife (Chiziane 289). In this gesture, we can see that the network that they cultivated gives them the ability to take space and power elsewhere, ensuring their futures and securing them from the precarity Tony offered them.

4. Bearing Witness, Seeking Justice

The wives are dynamic figures who evolve as they learn and grow through each other. Tony, on the other hand, remains static throughout the course of the text while the needs, ambitions and desires of his wives evolve around him, offering a counterpoint to the love which allows Rami and the other women to change. This contrast of the relational intimacy opens between each of the wives as they learn about each other's relationship to Tony through the oral sharing of information. For her peers, the evolution of their characterization reflects a mutual intimacy between Rami and her interlocutors which encourages them to not only share power but use each other's power to build more and share it laterally as demonstrated through the "softening" of Rami's rhetoric towards her co-wives, which is best represented in the way their voices begin to blend together and become harmonious throughout the text. This represents a transition away from being defensive and reactionary towards a proactive worldview which allows the women to build up power against their husband rather than through him in a way

which he alone can sanction, essentially loosening his grip on power simply by relocating it. This loosening of herself is reflective of the idea of love and intimacy as a form of resistance, as it shows her being able to open her heart to understand the conditions which cause the women around her to need to "steal" her husband from her while simultaneously showing her the conditions which cause her husband to need to cheat. This love gives them the opportunity to create the forms of lateral solidarity which they use to obviate their need for Tony's presence in their lives. To best organize this section, I have split it into a section dedicated to the characterization of Tony and another section dedicated to the varied characterizations of the wives.

Tony: Naming an Empty Signifier

Tony is the chief of police in Maputo both during and after the civil war, making him a high-ranking member of FRELIMO. Each of the wives that he's slowly taken over the course of the civil war has represented one ethnic group in Mozambique. Tony starts the text characterized as all powerful and unassailable, distributing power and resources to survive outward from himself and giving less and less as he moves from wife to wife. The patrimony system works in much the same way; it waters down the disbursement of wealth leading to the massive inequalities which affect women the most. Achille Mbembe explores the nature of power as it pertains to the idea of the central figure, God, and his relationship to the ability to exercise control. This central figure is represented by the phallus because of its nature as a strong masculine figure as a stand-in for power and unity in a secularized context which still carries the echoes of the imposition of Christian values under colonialism. Mbembe describes that

> From Christ's status as head of humanity followed Christianity's claim to a universal empire. In other words, Christ's power to rule was inseparable from his *right of property,* a right of property exercised, naturally, over so-called Christian lands… From this it followed that the property of the infidels belonged to him, by

> virtue of the universality of his reign; this conclusion opened the way to assertion of the *right of conquest.* (Mbembe 227)

This specifically reflects both the ways which the FRELIMO government functions in the post-civil war era and further as a way which the relationship between Tony and the wives operates at the beginning of the text. Tony, being a well-respected and powerful man within FRELIMO's government, maintains significant power over his wives essentially through right of conquest, first over a Catholic woman, Rami, then over the other wives who practice other indigenous faiths and do not lend their credence to the same religious ideas. The dominance of the hybrid, Christianized faith in Maputo thus continues to influence the ways in which men like Tony are able to exert their power over the nation and the women within it. Rami confirms this to her therapist, who asks her what she actually knows about love, only for Rami to reply that she: "Tinha aulas na igreja, com os padres e as freiras. Acendi muitas velas e fiz muitas rezas… [minha família] falava-me da obediência, da maternidade" ("I had classes at church with the priests and nuns. I lit a lot of candles and said a lot of prayers... [my family] talked to me about obedience, about motherhood"; Chiziane 37; 46-47). The society around Tony is constructed for him to take advantage of women, who are encouraged by everyone around them to play by the rules in order to secure their future. Tony can exploit this system and, in essence, do what he pleases.

Even though Tony is constantly in and out of their lives and even if they come up with other survival strategies, they remain dependent on him and his money to survive, he becomes a metonymic figure for God in that he sustains the women's ability to survive. Chiziane demonstrates this when Rami comes to understand the economic situations that they are in and the way that they are left behind: "Fui ver a Luísa… [Tony] construiu raízes sobre ela. São dois filhos a que mele presta assistência apenas quando lhe dá na gana. Para alimentar os filhos, a

pobre tem que arrancar cabelos e pentelhos, transformar em grão para cozer o pão" ("I went to see Luisa... [Tony] trapped her in his roots. She's got two children he occasionally supports when he's in the mood. She has to use a lot of initiative to feed her children, to conjure up flour to bake her bread"; 68; 95). Chiziane shows through this that Tony, thus the state, can act with impunity. He essentially holds a necropolitical power over them, that is, the ability to decide when they are able to die. What's more, as the father of their children his role is begrudgingly needed as a means of support for the family that has stemmed from his power, literally having been sowed from his phallus and rooting his need within their family hierarchies. The impunity which he is able to exercise over the other wives demonstrates that fact that he can exercise his power for violence if he wants which further demonstrates the way in which his family is interchangeable with property to him, his power allows him to objectify them as he pleases.

From this same notion, however, it becomes clear that Tony is also an empty signifier. Mbembe argues that power comes from an imaginary, God, who is no more than a phantasm. He is, then, no more than a vessel upon which people assign power. Mbembe argues that power thus comes from this imagined creation, stating that,

> First, all power is based on an originary phantasm. The phantasm of power and the power of the phantasm consist in rubbing the two imaginaries of death and sexuality together, rubbing them constantly until they burst into fire. Domination consists, for the dominators and for all others, in sharing the same phantasms. Second, conversion always presupposes an entry into the time of the other. The converted self is placed such that it can be spoken by the god taking possession of it… Third, to produce religious truth, faith and a certain stupefaction must overlap. All religious truth, especially when the latter aspires to universality, is always exposed to being seen in some way an experience of madness. (Mbembe 231)

Tony's character as a central figure who is affiliated with both the state and the Catholic church fits this proposed description of power in two ways. First, within the phallocratic logic of Tony's relationship to the wives, it becomes clear that Tony holds his supposed godhood, the near

worship of his penis over the women, he literally views men as being unable to act in the wrong, telling Rami when she accuses him of cheating, that: “A pureza é masculina, e o pecado é feminino. Só as mulheres podem trair, os homens são livres, Rami” ("Purity is masculine, sin is female. Only women can betray, men are free, Rami”; 31; 38). He wields his impunity as a cudgel against them and their autonomy. We can thus understand Chiziane as describing the FRELIMO government in such a way as well, using the cult of the (masculine) leaders of the party to ensure their continued power. Second, however, it presents the opportunity that Chiziane describes in the text through the sharing of knowledge that the wives engage in, that if the phantasm has to be shared for power to be created, all the women have to do is simply stop believing in the phantasm. Using polygamy as a weapon against Tony’s phallus, then, becomes a central technique for the women to redraw their boundaries simply by taking Tony’s power away from him.

While Tony is hardly the most important character in the text, understanding his role is vital to my project as he is a stand-in for the restricted future that the wives will have to accept were they to simply continue with the status quo. Tony’s characterization within the text is significant to our understanding of how justice is created through the fact that their interpretation of him shifts as the wives grow and he remains remarkably static. In “Edible Encounters” (2016), Rodrigues and Rivera point out that the sheer level of influence that men have over their wives in modern Mozambique is staggering and demonstrates the need for Chiziane’s text both at the time and currently. They state that,

> Marriage is both a gift and a curse for women. The institution of marriage provides monetary stability for the women through the husband’s employment as well as through the inheritance (or, *lobolo*) that the husband presents in exchange for the woman’s hand in marriage, but only under the condition of their subservience to their provider… agency for women is limited and often unobtainable without the material independence that marriage provides… While

> women are made voiceless subalterns, the narrative exposes the ways in which males garner unfair advantages in the realm of economic opportunities and amorous relationships. (13)

This level of control and the fact that stability is only possible through personal subjugation to the whims of a husband shows precisely why a text like this is necessary to understand what potentials exist outside of the current restrictions placed on women. Chiziane, then, uses this dynamic to be able to describe ways in which the models of polygamy that exist throughout the country can be used to create conditions which allow women to gather power and maintain it, with or without a man standing by their sides.

The fact that this independence is so scarce, too, allows the wives to gain agency through polygamy because they are able to finally compare notes when they create these alliances in ways that they were unable to previously. Sharing information, then, becomes a resource more valuable to them than the stability that Tony and his capricious brutality can provide. They discover his infidelity once they begin the conjugal parliament, a tradition which serves as a formal meeting between the wives and outside observers as a way to ensure that the marriage is being upheld. Rather than having to go door to door and fight the way that Rami thought she had to, they instead call a meeting and decide that they need to investigate and catch him in his infidelity. In doing so, they collate all of their data on him, helping facilitate the other actions that each of them need to take in order to keep him from hiding from them. Combined, they each come up with ways to solve the issue and what roles they should each have, Saly, the fourth wife and a woman from the north, reminds everyone that "A poligamia confere-nos alguns direitos, vamos usufruí-los. Um polígamo pode ter amantes e deve ter amantes, caso as suas esposas estejam no período de resguardo. – Tens razão – complementa a Lu. – Nenhuma de nós teve nenhum aborto e nem está a aleitar" ("Polygamy gives us some rights, so let's make the most of

them. A polygamist can have lovers, and should have them on occasions when his wives are in a period of confinement"; Chiziane 132; 193). When it becomes clear that Mauá, the wife who caught him cheating, was not menstruating, the tone becomes much more serious, they take on the roles of private investigators and Mauá and Luísa catch him in the act the next day, at which point they decide to take action. (Chiziane 134). Their ability to share their own testimony, then, creates potentials for them to step out from under the system which had kept them subservient to a husband in the first place, giving them room to grow on their own.

Rami and the co-Wives: Speaking Justice

Chiziane explores the legal traditions of polygamy and the way that they allow the women to leverage the legitimized marraige to their own advantage. They formalize the relationship via dowry at the behest of the families of the five wives. This reflects the ways in which Jennifer C Nash reflects on the direction that Black feminism can take after intersectionality has been fully appropriated by the broader feminist movement and watered down in *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019). Nash argues throughout the text that the defensiveness over the term, however justified, has distracted thinkers in the movement who should instead cede that ground. Doing so would let them focus on creating something new or at least use that freed up space to claim ground elsewhere within the broader context of intersectionality. Proposing that there could be unique ways of re-inscribing intersectionality as a tool with which to engage the state rather than rejecting the state as a space for Black women altogether, she states,

> Indeed, I argue that remembering intersectionality's juridical orientations, and recovering them rather than eschewing them (even in a moment where law is treated as the paradigmatic site of antiblack violence), might allow black feminists to encounter the broad sweep of our transformative call for love-politics. In so doing, I emphasize that law might be a space of black women's survival rather than simply the site of black women's wounding. (Nash 130)

To that end, she begins to outline ways in which this might be achieved, which will be explored later in this chapter. Importantly, however, the use of juridical traditions related to polygamy within *Niketche* seems to reflect the sort of project that Nash proposes here, suggesting again that feminist models stemming from the Americas continue to be insufficient when women can agitate for more. In using these legal frameworks, they begin to move on from simple survival and find instead ways to thrive by leaning on each other and finding different ways of engaging with the state that had been previously unavailable to them as women in Mozambican society when they simply are accepting Tony's rule. Mauá, the fifth wife from the far north of the country, insists to Rami that within her traditions wives should be just as highly regarded as men, that love is a right that women are able to seek out if they no longer have it (Chiziane 175). This notion, then, intertwines the idea of jurisprudence and love within the text and demonstrates its importance for finding sites of healing within Mozambican society.

In the context of this project Nash's work on Black feminism after intersectionality it is possible to understand the work that Rami and her peers are doing as a reclamation of law in their favor by creating a space for themselves in which that law can be legitimated while their participation and ability to sustain a ruling in their favor are denied by the laws proposed by the state. Instead, the conjugal parliament acts as a way for them to engage in what Nash describes as love-politics, as she explains,

> The realization of our capacity to be "undone," of the way others can "undo" us, and the decision to embrace rather than retreat from the possibility of our potential undoing, is the logic of black feminist love-politics… Black feminist conceptions of love as a unifying political principle encourage us to ask about our deep responsibilities to each other, by virtue of our collective inhabitation of the social world. This view, of course, entails risk. It is risky to view one's self as bound up with others and to fully accept the responsibility and potential peril that are entailed in embracing and practicing a worldview of linked fate. But this is the

> visionary call of black feminist love-politics—a radical embrace of connectedness. (Nash 117)

This concept applies to the wives in *Niketche* in the way that they witness the pain of each other and accept both that they can be made different by their interactions with each other. Chiziane best demonstrates this in an interaction between Juliana and Mauá, the second and fifth wives, when Mauá reveals that Tony may have a sixth lover which causes her to cry in frustration:

> Por que choras? – pergunta a Ju com ironia, aproveitando o momento para lavar a roupa suja. – O que tu sentes, já sentimos todas, Mauá. Nós fomos sofrendo traições uma seguir à outra. Tu é que escolheste um polígamo, de que te queixas?
> -- Estás magoada? – pergunta a Saly com sarcasmo. – Não sabias que era assim? Estás triste? Quem te disse a ti que o Tony era só teu? Por acaso ele te disse que eras a única e a última? (Chiziane 130)

> "Why are you crying?" Ju asks in an ironic tone, taking advantage of the moment to wash her dirty laundry. "What you're feeling, we've all felt, Mauá. We've suffered betrayals, one after the other. You chose a polygamist, so what are you complaining about?"
> "Are you hurt?" Saly asks sarcastically. "Weren't you aware this is how things are? Are you sad? Who told you that Tony was only for you? Did he by any chance tell you that you were his be-all end-all?" (189-190)

While the way that Saly and Ju speak down to Mauá seems cruel, they are also attempting to teach her about Tony's predilections. The catharsis that they get from airing this sentiment allows all of them to suffer through the same sentiment together and thus reach a point of solidarity where they can recognize their feelings within each other. Further, this style of engagement does in fact not obviate the need for the state in its entirety but rather demands that the state conform to them rather than the other way around. Using traditions that they state deemed worth shredding, they have taken up a position whose jurisprudence suggests that they have the right to redraw the boundaries placed on them by the patriarchal system which they are forced to inhabit. I propose that the juridical and social process of intimate love proposed by Nash represents a way of understanding how Chiziane's collective, polyphonic witnessing helps the characters

evolve and become more intimate in the interest of generating more solidarity and power. Nash's concept of love proposes a more intimate kind of "tough" love which demands a subject to change while the subject opens herself to becoming "undone" and being willing to change in the pursuit of love. This love, finally, gives the women the space to create new lives for themselves in their refusal to genuinely submit to Tony. Within the text, Chiziane characterizes women who embrace the idea of hearing each other's stories and opening themselves up to changing for each other as genuine drivers of change. These new subjects take control of vacated juridical institutions in order to establish new boundaries for themselves through an intimacy with each other rather than fighting over a "scarce" resource.

The portrayal of scarcity and abandonment by men and the way that it slowly changes throughout the text is what forces Rami to open herself up to the possibility that the legal structure of a polygamous relationship may help her find some justice against Tony rather than against her co-wives, which only seems to make him stronger. After Rami meets (and fights) with the second wife, Julieta, she learns that there is a third woman and that Julieta has not seen Tony in at least 7 months. As a result, she takes the same rage she had for Julieta and turns it to the third, Luísa. The scene is violent and chaotic and results in the two of them being arrested and thus put directly under Tony's control:

> Lutámos. Derrubámos tudo o que estava à nossa volta: vidros, pratos, vasos, plantas, e tudo ficou em cacos. Eu vim por bem, gritava apavorada. Sai da minha casa, dizia ela. Tu não tens casa coisa nenhuma, respondia eu, furiosa. Tudo o que aqui está é minha propriedade, foi comprado com o dinheiro do marido que é meu por direito, somos casados pela lei civil e pela igreja, e com comunhão de bens, para tua informação, respondia eu enquanto levava a maior sova da minha vida. Aí é que te enganas, vais ver que tem razão gritava a minha adversária enquanto me entrava as unhas na pele, riscando-me o corpo todo... A polícia apanhou-nos em flagrante e levou-nos à esquadra onde ficámos presas, acusadas de perturbar a ordem pública. (Chiziane 51-52)

> We fought. We knocked over everything around us: glasses, dishes, vases, plants, everything was smashed to pieces. I came with good intent, I shouted, alarmed. Get out of my house, she kept saying. You don't own anything, I replied, furious. Everything here is my property, it was bought with the money of my husband, who is mine by right, we were married in both the registry office and the church, and for your information, with full community of property, I replied while suffering the worst hiding of my life. That's where you're wrong, you'll see who's right, screamed my adversary as she dug her nails into my skin, leaving my body with deep scratches… The police caught us red-handed and took us off to the police station, where we were arrested, charged with causing a public disturbance. (69-70)

In this passage, while there is dialogue it becomes mixed and lost in the description, showing the reader the ferocity with which the two are willing to fight over Tony at this point in the text, citing laws which give him the final word on whose things are in Luísa's house and what right each of them has to Tony. While they may be looking out for themselves, they are left in a position where he remains the subject with agency and they are left to decide which object between the two of them is more important. It takes time for the polyphonic discourse between the wives to align and here we can see the discordant beginnings where Rami is unable to open herself to the idea that the women may not be to blame and instead it may be the man who is dividing and pitting them against one another. In spite of the fact that she opened up to Julieta, she is not able to see yet that she may be asked to change to address the actual wrong being done to better seek justice. It is no coincidence that Rami does not fight the other two wives with nearly the same violence that she fights the first two. This shift in Rami's outlook tracks with her capacity to become undone by the other wives and demonstrate her ability to change in the face of the love that the other wives offer. In a tender scene on the day of Luísa's wedding to a more respectable man (whom she had already shared with Rami once, at Tony's birthday party), the wives share hugs, kisses and tears. Mauá tells Rami: "Olha como é bela a tua obra. O que seria de nós sem ti? Tu és a nossa mão, contigo nascemos outra vez. Compreendeste o nosso

sofrimento, a nossa pobreza. Adoptaste-nos como filhas e melhoraste as nossas vidas..." ("Rami, just look at how beautiful your work has turned out. What would we be if it weren't for you? You are our mother, thanks to you we have been reborn. You understood our suffering, our poverty. You adopted us like daughters and you improved our lives…"; Chiziane 289; 428) While the wives ultimately fail to control Tony, they succeed in fostering love for each other in a way which gives them a social future. They succeed in finding comfort in each other as a curative for the abuses they have had to suffer in Tony's shadow.

This dynamic contrasts strongly with their relationship later in the text as it develops and they begin working against Tony. The development of the relationship between the wives after their infighting reads nearly like a reconciliation, particularly as they find their stride within the polygamous union that they've created. As they grow closer, they attain more power. Much of the power they gain is economic and they gain it through a wealth sharing system called a *xitique*[31] which I explain below. As they now have more things to do than simply worry about where their security will come from, they have better things to do and more time to be able to do things for themselves. They convene what Rami calls the "parlamento conjugal," in effect a meeting of the wives, and discuss solutions for how to best deal with his behavior after Tony fakes his own death to get out of his commitments. After some reassurance from the other wives, a discussion ensues:

> -- Meninas, que fazemos agora?
> -- Eu não tenho tempo para satisfazer-lhe os caprichos – diz a Saly.
> -- Nem eu – diz a Ju.
> -- Nem eu – diz a Mauá.
> -- A solução mais correcta é sugerir ao Tony uma nova mulher – proponho eu. – O que dizem as outras? (Chiziane 308)

"What shall we do now, girls?"

[31] A system of informal wealth sharing where participants pool money and pay each other the saved sum over time in a lottery system.

> “I haven’t got time to cater to all his whims,” says Saly.
> “Nor me,” says Ju.
> “Me neither,” says Mauá.
> “The best solution is to suggest to Tony that he take a new wife,” I propose.
> “What do the others think?” (457-458)

The outcome of this vote, of course is to find another woman, but Rami takes note of the transformation that has taken place within the women since they came together. Saly, the fourth, even insists to include someone from a different ethnic group than the five to broaden the reach and power of the relationship. Rami thinks, "Olho para todas as minhas rivais. O entusiasmo pela propriedade comum esmoreceu. Estão frias e indiferentes à existência do Tony. O que é o amor senão o grande sonho, a grande angústia, a eterna espera?... Agora que tudo acabou, perdeu-se o encanto. Cada uma de nós está preocupada consigo própria, com os seus negócios e os seus filhos” (“I look around at all my rivals. Any enthusiasm for our common property has faded. They are cold and indifferent toward Tony’s existence. What is love unless it’s the grand dream, the great anguish, the never-ending wait?... Now that it’s all over, the magic has been lost. Each one of us is absorbed in our own preoccupations, our business ventures, our children”; 309; 459). Beginning with the (now) ironic use of the term rival, a signal to the shift in how far along their relationship has come, Chiziane shows that as they have been able to claw themselves out of the economic and social trap that Tony lured them into, they have been able to leverage each other to create something better for themselves. At this point, as Rami points out, Tony has been emptied of all of his power and is little more than a figure around which the women have united. This shift in dynamic shows how the openness to each other and to the need to change to accommodate each other creates a space where a practice like polygamy, which is generally viewed as repressive and patriarchal, becomes a mode through which they can seek justice and redress. Much like the irony in Rami’s observation of her peers as her “rivals” at the point that

they are deciding to find Tony a new wife, Chiziane demonstrates that the ends that such a practice produces can also be inverted and ironized for the purpose of using the institutions for means outside of their typical interpretations. This then contributes to liberation through the use of these institutions for other means, giving the women power through the same processes which at one point were meant to stifle her.

One of the most important aspects of how this text succeeds and how it portrays its protagonists as actually redrawing the lines of their subjectivity is that it only happens through solidarity. Throughout the text when Rami reacts out of anger to her peers, particularly at the beginning of the book, her outbursts tend to give Tony more power to exploit her and the other wives that she is striking out against. This reflects a common trope in feminist and other radical thinking that divide and conquer strategies are the most effective at keeping liberation movements down by making them believe that there are fewer resources to go around than there actually are thus fostering a false sense of competition. The solidarity demonstrated in the text, however, shows that unity creates the potential for radical rejection to take place with enough power that it cannot be refused. The wives realize this potential slowly through exposure to each other and the world around them, reflecting what Oliveria Da Silva and Guimarães Da Silva say in their article "The Awakening and the Voices in *Niketche: Uma história de poligâmia* by Paulina Chiziane" (2019) which proposes that the transmission of knowledge orally reflects a return to a specific tradition which allows the women to find their own voices through engagement with the chorus. In a sense, it reflects a ritual that functions to transmit knowledge orally both within the text and to the reader. As the chorus gets louder, the individuals voice their independence, activities like the polygamous council show women speaking out and their voices

bleeding into each other through the oral technique that Chiziane uses both for the diegetic dialogue and the narration surrounding it, giving the effect of the narration joining in the chorus.

In *Niketche*, the fact that the text is presented as an oral retelling of the story just as much as it appears as a diary is of vital importance. While the intimacy of the language makes it sound as if the text is written as a journal, this is contrasted explicitly with the ways in which Chiziane writes both Rami's voice and that of her peers within the text as being heavily rooted into the vernacular of Mozambican Portuguese; the text even includes a dictionary of common words she uses throughout. O. da Silva and G. da Silva explain that "The dialogues that Rami has, throughout the novel, with other women bring to light the situation of subordination which they find themselves in society. It becomes apparent that one of the narrative's intentions is to denounce the reality of Mozambique's feminine being and, through conversations between the characters, enable the protagonism of these silenced voices" (O. Da Silva and G. Da Silva 128). Not only in the conjugal parliament but beyond, in the streets and anywhere where women are within the novel, there is testimony and not far behind, the women are searching for a sense of justice which they are able to find together but would not have been able to find on their own. When the women begin to explain to Rami how deprived Tony has left them and the fact that they need to make money on their own to actually do more than just survive, she begins to lend them money that she has saved for as long as she has known Tony (Chiziane 117). Much like with information and strategies, the disbursement of money has the effect of distributing power which allows them to continue to deprive Tony of his power over them.

This loan becomes the basis for their economic liberty, which had been one of the main methods through which Tony had controlled the women. One by one they begin to ask for the same loan and manage to pay Rami back quickly and with interest. After seeing what they can

do, the five of them enter into the *xitique*, which the glossary explains as a "Sistema tradicional de poupança" ("a traditional savings system"; Chiziane 334; my trans.). They start by selling in the market and the women begin to notice that they are surrounded by other women who all have similar stories to tell about the ways in which society has failed them as women. Once again, the polyphony of voices blends one into the other and the reader is not aided in determining who is speaking at any one time:

> Quando o movimento declina, as mulheres sentam-se em roda, comem a refeição do dia e falam de amor. Um amor transformado em ódio, em raiva, em desespero, em trauma... Eu fui violada aos dez anos pelo meu verdadeiro pai. Ganhei infecções e perdi o útero. Não tenho filhos, não posso ter. Eu casei-me, diz outra. Fui feliz e tive três filhos. Um dia, o meu marido saiu do país à busca de trabalho e não voltou mais... Fui violada por cinco, durante a guerra civil, diz a outra. Este filho bonito que tenho nas costas nem sei de quem é. Cada vez que olho para esta pobre criatura, recordo-me daquele momento horrível em que pensava que ia morrer. .... O meu marido bebe, diz outra, bebe tanto que já nem trabalha... (Chiziane 119-120)

> When business slackens, the women sit in a circle, eat their day's meal, and talk about love. A love transformed into hatred, anger, despair, trauma… I was raped by my real father when I was ten. I got an infection and lost my womb. I haven't got any children. I can't have any. I got married, said another. I was happy and had three children. One day, my husband left the country in search of work and never came back… I was raped by give men during the civil war, said another. This handsome son I'm carrying on my back, I don't know who the father is. Every time I look at this poor little creature, I remember that horrible moment when I thought I was going to die… My husband drinks, said another, he drinks so much that I can't even work anymore… (172-173)

The multitude of voices all discussing the same sorts of issues that have brought them to this place, all rooted in violence, abandonment, and betrayal by men in their lives, demonstrates that not only is the story of Rami and her co-wives common, but it is also hardly even a shocking version of the same story that many other women share. What the wives learn from the rest of the women, however, is the fact that together they are able to grow their money and open businesses. They do this by rejecting bank accounts and instead creating a *xitique* system with each other,

which gives them the independence that many of the other women show. Despite the fact that all of these women have these tragedies in their past, they all demonstrate the resiliency that they share simply by learning to rely on each other rather than the men who promised them things that they could not provide. By the end of the chapter, Lu and Rami own a clothing boutique, Saly has a teahouse, Ju has a bar and Mauá opens a salon (122). When they combine and contribute their money together, they are suddenly able to grow independent to the point that they can escape the traumas inflicted on them. Much like the social independence that the women get from being publicly married to Tony, they also gain power through the economic independence that working together provides. This activity amounts to a refusal to simply exist as a domestic worker in the house and instead use work as a way to break free of patriarchal surveillance and control.

Chiziane demonstrates that with enough power and collective momentum, the women in the story are able to create alternative futures before each other's eyes. In her article "Sowing Women, Harvesting a Nation: Rethinking the Mozambican Female Condition in *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia"* (2019)*,* De Morães argues that the liberation that the women experience is necessarily rooted to the fact that they are committing the act of liberation for themselves and by themselves. *Niketche*, in fact, opens the text with a proverb: "Mulher é terra. Sem semear, sem regar, nada produz" ("A woman is earth, if you don't sow her, or water her, she will produce nothing"; Chiziane 9; n/p). In short, the only way to ensure women have a future is by cultivating their lives. The opening proverb, however, does not explicitly state who is sowing and who is harvesting these women and if they are simply passive figures or if they are able to take control of their own cultivation. De Morães argues that

> Chiziane takes us to reflect on what it means to women to live in a polygamic context. In the first instance, polygamy can be seen as a demonstration of male

> power. Tony is entitled to have other wives, but the same right is not reserved to Rami. Nonetheless, the protagonist takes over the narrative, defying her female status as a Mozambican woman from the south, and turns polygamy into her own political agenda. Here lies the idea of consciousness change addressed by Rainho and Silva and that I want to explore in terms of collective transformation. (115)

In taking control of this narrative, Chiziane shows her narrator inverting power structures through her engagement with the institution of polygamy and using it for her own gain rather than that of her husband. In a sense, she takes over the cultivation and the garden, in essence, begins to tend to itself. Luísa acknowledges this touch that Rami wields as the first wife, saying to her, "Ah, Rami, tens mãos de fada. Tudo o que tocas se transforma em ouro… Deste-me o supremo amor. Perdoaste-me as ofensas. Deste-me uma fatia do teu homem, que partilhamos fraternalmente. Multiplicaste o amor onde só havia ódio, Rami, tens uma força enorme, podes transformar o mundo" ("Ah, Rami, you have the hands of an enchantress. Everything you touch turns to gold... You gave me supreme love. You forgave me my misdemeanors. You gave a slice of your man, whom we share like sisters. You generated love where there was only hatred, Rami, your strength is endless, you can transform the world"; Chiziane 252; 373). In the broader context of the national allegory which De Morães also suggests is present beneath the surface, we can see that Rami, as the one closest to power, has the most potential to redistribute that power in a way that creates a better future for Mozambique than the one on offer by Tony and by extension, FRELIMO.

Going through the text, the reader slowly begins to realize that Rami's experience as the first wife is not exceptional. It is, in fact, the standard treatment that many wives receive. While there are a few examples of men who behave respectfully, they are few and far between. Even fewer can offer the sort of stability that men like Tony, who abuse their power, can offer. Luísa, in explaining herself to Rami, says it succinctly, "Muitos homens há, sim, o que falta são homens

com dinheiro" ("Yes there are a lot of men, but there aren't many with money"; Chiziane 58; 80). With that, Chiziane shows the reader the societal shifts which could take place through solidarity. By speaking this to each other, sharing the knowledge that there is a scarcity of stability, the women figure out how to find it for themselves and hold onto it. Even in the market, sharing stories of disappointment and rage at the horrendous acts committed by the men in their lives, the women of the market managed to find a space to exercise their own power and take some independence back from their husbands. While not able to escape the abuses of men or their power, the wives in this case demonstrate the potential of solidarity beyond simply sharing their stories. They show that sharing and resisting together is a generative act, one which gives them a way to show Tony that they are simultaneously able to exist without him and that the power that they generated would continue without him at the center, making obvious the fact that he was not a necessary part of the politics of radical solidarity that Chiziane proposes in the text.

5. Generative Ironies: Submission as Refusal

One of the first things that the wives come to realize is that the entire marriage, particularly the fact that it is polygamous, is entirely ceremonial and thus has not yet been encircled by laws which can be used against them. Thus, those ceremonies can be bent around. They can do what they need to for their own security and to generate the lateral solidarity necessary to transform Mozambican society to the benefit of women. To that end, they do not feel that their husband is a necessary component of the power that they have generated; rather, he was simply a ceremonial guidepost which no longer serves any use after he becomes too much of a hinderance. This knowledge arms the wives against Tony's actions. It gives them the upper hand by providing them with the boundaries of his power, showing them where the weak points are. The primary point, it seems, is through giving him exactly what he wants, but on their terms.

Rather than an unofficial polygamy, formalizing it through their conjugal parliament gives the wives several tools to control, or barring that, outwit Tony. The best example of this is the orgy to which they subject Tony in retaliation for his extrapolygamous affair, Mauá protests in front of the parliament (including Tony's and Rami's entire families) that the orgy was an offering of love symbolizing their loving family (Chiziane 154). In this framing, the violent act of making Tony prove his virility does indeed seem to be exactly what a polygamous man like himself would want. As such, these women can be understood to using Tony's stated desires against him in a way which deprives him of the upper hand while the wives still appear to be doing what they can to appease him.

This legitimation on their terms, rather than his, amounts to a refusal to accept the rules that he has proposed at face value. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that this sort of refusal is a fruitful and worthwhile approach to resisting colonialism in her text *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resurgence* (2017). She describes this sort of struggle through the concept the concept of "generative refusal," which is a kind of resistance in which the colonized refuse to argue for rights with the colonizer on terms which they have set out, instead simply refusing the interior logic of the colonist and on their own terms, with the women of Mozambique still subject to the legacies of colonial forces. Framing it in terms related to her own nation's attempts to gain sovereignty in Canada, she gives examples of ways that this sort of radical refusal has been used previously, asking,

> What if no one sided with colonialism?
> What happens, then, when we build movements that refuse colonial recognition as a starting point and turn inwards, building a politics of refusal that is generative? Well, you get things like the Dene Declaration, and you get things like the Iroquois Nationals refusing to participate in the World Lacrosse League Championship tournament in Manchester because the UK refused to recognize their sovereignty as demonstrated through their Mohawk passports. You can sign

> a petition and stage a demonstration because you don't want a Canadian passport, or you can make your own passports and travel on them. (Simpson 176)

Simpson, thus, suggests that there is potential in simply striking out from a position where the logics of the colonizer are rejected out of pocket. As its name suggests, this type of protest generates new ideas rather than trying to work within existing frameworks. The example provided above forced the UK government to acknowledge explicitly that they do not recognize the sovereignty of the Mohawk Nation, effectively putting them on the back foot without the ability to maneuver around the demand for recognition by being asked for it. This portrays that denial as a Belligerent act but also creates the groundwork for a potential Mohawk Nation with equal status to any other nation. In much the same way, the types of refusals that Chiziane describes in the text, testimony that she collected throughout the nation, demonstrate ways that women themselves generate the potential for new futures themselves through their own refusal to participate in the problems that men create. Generative refusal applies to this text because of the way that Chiziane describes women who, through the course of the text, learn that the only way to achieve the liberation that they need is through the outright refusal of Tony's power and instead creating their own parallel system which they can step into over time.

Chiziane describes a similar process of demanding recognition from the state through the way in which the wives seek legitimation from Tony in public. After years of petitioning Tony to do the right thing and help them more and give them the love that they deserve, they instead choose to work on their own terms, with each other, in order to force concessions rather than wait for them. This strategy, as she demonstrates, has strong returns and portrays the wives as often one step ahead of Tony. Even if he manages to find a way out of one of their attacks, he fails to stop them from gaining power while they attempt to skirt around him, eventually rendering him useless to them. However, the twist that Chiziane puts onto this concept is

precisely what makes the text humorous. The women are shown to comply with the demands and rules placed on them by polygamy but in such a way that it becomes suffocating for a man like Tony who never intended to follow any strict set of rules when it came to his engagement with his many wives. This is best exemplified in the moment when he is confronted by all of the wives at his birthday party, only to flee when he realizes what is about to happen. Up to this point he is unaware that the women are working together and to see them all in the same place is simply too much for him to accept. The scene is thick with sarcasm and disdain, with Rami stating,

> Querido Tony, feliz aniversário. Hoje, nós, tuas mulheres decidimos fazer-te esta surpresa. Como prova do amor que temos por ti, decidimos juntar-nos, para que sintas o palpitar dos nossos corações. Decidimos unir as cinco mulheres numa só. Sabemos o que sofres por nos amares um dia cá e outro lá. Decidimos todas, em uníssono, homenagear-te com a nossa presença neste teu grande dia... (111)
>
> Dearest Tony, happy birthday. Today, we, your wives, decided to organize this surprise for you. As proof of the love we have for you, we decided to come together so that you could feel our hearts pulsating. We decided to bring your five wives together as one. We are aware of what you suffer by loving us: one day here, another day there. So we decided to honor you with our presence all together and of once voice on your big day…" (159)

Because they gave him precisely what he wanted, this interaction shows the point at which the wives take the upper hand against Tony. Like a cornered animal, his only recourse is to turn around and walk back out of the house without a long-term plan to fix his predicament, muttering about how he forgot something in his office. From then on, they can generate the conditions which lead to their liberation, essentially by suffocating him with the sort of love that they are required to give him. This lays the groundwork for the wives to be able to define their own terms of liberation by demonstrating to him what they are willing to do for him, while having the power to expect something in return when they join together.

This collective action is what finally puts Tony on the back foot and gives the wives an opportunity to create their own futures. When Rami and her fellow wives ambush Tony with the knowledge that they are aware of and fine with the existence of one another, they immediately put him on the defensive. He is literally incapable of responding in an asymmetrical conflict within which he is not the sole agent with the ability to project force. In this way, Rami and the other wives are not simply resisting their colonial predicament, they are pushing the boundary even further and rejecting the logics set out by Tony in the first place. Rather than demand further rights from him, a process that has gotten them very little progress for a long time (in Rami's case nearly 40 years), they create rights for themselves by re-orienting their relationship to each other to legitimize their polygamous relationship, if not in the eyes of the state than in the eyes of each other and the society around them (Chiziane 139). This arrangement gives them the ability to redraw boundaries on their own by drawing on traditions which, while on the surface seeming like highly restrictive patriarchal systems, had more liberatory aspects than were recognized by outside observers. This gives credence to Chiziane's refusal to completely reject polygamy as a practice. Instead, the interaction that Chiziane describes illustrates how she imagines it as a potential solution to the problems she observed in her own neighborhood and through the testimony of other women. This recharacterization of the relations between these characters illustrates how refusing the logics of colonialism can help break the repetition of the practices of oppression which remain latent in the post-civil war FRELIMO government.

As I have stressed throughout this chapter, I believe that one of the most overlooked aspects of this text is the fact that Chiziane shows her characters using irony as a means to break the control of Tony, who seems to have limitless power over them until he loses it, eventually looking completely impotent before their power. This process, while sometimes painful and

harrowing when depicting the dehumanized status of women in Mozambique, is often joyful and playful while they reclaim it as shown by Rami when she slowly becomes the woman in her mirror who dances as a curative (Chiziane 18) and shares her strength in such a way that Saly believes her to work magic through her actions (252). In that sense, they are rejecting and refusing to side with their status as colonized subjects and instead take their place as equals in Mozambican society. The text depicts women helping each other flourish and becoming better people in the presence of each other, showing each other the sort of love that they were denied by the patriarchal forces which subjugated them. As a result, I reject the interpretation of this text as telling a story of tragedy and struggle but rather one which centers around liberation, one which shows potential ways out of the sorts of mazes woven by patriarchal systems from which there rarely seems escape through simple critique. Instead, Chiziane shows how an exit can be dug out of the wall once the subject is able to identify the structural issues.

This understanding creates what, on the surface, seem to be contradictory forms of liberation. In "A Feminist Dance of Love, Eroticism, and Life: Paulina Chiziane's Novelistic Recreation of Tradition and Language in Postcolonial Mozambique," (2003) Russell G Hamilton suggests that Chiziane is playing with the idea of Mozambique's modernity by comparing the "secret polygamy" of adulterous, monogamous husbands to the rules and traditions which polygamy uses. He points out that Rami's experience with polygamy comes exclusively from the practices in southern Mozambique which have been heavily influenced by Catholicism and the patriarchal systems brought into polygamy by the Islamization of the coast, while she comes to realize that the matriarchal systems of polygamy that exist in the North indicate that there are alternatives to the local conception of polygamy that can be used to challenge the force of patriarchal systems in the South (Hamilton 157). One of the most important themes that he

brings out is the fact that in the text "this liberation applies, somewhat paradoxically, to certain traditional practices that might be considered at best outmoded and at worst reprehensible." (159) After describing how Rami has to take part in the *kutchinga*, a tradition in which the wife of a man is passed on to his brother after his passing, she takes it as an opportunity to experience pleasure with Tony's brother Levy.

What Hamilton does not acknowledge, however, is the way that this act plays into the orality of the text because it portrays a type of irony where the "dreaded" *kutchinga* is made parody and defanged simply through the process of rejecting its patriarchal nature and commandeering it for Rami's own purposes. Rami can do so because through her network of women she is well aware that Tony has faked his own death to get out of his commitments. As a result, she is free to take this opportunity to not actually suffer any of the downsides of the *kutchinga*, which as she describes are actually quite repressive under most circumstances. However, her own experience gets to be pleasurable because of how she takes it in her own hands, saying,

> Olho para o Levy com olhos gulosos. Ele será o meu purificador sexual, a decisão já foi tomada e ele acatou-a com prazer. Dentro de pouco tempo estarei nos seus braços, na cerimónia de *kutchinga*. Serei viúva apenas por oito dias. Sou um pouco mais velha que ele, mas sinto que vai amar-me e muito, pois apesar desta idade e deste peso tenho muita doçura e muito charme. Daqui a oito dias vou-me despir. Dançar *niketche* só para ele, enquanto a esposa legítima morre de ciúmes lá fora. Vou pedir a Mauá para me iniciar nos passos desta dança, ah que o tempo demora a passar! Deus queira que o Tony só regresse a casa depois deste acto consumado. (Chiziane 220)
>
> I look over at Levy with hungry eyes. He is going to be my sexual purifier, the decision was taken and he grabbed the chance with delight. Not long now, and I'll be in his arms for the *kutchinga* ceremony. I'll be a widow for just one week. I'm a bit older than him, but I get the feeling he's going to give me a lot of love, because in spite of my age and girth, I'm very sweet and charming. IN a week's time, I shall undress. I shall dance the *niketche* for his eyes alone, while his legitimate spouse stands outside, consumed with jealousy. I shall ask Mauá to

> teach me the steps for this dance. Ah, I can't wait! I hop to God Tony only comes home after the act has been consummated. (324)

Not only is Rami shown to be interested in using this act as revenge against Tony, she has given the opportunity as a way to purify and cleanse herself of her husband's acts against her while also integrating herself further into the practices of other cultures within Mozambique by learning to dance the Niketche and being initiated into it. This irony is at the core of how Chiziane engages with the readers as a way to contest the seeming impossibility to escape patriarchal systems within Mozambique. Challenging the boundaries of what women are able to agitate for gives Chiziane a chance to redraw the boundaries within a space that women previously claimed by taking up an institution that had previously been vacated as a way to leverage power.

One of the women's main forms of ironic resistance within the text deals with food and the way it is distributed within the family, both before and after polygamy. As a result, food becomes interrelated with oppression and liberation quickly through it. Rodrigues and Rivera, in "Edible Encounters," deal with this idea by analyzing how the wives are shown to use food as a form of control over Tony when they begin to group together. They explain,

> The women of *Niketche* manipulate food not only for the sake of feeding their children but also to incite sexual desire. Food and sex are entangled, as gastronomical manipulation plays a central role in the art of pleasing and retaining men… successful seduction entails the constant reaffirmation of the husband as head of the household… While, on the one hand, adhering to these cultural notions accentuates the gendered divide, on the other hand, it demonstrates that women are able to express agency through food preparation. (Rivera and Rodrigues 18)

While this relationship does indeed require that the women prostrate themselves in front of Tony as a way to prove their dedication to him, I contend that this is not done in good faith. There is a cynical, ironic tone to the way in which the women speak with Tony as they come to understand

his inability to satisfy them and instead, as Rodrigues and Rivera put it, simply consume the women and search for his next meal, no matter where that comes from (13). As they come together to serve him, they check in with their conjugal parliament and Rami asks for a report from Mauá, the youngest wife. After reporting that she did indeed serve him on her knees, serving only the best parts of the meal, Mauá confirms what Rami had already suspected, that Tony continued to step out on the relationship, telling her and the other wives that

> Ele andava bem, cantarolava e assobiava quando tomava banho, uma expressão de felicidade total, mas quando chegava a hora, só dormia! E como dormia! Ressonava como as trombetas do paraíso e nada mais... A princípio julguei que era doença. Mas um dia encontrei um fio de cabelo na roupa. Um fio longo, grosso, não daqueles cabelos artificiais. Desconfiei, cacei e acabei descobrindo. Ele tem outra. (Chiziane 129)

> He was all right, he sang and whistled while he was having his bath, as if he were completely happy, but when the time came for it, all he did was sleep! And how he slept! He'd snore like a trumpeter at the gates of paradise, and that would be that… At first I thought he was ill. But one day, I found a thread of hair in his clothes. A long, thick hair, not one of those artificial hairs. I got suspicious, I got on his trail and found him out. He's got another woman. (188-189)

While the act of betrayal portrayed is of course difficult for the women to hear, it is not one that is foreign to them. All of them, save for Mauá until now, have experienced this same betrayal. Here, again, the irony enters into the frame as the co-wives are doing everything in their toolkit to "do it right" and still cannot get anything out of Tony. As a result, they begin to defy him simply through their agency, an act which itself is generative, in a series of escalating challenges to his authority which all amount to giving him exactly what he had asked for.

The use of irony in the generative refusals by the women is part of what makes them so effective at curtailing Tony's power over them, effectively creating ways for them to behave "within the law" to as much of his detriment as possible. The culmination of this discovery is an orgy at the sexual congress as a way for him to prove his virility, where the women finally

demand that he contribute his fair share of love and pleasure to the household after they have completed their part. The scene is intense, violent, and erotic at the same time with the wives cornering him during conjugal parliament meeting:

> Hoje vais mostrar-nos o que vales, Tony – diz a Saly furibunda. – Se cada uma te realiza um pouco de cada vez, então realiza-te de uma só vez, com todas nós, se és capaz.
> O Tony fica atrapalhado. Somos cinco contra um. Cinco fraquezas juntas se tornam força em demasia. Mulheres desamadas são mais mortíferas que as cobras pretas. A Saly abre a porta do quarto. A cama estava desmontada e o soalho coberto de esteiras. Achamos a ideia genial e entramos no jogo. Era preciso mostrar ao Tony o que valem cinco mulheres juntas. Entramos no quarto e arrastamos o Tony, que resistia como um bode. Despimo-nos, em striptease. Ele olha para nós. Os seus joelhos ganham um tremor ligeiro. (143)

> "Today, Tony, you're going to show us what you're worth," said Saly, fuming. "If each one of us gives you a bit of satisfaction some of the time, then get your satisfaction in one go with all of us, if you're able."
> Tony didn't know what to do. We were give against one. Five weaknesses together become a force to be reckoned with. Unloved women are more deadly than black mambas. Saly opened the bedroom door. The bed had been dismantled and the floor covered with sleeping mats. We thought it an awesome idea and got into the spirit of it. Tony needed to be shown what five women together could do. We went into the room, pulling along Tony, who resisted us like a billy goat. We got undressed as if doing a striptease. He looked at us. His knees began to tremble slightly. (210)

Interestingly, Chiziane characterizes this as effective because at the end of the ordeal, while the wives are energized by their erotic encounter with each other in which Tony is rarely mentioned, he is left completely passive and catatonic, terrified of his wives simply because they have control. If he were to receive what he implicitly demands from the wives, he would be unable to handle it. Instead, he is only able to handle it on his own terms. When he is in full control rather than sharing power with the wives he can perform his power but the minute they refuse to play the games on his terms, they generate the capacity to create their own boundaries. To have completely broken him down in this way demonstrates the power of the ironic form of control that Rami and the wives devise in their congresses with each other. They collectively devised a

way to give Tony exactly what he seemed to want to prove that he was, ultimately, an impotent and unreliable figure when they had any control over him, hardly even able to control himself let alone them, the minute he had any power taken away.

Their demand, in essence, forces him to become impotent in their eyes. Their acts against him, from forcing him to legitimize his marriage to becoming financially independent, demonstrated a future in which the wives do not side with the patriarch. As they refuse to acknowledge his power, eventually his identity culminates in his legal impotence. As a stand-in for a phallocratic center of power, he truly becomes an empty signifier, unable to exercise its force through penetration. Through testimony and sharing of knowledge and strategies, the women can leave him destitute and nearly alone. After he fakes his death, he loses his job and thus his legitimacy as a provider through his proximity to the government. After he refuses to take on a wife who will have time to take care of him, the conjugal parliament disbands, "Terás de tudo: alimentos, cuidados e paz, menos a nossa companhia. A tua recusa é uma declaração de impotência sexual, e então vamos reunir o conselho de família, informar que se passa e procurar assistentes conjugais. Este é um direito que a poligamia nos confere" ("You'll have all you need: food, care, and peace and quiet, but not our company. Your refusal is a declaration of sexual impotence, and so we'll summon a family meeting and inform its members of what is happening, so that we can then seek conjugal assistants. This is a right that polygamy gives us"; Chiziane 324; 482). One by one, the wives tell him that they no longer need him, that they found more respectable, richer men or that they simply do not need a man anymore. Even as Rami stays, the only remaining wife, she has an offer to join Luísa as the second wife of her new husband. She is pregnant with Levy's child. Tony proves himself to be entirely uncontrollable, at a great cost to himself. He ensured that he would lose everything and make himself useless to make sure that he

could not be controlled. In short, Chiziane shows how solidarity through testimony has given the wives justice, which they take through an ironic use of their established gender roles to twist their husband into someone respectable or, barring that, simply break the barriers he constructed so they can find their own.

6. Conclusions: Love after the Civil War

Approaching *Niketche* with this understanding in mind is unique in the field because it postures Chiziane within a broader conversation which acknowledges her discomfort embracing the feminist label while placing her within a movement which is seeking something beyond what feminism has had to offer to women of color in the Global South so far. Ultimately, Chiziane's insistence that she is not a feminist author holds up in my opinion, her perspective on the fact that there are so many homegrown liberation movements does, in some way, render the term less meaningful in that context. However, I think that the liberatory activity in which the women in the text engage is legible as another thread in an aesthetic trend of women's liberation movements in the global south which is legible as feminist from the outside. As Jones acknowledges, there are already few pan African dialogues taking place because of cultural and linguistic barriers which leaves texts like Chiziane's under-scrutinized outside of the Lusophone world; increasing the legibility of Chiziane's work outside of Mozambique allows it to stand as a critique of the feminist movement while achieving many of the same goals.

Chiziane's story in *Niketche* weaves in and out of critique and imagination, it produces a complete picture of women's struggles after the civil war and shows ways that they imagine moving past them to create a better Mozambique than the one that they have to live in. She shows this through the way that the women develop their solidarity. At the beginning of the text, Rami is characterized as nervous, hypervigilant, and isolated. She thinks to herself, "Um

estrondo ouve-se do lado de lá. Uma bomba. Mina antipessoal. Deve ser a guerra a regressar outra vez. Penso em esconder-me. Em fugir. O estrondo espanta os pássaros que voam para a segurança das alturas. Não. Não deve ser o projéctil de uma bala. Talvez sejam dois carros em colisão pela estrada fora..." ("An explosion can be heard somewhere over there. A bomb. A landmine. It must be the war returning once again. I think of hiding. Of running away. The explosion scares the birds that seek refuge in the heavens. No. It can't be the sound of a gunshot. Maybe it's two cars colliding somewhere on the road"; Chiziane 11; 9). The tension in the scene is made clear by the short sentences that she starts with, the visceral fear and the stress response that comes from hearing a loud bang after a 15-year civil war, being the wife of an important figure in the armed wing of the government. Her status as near the center of the state is assured throughout the text as `the first wife, the one with the legal documentation to prove her affiliation with him. This opening paragraph shows how dependent Rami is on Tony. Were the civil war to return, the precarity of losing her husband and being left with nothing would become significantly more likely. The likelihood of violence and conflict leave Rami nervous and marginalized, a stupor from which she has not yet woken up. After the anticolonial war and the civil war, a state of dependence and conflict is really all she has ever been able to know.

The other wives, while taking energy and resources that would have otherwise gone to Rami, are given significantly less than she has received. As a result, they are set up as competitors fighting over scraps while Tony is able to extract whatever he pleases from all of them while keeping them fighting each other rather than their oppressor. When the wives then try to turn this around on him, it becomes clear that he had very little material power to begin with. They are able to turn it around, simply, by sharing information and testimony with each other, giving them a clear path forward to receive justice and compensation for the wrongs that he has

committed against them. They create a framework for being able to create something new rather than simply revolt against him and seek more of the same. After they create this framework, they are effectively able to cut him out of it while maintaining the polygynous arrangement which they had used to gain power in the first place. Ironically, they use an institution which is generally maligned as antifeminist, polygamy, in order to achieve these aims in a way which uses the power structures of the institution to deprive its center of power.

By stepping into the framework of polygamy, they are able to redraw the lines of their conditions and find something better for themselves. This goes beyond simply writing themselves back into history, it gives them an opportunity to essentially decolonize their relationships with the state and with Tony through reliance on each other as a method of flourishing. They punch back against Tony, however, not simply by refusing his demands, but by seeming to give in to his demands but in a way which shows him what it is that he needs to do in exchange. In effect, they ironize his demands and mold them to their logics rather than accepting his at face value. This shift creates the conditions for not only a better life for the women, but a complete obsolescence of Tony in the society around him. This describes the sort of project of lateral solidarity for both individual and societal liberation that Chiziane describes within the text, one which shows the necessity of sharing knowledge, tradition, and culture as a means of fostering a broader understanding to create a future founded on mutual respect and ingenuity.

IV. Chapter 3: Truth and Archive: Sentimentality and Secular Consecration in *Nuestra señora de la noche*

> "Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd street. If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?"
>
> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools" from *Sister Outsider*

Mayra Santos-Febres (b. 1966) has had a prolific and varied career in both academic and fiction writing. Her work ranges from poetry to experimental fiction to treatises on genre and aesthetics in Caribbean literature. Her ability to not only manipulate these tools in her writing but to use them for specific ends is always evident, including in *Nuestra Señora de la noche* (2006), a novel about the infamous historical ponceña madam Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer (1901-1974). Santos-Febres tells the story of her life through the frame of what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, which she defines as a "kind of novel [that] asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time" (Hutcheon 105). Through this trend, Santos-Febres articulates how attention to black women's history can reveal how black women have impacted Puerto Rico's present and anticipate its future potential. First, she succeeds in revealing Puerto Rico's brutal past as it relates to these women. Second, she uses Isabel's story to show the limitations placed on their success while, as Marta Alicea suggests, mystifying Isabel's life by demonstrating it in its totality (223). At the same time, this limitation reveals black women's massive impact on Puerto Rican history and culture. Using this framework, Santos-Febres proposes a project of liberation which teaches black women strategies to invert power structures and challenge the dominance of white men by manipulating them through their desires. This project of liberation seeks to break the colonial occupation of Puerto Rico by fostering a longing

in the island's elite to identify more closely with the black populace rather than with the occupying Americans. In doing so, Santos-Febres proposes that black women can make allies out of the white Puerto Ricans to create an inter-class and interracial social movement which can propose a future in which the island can control its own destiny.

Santos-Febres uses the historical novel for this project because it critiques Puerto Rico's colonial present as it relates to its past. In essence, she subverts the framework of the historical novel. She thus forces the reader to acknowledge the painful memories of Puerto Rico's early days as an American colony. She also shows black women's capacity to make their mark on history despite their marginalization. In doing so, Santos-Febres proposes a flight path out of Puerto Rico's colonial position by inverting the social relations which keep the island under occupation by outsiders. As one of the few remaining overt colonies in the world, Puerto Rico's challenges are not the same as indirectly colonial spaces like Mozambique and Cameroon. This makes the historical novel a clever choice because it demonstrates that while there is little nostalgia from which black women can draw in Puerto Rican history, they have still created myths and made their own impact on history.

1. Mayra Santos-Febres, Afro-Puerto Rican Feminist Writing, Genre and Structure

Mayra Santos-Febres came onto the scene in the early 1990s as a poet and an intellectual and throughout her career has written in a wide breadth of genres. What remains consistent in her writing is that she centers feminine black bodies and experiences within the Puerto Rican and Caribbean context. Her writing comes after the *generación de los 70*, a literary movement by women writers, most notably Rosario Ferré, who opened the door for Puerto Rican women to express themselves through literature. Santos-Febres suggests in interviews that while she recognizes the importance of Ferré's own writing, Ferré's main contribution was opening the

door for others to write through her magazine *Zona de carga y descarga* (Silva 6). Ferré opened the door for women to express themselves, and as such it also became vogue among Puerto Rican cultural circles to celebrate Afro-Puerto Rican culture because of her legacy. It was these two waves of Afro-Puerto Rican interest and space for women writers that allowed Santos Febres to gain a foothold in the literary spaces she would come to dominate. Specifically, she rejects the style of writing most closely affiliated with the *négritude* movement, in which the author addresses the colonizer to prove the value of black/African literature. Instead, Santos Febres writes in such a way that assumes that she should speak directly to her community through her literature and allow the colonizer to look in if they so choose. Combined with her academic career which focuses on aesthetics in Latin American literature, Santos-Febres creates a style all her own which allows her to move through multiple genres and styles unrestricted, experimenting with how each one expresses her specific message and themes about *latinidad*. Much like Liking and Chiziane, she stands somewhere between a writer representing her nation and one whose style defines a broader region. In Santos-Febres's case, the influence of other Caribbean theorists and literatures is apparent.

Santos-Febres thus addresses the feminine Afro-Puerto Rican community directly with *Nuestra señora de la noche*, which demonstrates the roles that they played in created modern Puerto Rico. The text is a historical novel which explores the life of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer from her childhood in the early 20th century to her death in 1974, focusing on her interactions with a young man, Luís Arsenio Fornarís, the child of her former lover Fernando Fornarís (a wealthy lawyer from a prominent ponceña family) in the 1930s and 1940s. It weaves her story in with that of her son with Fernando, Rafael Roberto "Nene" Fornarís and his life with his adoptive godmother, María de la Candelaria Fresnet (Montse), as well as Cristina Rangel, Luís

Arsenio's mother and Fernando's wife. While the fictionalized[32] version of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer that Santos-Febres puts forward is a feminist character, this is not exactly how she views the historical Luberza. In an interview in the back of the Editorial Rayo copy of *Nuestra Señora de la noche,* she explains that while it was popular to consider Luberza feminist at the time of publishing, "Al fin y al cabo, traficaba con otras mujeres. Era la dueña de un prostíbulo. Su intención era hacer dinero y evitar que la siguieran marginando por pobre." ("At the end of the day, she trafficked other women. She was the owner of a brothel. Her intention was to make money and avoid being continually marginalized and made poor."; 353; my trans.) This sentiment combined with the fact that she chose this exact figure for her novel demonstrates her nuanced view on the role that black women played (and were allowed to play) in the history of Puerto Rico through Isabel's interactions with her own community of black men and women who support her as she finds her way on her own as well as the women she takes in when she becomes a madame. Santos Febres, however, still represents a much more humane interpretation of Isabel's social role when compared, for example, to the portrayal that Ramos Otero proposes and much more direct than that of Ferré. Ramos Otero's portrayal, for example, displays her as a blackmailer who spies on her clients both to satiate her lust for power and her equally sadistic side (Branche 159). Ferré's representation is an "attempt at a gendered transracial reconciliation that uses the strategy of the double to tie together the fortunes of black and white women and see them as equally vulnerable to the machinations of white male privilege…" (Branche 154). Santos-Febres's re-interpretation, which goes beyond than Isabel's salacious past like Ferré's interpretation does or simply an exploration of her cruelty that Otero presents, Isabel ceases to

[32] Santos-Febres had to fill-in many of the gaps in Isabel's life story from before she was a madame because few sources exist on the subject. As a result, on top of mystifying her early life on some level, she also drew from evidence of life for Afro-Puerto Rican women at the time to fill in many of the unknowns (Branche 160-161).

act as a singular totem to represent the status of black women. Rather, she becomes an individual whose life demystifies the ways in which marginalized women are able to attain power in a social system which enforces their precarity, becoming a semi-mythical synecdoche for the experiences of black women. I argue that as Isabel manipulates the desires of powerful and influential men, over time and with experience, she creates the conditions which would allow her (and thus other black women) to imagine a future which is instead built around her wishes, as she implants her desires in the minds of the men she seduces.

The format of the novel explores the lives of both Isabel and Luís Arsenio as they grow up, jumping forward and backward in time as each of them grow. Santos-Febres tells the story in three sections which all begin with an interlude titled as a visitation, often told from different characters' perspectives, before starting the traditional third person narrative which follows Isabel or Luís Arsenio. Each section has both numbered and titled chapters. The numbered chapters follow either Luís Arsenio's experiences growing up in Puerto Rico, Pennsylvania, and the Navy as a commissioned officer or Isabel's experiences growing up as a poor black girl who was abandoned by her mother. These chapters do not follow a linear structure and often juxtapose Isabel's experience with Luís Arsenio's. Eventually, the two characters occupy the same narrative space, continuing Luís Arsenio's story until Isabel's death. These two threads describe in detail the disparity between black and white experiences while also examining the influence that one has on the other, allowing a more nuanced portrayal of the interactions of race and class within Puerto Rico at the start of American occupation.

Meanwhile, the titled chapters—much more limited in number—describe the lived experiences of the other two protagonists, Montse and Cristina who, while having vastly different circumstances, experience similar struggles with maintaining their sanity in the face of

their social immobility, caused by the rigid hierarchies of Puerto Rican society. Cristina struggles with her marriage to Fernando, which manifests in her addiction to alcohol and the abuse of her household staff. She is jealous that Fernando carries a flame for Isabel while they were married and resents that he continues to care for his and Isabel's son Rafael Roberto throughout the story, and she eventually succumbs to alcohol-induced dementia. Montse, meanwhile, is a religious woman who takes a vow of chastity and pours her love and affection first into Isabel and then into Rafael Roberto while resenting that he is not ultimately hers and that she cannot be the Marian figure that she wishes to be. This desire leaves her anxious and irrational, while her illiteracy keeps her at a distance from the rest of the world, which she can only experience through her religious interpretation of the events around her. The stories of these two women supplement our knowledge of the events of the numbered chapters and often serve as a bridge between the two time periods, providing a detail related to both. These chapters, thus, give insight into the social and political circumstances surrounding different groups of women in Puerto Rico.

Throughout the novel's exploration of Isabel's early life, the experiences she has as a black woman in early 20th century Puerto Rico teach her how she must behave to create and maintain power and exit her marginalized position. In addition, if we frame Isabel's interactions with Luís Arsenio, the other protagonist, in this context, it becomes clear that she is shaping and manipulating his sentiment by fostering his desire for Minerva, a prostitute in Isabel's employ whom she uses to seduce Luís Arsenio and keep him coming back to her business, Elizabeth's Dancing Place. The inherent complexity of *Nuestra señora de la noche* as an historical novel about a figure whose life is less documented has created a proliferation of readings and perspectives on it. My interpretation relies on a critical focus centered around two principal

factors: her body and her interiority. Santos-Febres describes Isabel's ability to invert the trend of the oppressed to internalize and desire the oppressor. She demonstrates this while working for the Fornarís family as a young woman, teasing Fernando to manipulate him:

> En el pasillo se topó de nuevo con el señorito, que cuando la vio erguida, no pudo sostenerle la mirada. Ella no intenta bajar los párpados, se los clavó fijo en el rostro. La cara del licenciado enrojeció al instante. "Estos amitos, siempre lo mismo"… El juego le pareció divertido y lo mejor, tenía premio. (233-234)
>
> In the hall she ran into the señorito again who, when he saw her standing, could not return her gaze. She didn't even try to lower her eyes; she fixed them on his face. They attorney's face grew red immediately. *These little masters, always the same*… The game was fun and, better yet, came with a prize. [Mestre-Reed[33] 243]

This scene demonstrates how Isabel's desirability is carefully constructed. She has, over time, figured out how sink her will into men's thoughts through the bodies of black women. This is a technique employed by colonizers that Frantz Fanon describes in his text *A Dying Colonialism*; here, Santos-Febres shows a black woman using it in pursuit of decolonial ends. Next, through Doris Sommer's "Resisting the Heat," (1993) we can understand as well that Santos-Febres mystifies Isabel by forcing the reader into a state of incompetence wherein they are never granted unfettered access to her interior life and to the experience of black womanhood she represents. This forces the reader to stand in solidarity with Isabel rather than identify with her, denying them the ability to consume Isabel's life for its salacious details, having to settle for the access she is willing to give up. Finally, I pair this examination with Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012) to explore how Isabel's quietude—her refusal to reveal her inner life—thus in turn also refuses to be reduced to a caricature that simply symbolizes black resistance to oppression. That refusal, in turn, contradicts the outward public image that she creates to throw people's scent off of her inner life. This helps the reader better understand why her character is

[33] All translations for *Nuestra señora de la noche* come from Ernesto Mestre-Reed's translation from 2009.

such an effective tool for understanding black capacity for attaining power in the face of oppression and cruelty while not maintaining a loud public face of opposition. I argue that this quiet is, in fact, a necessary tool for Santos Febres to claim that Isabel attained the power and status that Santos Febres shows Isabel to have.

I opened this chapter with a quote from Audre Lorde's best-known speech, "The Master's Tools" (1984). Famously, this speech is about the marginalization of black feminism within white feminist spaces, where white women still rely on black women's bodies and labor to be able to discuss their own liberation while shutting the black women that they marginalize out of the conversation, in effect maintaining the status quo. Lorde effectively argues that these feminists create theories using white supremacist patriarchy, which are inherently unable to address feminine experiences from any perspective but a wealthy and white one. They are thus blind to the difference in experiences of black and poor women, which are vastly different from that of white women who profit off of the very social hierarchies which allow them to write feminist theory, and effectively silencing black and brown feminist voices. I draw on Lorde's argument that: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 107) to show how Santos Febres challenges the stereotypical characterization of Isabel in Puerto Rican cultural memory to instead show a woman who is, on some level, exploiting systems of patriarchy to not only survive but thrive. Throughout my argument, I revisit Lorde's idea and suggest that Santos-Febres's narrative allows its readers to look towards the future by fashioning new tools using those of the master, thus making sure that *someone "*can beat him at his own game".

Nuestra señora de la noche also challenges the novel's capacity to accomplish its goal of advancing a more decolonial interpretation of Puerto Rican history due in part to the baggage that the historical novel carries. In Waldron's "Killing Colonialism's Ghosts in McOndo" (2010) Waldron argues that the historical novel form forces Santos-Febres to focus too heavily on Puerto Rico's historical archive and thus harkens back to a mythical past. Additionally, Helene Weldt-Basson's "The White Male as Narrative Axis in Mayra Santos-Febres's *Nuestra señora de la noche*" (2013) takes a similar interpretation and argues that Isabel's story is still dictated by the role of white patriarchs in her story. In part, these interpretations are informed by the texts that have preceded Santos-Febres's version of Isabel's life: Ferré's short story "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" (1974), Ramos Otero's short story "La última plena que bailó Isabel" (1974) and López Neris's film *A Life of Sin* (1979) which all emerged within a few years of her death. These texts use Isabel's life as a foil for explaining societal ills, particularly about morality, race relations, and the status of women while using the most sensational and salacious interpretations of her actions (Branche 150). Santos-Febres, instead, focuses just as much as the unknowns by filling in her life with the historical context of black women's experiences (Alicea 223). All of these interpretations, to some extent, are dependent on the idea that the text is creating a myth out of Isabel to add to the national archive. My interpretation instead suggests that creating nuance in Isabel's metafictional biography dispels nostalgic myths of Puerto Rico's past through Isabel's mythification, in line with the general purpose of historiographic metafiction. I see the novel as a kind of post-slavery historiographic metafiction which demonstrates how black women contributed to history in part by using their bodies and brains to get ahead and to lay the groundwork for futures which break free of the national myths of Puerto Rico, thus inverting the purpose of the 19th and early 20th century Latin American historical

novels that seek to establish national creation myths that serve as the nexus of national identity. We, as readers, should not consider ourselves competent enough to fully grasp Isabel's life and experience and thus in the novel, Santos-Febres refuses to give us a myth to add to the national character, but rather a new tool to forge Puerto Rico's future.

2. Historical Contexts

Nuestra señora de la noche explores the layered history of Puerto Rico after the transition from Spain to the United States as the hegemonic power. The text takes place in the city of Ponce, the cultural capital of the island immediately after the United States took over from Spain in 1898 until the early 1970s, while the bulk of the novel's narrative is concentrated between the 1930s to the end of World War II. At that time, Puerto Rico rapidly modernized from what was considered a backwater by its Spanish occupiers to a significant location for the United States military presence in the Caribbean. Ponce in particular was home to Losey Field (now called Fort Allen) which remains a significant military outpost to this day and a significant landmark within the text. This US military presence caused the city to modernize rapidly, which influenced the social fabric of the city in such a way that had many people, particularly soldiers and sailors, coming and going from the area. At the same time, the political and social movements which had been brewing before the Spanish-American war continued to simmer as the United States took over, given that the war did not resolve the essential demand of Puerto Ricans before their takeover: some level of autonomy and self-determination. At the time both independence and statehood movements as well as an organized labor movement grew around the island, all of which called for a definitive answer on Puerto Rico's status within the colonial systems which dominated the island. Those political movements informed the outlooks and lives of the protagonists of *Nuestra señora de la noche*, as they explain the position of Puerto Rico in

relation to the United States as a distant and unimportant colony much as it had been under Spanish rule.

On the island there were three main political forces which preceded American occupation, and which are still present today. There were the conservatives who sought to maintain the status quo or something similar who were generally affiliated with the *capataces*, the owners of the haciendas and main industries, there were the liberals who were reform-minded, and the independence movements who focused on labor reform and wealth redistribution. While the conservatives have maintained political control of the island throughout that time the liberals have also maintained a strong presence and have pushed for a more prominent legal status, seeking either statehood or regionalist devolution. These currents were "the two political parties that had been organized soon after the onset of U.S. rule—the Partido Federal and the Partido Republicano—called for the transformation of Puerto Rico into a state of the United States. Their programs reflected the hope of the Puerto Rican possessing classes of joining the U.S. federal state structure as equals, with the corresponding representation in Congress and control of their own state government" (Ayala and Bernabe 52). This shows, as the plot demonstrates through the lens of Luís Arsenio, that the upper classes wish to be seen as equals who are able to be incorporated into the fold of American statehood, or at least territorial status to secure the gains of the upper *criollo* class[34]. When it became clear that this was not a possibility and that the United States would continue to leave Puerto Rico in an ambiguous legal position, these movements began to shift into the two broad options that exist today, the Partido Popular Democrático who advocate for the status quo and hold a thin margin and the Partido Nuevo Progresista who seek statehood.

[34] In this context, *criollo* refers to the descendants of European colonists who were born in the Americas. This class would be the basis of the national elite of Latin America after independence.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the labor movement with which Isabel affiliates was a complicated and transnational movement that sought affiliation with the more radical aspects of the labor movement. Most importantly, while it was eventually folded in with the American Federation of Labor's less radical, more legislative agenda, the movement also had space for more radical thinkers like Luisa Capetillo (1879-1922), whose work features prominently as an influence on Isabel's worldview. Capetillo was a reader in cigar workshops and a labor organizer who agitated for a general strike of tobacconists in Cuba, Puerto Rico and Florida. In addition, she was an early writer on "suffrage as well as economic and sexual rights. Her rejection of gender stereotypes made her well known beyond the labor movement. Years later she would be remembered as the first woman to have "worn pants" in Puerto Rico." (Ayala and Bernabe 66) Given the atrocities against black women that Santos-Febres explores in the novel, having been exposed to radicalism and equality in the women's rights movement as a central pilar of Isabel's upbringing helps characterize her ability to move through political and social spaces. Her understanding of how to speak to different people to get what she wants out of them, then, stems from her ability to organize and negotiate with people. In essence, reading Capetillo gave Isabel a way to effectively organize sex work in Ponce and use it to stand up against the forces which oppress black women.

Puerto Rico's relationship to its nonwhite citizens did shift under its new occupation but could not change as significantly to reflect that of the United States: U.S.-style segregation was impractical because of the massive population of black and mixed-race people on the island. Additionally, American sentiments towards the island looked down equally on white criollos as it did on black criollos, *mulatos,* and *mestizos*; at least in the sense that they were viewed as inferior to the North Americans who were brought in to govern the island. The American

occupiers' sense of superiority extended the colonial attitudes established under Spain's occupation of Puerto Rico:

> the justifications formulated by northern expansionists of colonial control over other lands based on the alleged political immaturity of their inhabitants seemed to legitimate southern visions of a castelike hierarchical social order. Wall Street and Jim Crow could thus clasp hands as reconciled associates of a nascent imperialism. Social Darwinism, popular at the time, could also be brought into this ideological mix as a doctrine compatible with racial hierarchies, colonial projects, and the competitive logic of capitalist accumulation. (Ayala and Bernabe 30-31)

Thus, even though Puerto Rico's elite viewed themselves as white, the United States political classes viewed even Puerto Rico's upper-class, educated elites as inherently backwards and thus inferior. Even without the Jim Crow laws in effect in mainland United States, perpetuating the social hierarchies which existed before the United States conquered the territory suited the island's new owner just fine in the interim as it allowed for the perpetuation of socioeconomic control through race just as it did in the States.

In *Women, Race and Class* (1983), Angela Davis proposes that the status of black and brown women in United States history has remained underexplored and rhetorically overlooked both during and after slavery. She argues that the policies and long tail of slavery's legacy have continued to impact women in ways both seen and unseen. From the ways in which reproductive rights were carefully restricted (especially in Puerto Rico) to the fact that black women continued to work the same jobs for less than poverty wages both before and after the official end of slavery, the bodies of black women continued to be oppressed in ways not witnessed by their male counterparts. Beyond that, Davis argues that while slavery ended officially in 1865 (and 1873 in Puerto Rico), slavery conditions continued for black women in some cases up through the end of the Civil Rights movement, still fulfilling the role of domestic laborer or sharecropper in much of the South. These observations are also affirmed quite clearly in the context of Puerto

Rico, as evidenced in the meager roles afforded to black women that Santos Febres records in *Nuestra señora de la noche* (laundress, domestic, or prostitute). While the situation for men was not significantly better, they were at least recognized, named and understood in the historical archive while women's narratives were left to languish (Davis 90). This has led over time to the continued underemployment of minorities, particularly black women, across society, which sets the stage for the conditions which led to Isabel's impoverished state and her inspiration for founding Elizabeth's Dancing Place, Isabel's brothel, as a source of economic stability for her community and the most marginalized in her society. Santos-Febres confirms through this understanding that so little of black women's history is recorded that it would be hard to find something nostalgic to be about even if something positive could be pulled from the past. This lack of sentimentality or nostalgia also accentuates the potential for writing futures whose impact on the present stems from the past, because it allows the reader to imagine the sorts of historical narrative tendencies that can be corrected if recognized, allowing these communities to join together and create something better.

3. Theoretical Approach

I look to decolonial philosophies to better understand how Isabel's characterization fits into the broader context of global southern feminist literature imagining alternative futures. As previously stated, *Nuestra señora de la noche* is Santos-Febres's only historical novel and the effectiveness of this choice has been debated in academic circles, such as Waldron's critique of the effectiveness of the historical novel as a backdrop for exploring postmodern Caribbean identities. Beyond that, as Alicea suggests, it is a postmodern historical novel, an example of how Linda Hutcheon defines the postmodern in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* as the collapse of

the past into the present. Hutcheon argues that postmodern literature closes the gap between the production of history and the production of the future:

> Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. It is not a modernist desire to order the present through the past or to make the present look spare in contrast to the richness of the past… It is not an attempt to void or avoid history. Instead, it directly confronts the past of literature – and of historiography, for it too derives from other texts (documents). It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. In all, there is little of the modernist sense of a unique, symbolic, visionary "work of art"; there are only texts, already written ones… Historiographic metafiction problematizes the activity of reference by refusing either to bracket the referent (a surfiction might) or to revel in it (as non-fictional novels might). (Hutcheon 118-119)

At its most basic, then, historiographic metafiction uses the archival past as an unstable source of information in the same way that fictional narratives are unstable sources of information. This coincides well with Santos-Febres's own writings on the postmodern, which suggest that as she came to understand the postmodern, she discovered its potential as a style which could assist in describing the contradictions present in Caribbean culture because "La historia es una forma de legitimación. No hay que quitársela a quien nunca la ha tenido. La posmodernidad caribeña debe ser contradictoria; dar espacio para reclamar una historia propia y entender a la vez que es una fabricación, una fabricación necesaria" ("History is a kind of legitimation. There is no need to take it away from someone who has never had it before. Caribbean postmodernism should be contradictory; giving space to reclaim a personal history and understand at the same time that it's a construction, and a necessary one at that"; Santos-Febres 171; my trans.). Santos-Febres thus explores the way that postmodernism can be used to create fluidity in identity, layering contradictory aspects of the self and the nation together to define and explore the multilayered histories which created their present reality, and which can impact their futures.

The style of writing that Santos-Febres uses also fits into Roberto González Echevarría's argument about the place of the "Archive" in the Latin American novel as a way for Latin American authors to take control of their own narratives through the form of the historical novel, in essence employing the historical archive as a root for foundational myths through the novel which help produce narratives that describe a national character. *Nuestra señora de la noche* participates in this form of mythmaking by attempting to produce a subject whom Santos-Febres can write into the Latin American historical archive not as a legendary figure but as an historical participant. Describing how the archive is backed up by a hegemonic, scientific discourse, González Echevarría states,

> It does not escape me that the hegemonic discourse described here comes from "outside" Latin America; therefore Latin America appears to be constantly explaining itself in "foreign" terms, to be the helpless victim of the colonialist's language and image-making. There is a level at which this is true and deplorable… The Latin American narrative, both in the stories it tells, and in the structure of those stories, reflects a struggle to free the imagination of all mediation, to reach a knowledge of the self and collectively that is liberating and easily shared; a clearing in the current jungle of discourses of power… (González Echevarría 41-42)

The process of writing against hegemonic discourse to combat definitions that come from the outside that González Echevarría observes as a widespread tendency in Latin American writing mirrors the experience of blackness within the Latin American narrative. In Santos Febres interpretation, her Afro-Latina protagonist would rather not share their full, unedited experience with the world. Further, Santos-Febres problematizes the historical-anthropological 19th century narrative style that governed classic nation-building historical novels to claim space for black women's place in history in the early 20th century. She does so by using realist language which, in its multi-perspective layering of styles, removes the edge of rationality of a 19th century historical-anthropological novel while still using its basic functions. By writing in this style,

Santos-Febres takes a tool from the master, that of the historical novel, and reshapes it into a new tool, historiographic metafiction, with an inverse purpose.

Santos-Febres reassesses Isabel's contribution and significance in Puerto Rican history not simply as an individual figure but as a representative myth in the specific production of Afro-Puerto Rican history. To do this, Santos-Febres grounds her in the lived realities of black women in her time and extrapolates the life that she led from that position, this positions Isabel as both a witness and a participant rather than a stand-in for the broader injustices suffered by the black community. In this way, she challenges the sentimentality often present in historical texts to instead show how, in spite of the lack of nostalgia for a previous time in both black and white subjectivities in Puerto Rico, a close examination of the past could instead demonstrate the importance of folk-heroes in the historical archive and their role in determining the future in spite of the lack of idealism in their own lives which reflect the reality of black women's experiences in Puerto Rico, fully marginalized and encouraged to fill subservient roles.

Recently, there has been some analysis of *Nuestra señora de la noche* as a historical novel. Marta Jiménez Alicea argues in "Direcciones de la nueva novela histórica" (2017) that the 21st century has seen a further development of the historical novel away from its nostalgic and atavistic past. This interpretation builds on Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction and suggests that using the past as a lens through which the present can be articulated assists in addressing historical deficiencies and challenging historical narratives with contradictions to the "official story". These contradictions allow Santos-Febres to build a cohesive narrative out of a highly fractured present in order to root these fractures in reality. She writes that, "el palimpsesto, la polifonía y la metaficción son el resultado de la incorporación de distintas voces que contribuyen a evidenciar que la historia es relativa porque depende —entre otros factores—

de quién la cuente y de la perspectiva del presente que asuma para representar el pasado. Este relativismo engrana perfectamente con la multiformidad de los productos posmodernistas." ("Palimpsest, polyphony, and metafiction are the result of the incorporation of distinct voices which contribute to demonstrating that history is relative because it depends – among other factors – on who tells it and on what perspective of the present the past is assumed to represent. This relativism perfectly integrates with the plural forms of postmodernist artifacts"; 225; my trans.) As such, Alicea suggest that because history is a relativistic narrative, Santos-Febres is able to destabilize the archive through her use of anti-postmodern poetics to attempt to build a new archive out of the fractures left by postmodernist thinking. This dynamic works in a place that suspends the typical rules of society, like Isabel's brothel Elizabeth's Dancing Place, thus allowing a space for the historical archive to be rewritten but which also does not mystify the principal actors. Santos-Febres challenges the idea that these characters' lives were heroic or romanticizable. Additionally, the presence of both Montse's and Cristina's voices further complicate the narrative by showing the complex relationship between mythmaking and the variability of experiences present within society. Alicea does not argue that Santos-Febres seeks to create a mythical figure out of Isabel. Santos-Febres, as mentioned in her interview, did not view the historical Luberza to be a feminist figure at all, as a trafficker of women. Thus, she has no interest in making Isabel into a myth. Rather, Santos-Febres uses her to typify one route of the black experience and show what was necessary for black people to gain power at the time.

In this way, we could understand *Nuestra señora de la noche* as part of a literary tradition which rose out of the post-Civil Rights era in the United States and decolonization in the Caribbean. The neo-slave narrative is defined by Ashraf Rushdy as having been borne of the attempts to shift and rearrange the discourse on slavery and slaves to center the voices of the

enslaved, and in doing so focuses on the experience of enslaved as they speak their perspectives, rather than relaying these perspectives indirectly. Blossoming in particular in the 1980s in the face of the cultural hegemonic backlash against the Civil Rights movement under the Regan administration, writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker formed part of the founders of this movement by writing against texts which exploited the black experience and perspective. Instead, these texts:

> Immediately raise questions about the connection between slavery and postmodern black identity, between the moment when the first slave narratives were produced and the moment the Neo-slave narratives appeared. In other words, they make that connection not only in their content but also in their form, since they adopt the conventions, gestures and voice of the antebellum slave narrative in order to play with, partially dismantle, and partially demonstrate the implacability of that original identity—of slave. (Rushdy 22)

Thus, in using the form of the historical novel, which Hutcheon suggests in postmodern contexts works to challenge the totality of the archive, it is evident that in this post-slavery narrative, the dismantling the undifferentiated identity of "enslaved" and demonstration of the multitude of black identities are central. Using the form of the historical novel allows Santos-Febres a chance to dismantle parts of the post-slavery past as well.

George Handley's *Postslavery Literature in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (2000) explores not only how the neo-slave narrative expresses the relationship of race to historicity, but it further explores the interconnectedness of slavery to geography in the Americas and beyond and its impact on migration, labor, and imperialism throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. He connects this concept of the echoes of slavery's impact to the broader experience of slavery in the Americas, particularly in the Caribbean and Brazil. Handley suggests that it is not only possible but necessary to take a comparative approach to analyze slavery narratives because

of the shared experience of slavery in the Americas as well as the continued influence of United States hegemony over the continents:

> Although postslavery literature borrows from the traditions of the slave narrative and antislavery novels in its exploration of black speech and the reconstitution of family in slavery's wake, it more self-consciously argues that the amnesia caused by slavery has yet to be answered by authors' respective national cultures and even by their own attempts to resurrect slavery's enigmatic past. These texts are haunted by their own shortcomings in attempting recovery of repressed histories and in finding meaning in such failures. (Handley 3)

Santos-Febres is thus exploring the fraught relationship between blackness and domesticity in a place where blackness had long been ignored (Branche 151) as an echo of the black experience in both the Caribbean and the United States, while challenging the idea that the center of society is the only place through which power can be acquired. Angela Davis describes in *Women, Race, and Class*, a great majority of employment for black women has been, particularly at the time in which *Nuestra señora de la noche* takes place, concentrated into domestic labor as an extension of slavery that has never really gone away (Santos-Febres 103). She is, in essence, trying to give language to the experience of black womanhood in the postslavery environment of Puerto Rico at a time when a new form of subjugation was coming into focus while stopping short of giving a full account of the experience. For example, Santos-Febres provides evidence that while Isabel continues to survive with her peers as a seamstress, the space that they move through is marked with the legacy of slavery. Describing a dancehall Isabel and her friends frequent, she mentions "Algunas lenguas decían que aquel ranchón había sido barracón de esclavos. Pero ya no lo era. Lo habían transformado en el centro donde se celebraba el baile público amenizado por Bumbúm Oppenheimer." ("Some said that the house had been the slave barracks. But it wasn't anymore. They had made it into the center where the public dance led by Bumbúm Oppenheimer was celebrated."; Santos-Febres 164; 174) While the space has become a locale for black culture, the

fact that it was at one point a slave barracks is a reminder that black culture was once (and, to some extent, continues to be) refracted through slavery and the legacy it left to the descendants of those who lived under it.

In *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative,* Elizabeth Beaulieu argues that the neo-slave narrative (and by extension, the postslavery narrative) was particularly well-suited to narratives by black women because it filled the need that Angela Davis described in *Women, Race and Class* (1983) to actually describe the feminine experience as it related to slavery. Moreover, it challenged the misogynist trope of women being nothing more than homemakers and mothers but for a class that, as Lorde mentions, is relegated to that role to let more privileged white women discuss topics of feminism while continuing to ensure that black women are left out of the conversation. Beaulieu emphasizes the importance of education in the enslaved populace as rooted in the fact that:

> Slaveowners widely believed that an enslaved person who could not read or write was more easily kept under authority. Those who did write could make others aware of the plight of blacks, and those who did read could learn of free blacks and of anti-slave sentiment elsewhere… Literacy was a subversive act; to "steal" learning (as Douglass did on the streets of Baltimore) was more threatening to the established white male patriarchy than to steal food for hungry children or trinkets for everyday living. Literacy afforded enslaved persons a greater stake in their own humanity. (Beaulieu 8)

This trope is apparent in *Nuestra señora de la noche*, where Isabel is immediately introduced to "dangerous" ideas about women and people of color which challenged the white supremacist patriarchal order, as soon as she is able to take advantage of them. For example, one of the few men who looked out for her, the owner of the laundry don Demetro, forces a libretto by Capetillo in her hands the moment he learns that she can read it and explains that "porque el matrimonio es un contrato de compraventa donde muchas veces la mujer sale perdiendo, ¿a que eso no te lo enseñan en la escuela a dónde vas?" ("Because marriage is a contract of buying and selling

where often the woman ends up losing. I bet they haven't taught you that in school."; Santos Febres 85; 91). The minute she is placed in a community with other marginalized people in her community with whom she shares solidarity, they begin passing around 'radical' ideas to go with the radical act of being able to transmit them.

Indeed, while different approaches have been taken all throughout Latin America and Anglo America towards its black populations after the end of slavery, the impact of white supremacy on discourses like *mestizaje* cannot be overstated. Handley suggests, in fact, that the Caribbean myth of the "gran familia nacional" continually demotes blackness to the margins of the family, a tendency that as we will see Santos-Febres attempts to write against. He explains that:

> Despite apparent national consolidation following the Civil and Spanish-American Wars, colonialist ideologies from the period of slavery were disguised in new conceptions of the national family… Some, in their eagerness to move beyond racial conflict, were tempted to elide radical difference altogether in order to arrive at a more facile solution to the painful problems of democracy in a former slave society. This is because Africanization, or what amounted to radical racial difference, posed a threat to each nation's family model and therefore frequently was made invisible to the nation's eye. (Handley 110)

Santos-Febres challenges this trope explicitly in the conclusion of *Nuestra señora de la noche.* At Isabel's funeral, both Roberto—her own son with Fernando Fornarís—and Luís Arsenio—Fernando's son with his wife Cristina—take over carrying the coffin at once, and carry her corpse shoulder-to-shoulder to its final resting place (344), showing the reconciliation of Puerto Rico's white, black and *mulato* populations as stemming from the actions of a black maternal figure. Thus, Luís Arsenio's choice to acknowledge his familial ties to Isabel by joining his half-brother to carry her coffin represents a radical rejection of the national family and embracing the formative role which blackness played in his own cultural and personal development. This demonstrates the importance of the black woman's mind and body in the production and

maintenance of a culture distinct from the homogenizing force of United States culture and imperialism. This is evident in the way that Luís Arsenio ultimately choses to identify himself as part of Isabel's family rather than the other way around.

The notion of the neo-slave narrative often requires an examination of domesticity and modes of resistance to make their point as a means to humanize the subjects and make the horrors of slavery more real without straying into exploitation and violence. In *Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012), Kevin Quashie explores the idea that black resistance is hardly the only way to examine African culture and, that this trap leads to positioning one's culture against a culture which views itself as superior in such a way that the non-hegemonic culture is always defined in opposition to the dominant. His argument furthers that of the neo-slave narrative by placing an emphasis on writing which is not rooted in fighting back, much like Isabel's characterization in *Nuestra señora de la noche*, but instead on the quiet and interior of her life, of which we are only given small glimpses at that. For example, after acquiring the land from Fernando Fornarís in exchange for her silence at her pregnancy, Isabel solicits help from her network of support, namely, don Demetrio and her best friend Leonor. Demetrio and Leonor discuss Isabel's plans as if her desires are inscrutable: "—Quiere que le consiga a un maestro de obras y a unos carpinteros. – Pero, ¿para qué muchacha? – Demetrio, quién sabe. Yo no me atrevo a contradictarla porque está bien delicada, reponiéndose de la operación que le hicieron" ("She wants you to get a master builder and some carpenters." "But for what, *muchacha*?" "Demetrio, who knows. I don't dare contradict her, because she is very ill, recovering from the operation they had to perform on her."; Santos-Febres 257; 268). Isabel doesn't even reveal her plans to her close confidants. Santos-Febres instead gives us the same look into Isabel's life as someone who is close to her but is not her. Even the parts of the novel which are about her are not normally

from her perspective, which distinguishes them from Luís Arsenio's chapters, where the reader gets to examine his thoughts directly.

Isabel is also characterized as strategic, but often we are not given a glimpse into her motivations. Mae Lin is a significant character in Elizabeth's Dancing Place, one of the young women that Isabel had imported from Panama in an attempt to secure Elizabeth's Dancing Place's future and keep it open in the face of scrutiny by the local bishop. While we can surmise that adopting Mae Lin is a sort of proof of Isabel's benediction, we are never granted full access to her full motivations. When she saves Mae Lin from a situation where she was caught shoplifting, the reader is only granted this: "No se lo pudo explicar. Tampoco sabe cómo hizo para convencer a la niña que se subiera al taxi con ella. Será que en la cara le vio el abandono. En los ojos le leyó la rabia. Le dieron ganas de llevársela" ("She couldn't explain it. And she didn't know, either, how she convinced the girl to get in a taxi with her. Perhaps it was because she recognized the neglect in her own face, the rage in her own eyes. Isabel felt like taking the girl with her"; Santos-Febres 300; 312). While we can imagine that Isabel hoped to save her from further indignities that she had experienced in her own childhood, Santos-Febres also suggests that there is a strategic element to her choice by describing Isabel's excitement to take her home. This scene, in which Isabel reveals very little and does not reveal her intentions to Leonor when her and Mae Lin arrive back at their hotel, reflects what Quashie describes as a kind of subjectivity which is often only attributed to exterior forms of resistance. Quashie states that,

> Quiet is the expressiveness of the inner life, unable to be expressed fully but nonetheless articulate and informing of one's humanity. As a concept, it helps us explore black subjectivity from beyond the boundaries of public expressiveness… And yet this existential consciousness is often read through the discourse of resistance and therefore is reduced to what it says about the nature of the fight with publicness. (Quaishie, 24)

Much of Isabel's life and experience is rendered private throughout the novel, and while readers are given more information about her than most of the other characters in the text, that does not leave readers with a full picture of Isabel's experience. Instead, we are only given the broad strokes of many events but are left, instead, to catch her reflecting and planning in her quiet moments. This is exemplified in her immediate turn to planning her next move after Isaac leaves her. As soon as he does, we are not given any glimpse of her emotions, simply that Leonor moves in with her and they both begin working in laundry again to help her keep the house (202). After having set her sights on Fernando Fornarís as a vector through which she can acquire the capital to secure a future, she already has a plan in place: "Alcohol ilegal. Ahí era donde estaba el dinero. Lo veía claro en su cabeza. Ni sabe de donde le salía la maña, pero estaba Segura. A la porra el soldado que la tomara del brazo, dándole sostén para el paseo. Lo haría ella sola" ("Illegal alcohol, that's where the money was. She saw it clearly in her head. She didn't know where the idea had come from, but she was sure. To hell with the soldier who would take her by the arm and lend support for the stroll. She would support herself."; Santos-Febres 204; 214). This technique of writing futures for black women by simply writing a humanizing vision of their experience rather than focusing on the tragedy of it, is reminiscent of texts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) which focuses on interior experience as a force for humanization. In this comparison, readers will notice an obvious thread through which Santos-Febres's work fits into the discourse of the neo-slave narrative and how it uses this status to create a space for reflection, without romanticizing or exploiting the undoubtedly dark and difficult-to-articulate experience of blackness in the early 20th century. Further, it demonstrates the way that that experience of blackness is not given away freely to the reader, instead left just out of reach.

4. Reading *Nuestra señora de la noche*

The interconnectedness of the Caribbean is one of the most established tropes in Caribbean literature, as it relates to the ways in which the islands themselves are an expression of the clash of cultures which are at the root of their history. Theorist Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) expressed this process in his text *Poetics of Relation* (1990) through the term "creolization" which he posited best expressed itself in Caribbean culture:

> What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word *creolization,* approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter, a shock… a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry… But the explosion of cultures does not mean they are scattered or mutually diluted. It is the violent sign of their consensual, not imposed, sharing. (Glissant 34)

In short, Glissant argues that the expression of cultures in the Caribbean is a sort of all-encompassing relationship of identity with otherness refracted through its concentration onto one space, a concept which Glissant names the *Tout-monde*. This relationality is expressed in several places within *Nuestra señora de la noche* as well. Isaac, the sailor and Isabel's husband for a time, is a product of Caribbean interrelations. He was born in Saint Croix and raised in Saint Thomas in the Virgin Islands but considers himself from Puerto Rico because his mother was born there (Santos-Febres 167); when he is eventually shipped away from Loosey and abandons Isabel, he is sent to Panama (201). These touchstones in the Caribbean all inform his status as a soldier, but the fact that he is able to find himself legible as an Afro-Puerto Rican whose identities are transferrable between so many different linguistic and cultural spaces demonstrates the ways in which the Caribbean is built on a history of interconnectedness, both forcible through occupation and consensual through migration and fluidity.

Some early iterations of the scholarship of *Nuestra señora de la noche* expressed distaste at Santos-Febres's choice to abandon the style of her first novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000) and to instead try her hand at the historical novel. This is most evident in John Waldron's "Killing Colonialism's Ghosts in McOndo: Mayra Santos Febres and Giannia Brashi," (2010) which explores at length the comparative success and failure of the aesthetics of both works. He focuses on the aesthetic use of the tropes of the literary movement McOndo, a late 20th century trend which defined itself as a response to the Latin American Boom era. McOndo, a portmanteau of McDonalds and Macondo, postured that Latin Americans needed to search for individual identities rather than national ones as a way to speak around capitalist imperialism rather than submit to it. This distinguished itself from the boom which focused on a mythmaking and search for a national essence as Echevarría argues. Waldron contends that the focus of McOndo writing is an effective decolonial strategy in the face of late 20th and early 21st century neocolonial forces while other genres which have historically been synonymous with Latin American literature play into the demands of foreign markets for their own sake. He states that:

> [McOndo writers] arrive at an emphasis on the personal by ignoring and even thumbing their noses at the pressures of the new colonialism, globalizing capitalism. They do this by not conforming to the demands of foreign editors and publishing houses that expect Latin American literature to produce magical real narratives, texts that are concerned with national identity or those that transparently reflect Latin American reality such as testimonials or autobiographies. (Waldron 114)

Rather than examining national identity as a strict concept, *Nuestra señora de la noche* still plays on the interconnectedness of the Caribbean, as evident in the characters of Mae Lin from Panama and Isaac from the Virgin Islands. Isabel herself was born to a woman, María Oppenheimer, who was born "en el barrio San Antón a una Negra inglesa que se vino de las islas detrás de su hombre a cortar caña" ("she was born in the San Antón barrio to a black Englishwoman who

came to the islands to cut sugarcane"; Santos-Febres 37; 39). While Isabel knows about her mother, she is never given access to her mother and is raised, much like her own son, by a godmother. She too, then, is a product of the interconnectedness of the Caribbean islands as they interact both historically and politically, making the windward Antilles inextricable from the rest of the Caribbean both in its tragedy and in its cultural expressions.

This connection between the experience and language of the Caribbean, what Glissant calls creolization, lends itself to Isabel's interiority as a method of exploring the interconnectedness of her experience to both the Afro-Puerto Rican and the broader Afro-Caribbean experience. The sense of loss that came as a result of relocation, for example, is one which Isabel experiences not only because she lost access to her mother but through the way in which she loses Isaac, who is transferred to a base in Panama. This event, which takes place when Isabel is relatively young, is one of the few glimpses we get into her direct interiority, revealing her feelings as she learns the news:

> Entonces [Isaac] se lo dijo "Me transfieren para Panamá". Isabel se agarró el vientre como si se lo hubieran desgarrado… Leonor la encontró cepillando los escalones del balcón con una entrega total, como si en cada comisura de cada escalón se jugara la vida. Por dos semanas simplemente no hizo otra cosa sino limpiar… Hacía un mes que no sabía de Isaac. (Santos-Febres 201)
>
> Then [Isaac] told her: "They're transferring me to Panama." Isabel clutched her belly as if the words disemboweled her… Leonor found her brushing the stairs of the porch with complete devotion, as if in each corner of each step she was risking her life. For two weeks, she did nothing but clean… It had been a month since she had heard from Isaac. [211]

Her loss to the caprices of US military interventionism in the Caribbean demonstrates how her experience is one that is broadly legible throughout the region. Much like her own mother, who was abandoned by the "madre inglesa" only 40 days after her birth, Isabel lost her husband to economic precarity, which also caused her to fall into an economic precarity of her own. Later,

when Santos-Febres describes her seduction methods with Fernando Fornarís, we suddenly receive little indication as to her emotions about the events.

As a response to debates about whether her work responds to the market demands, in one interview Santos-Febres further insists that the market is, more than anything, a dice game: "Nadie, ni los editores de las grandes empresas editoriales, ni los críticos más mimados, ni los más serios, NADIE SABE lo que constituye un éxito de mercado… Perseguir el mercado es falsearse, y esto, para una escritora, o un escritor es peligrosísimo… Así que escribo y cruzo los dedos" ("Nobody, neither editors from the big publishing houses, nor the most respected critics, nor the most serious, NOBODY KNOWS what makes for a bestseller… Chasing the market is to make yourself fake, and this, for a writer, is extremely dangerous… So I write and I cross my fingers"; Acevedo and Villafañe 8; my trans.). Instead of existing within the ghosts of empire and colonialism, Santos-Febres engages with these spirits in a way that, as Sommer suggests, *rejects sharing* the interiority for which Waldron is looking. Instead, Santos-Febres uses the same tropes to complicate a larger-than-life figure in Puerto Rico's history rather than letting spectators in. The difference, then, is that the reader is rendered incompetent in a way which does not permit them the interiority that the individualistic writing in the McOndo movement champions. Santos-Febres, however, does not leave it out of the text; she teases the reader by showing small glimpses of its existence but leaving it out of their grasp.

I suggest, instead, that we are not permitted access to Isabel's specific interiority because it is not ours as readers to have access to. Instead, we are left to view it as a part of the collective experience of Afro-Puerto Rican women as much as Isabel's individual experience. Reflecting on Isabel's death, Luís Arsenio notes that her power came from the cover that her brothel gave her, not the money that her workers made for Elizabeth's. He thinks to himself that "La Negra

traficaba secretos. Habrá querido negociar con uno demasiado grande. Y ya tú sabes, le limpiaron el pico" ("La Negra trafficked in secrets. Had she sought to do business with someone too big? You know how it is, they took her out…"; 343; 354). He speculates that her death had nothing to do with the actual crimes she committed, but the fact that she knew so much and had to keep so many people in her pocket. We as readers are never made privy to what those secrets which cost her life may have been though we are provided with crumbs to speculate upon. Much like Luís Arsenio, the reader is placed in a position which gives them the ability to see and understand Isabel's life without being made wise of its interior. The reader is granted a glimpse into the abhorrent conditions of the sanatorium where she birthed Roberto, ironically, on the day of Fernando's marriage to Cristina, but not into her psyche (Santos-Febres 232). Even when she hears that she is subsequently barren, the look is juxtaposed with the plot we are made to follow by the narration, the plans she is making to use her newly acquired land, her only emotion being that her "Voluntad vencida y algo que la endurecía por dentro. Aquellas dos fuerzas la iban a rajar en dos mitades. Pero otra mujer que la habitaba tomó la palabra" ("A defeated will and something that hardened inside her. Those two forces were going to Split her in two. But the other woman who possessed her took over."; 241; 251-252). Indeed, Santos-Febres's characterization of Isabel shows her learning how to traffic in secrets long before she made it as a madam, refusing to tell either Leonor or Demetrio what had gone on, as mentioned above; Santos-Febres sets aside the more salacious portions of Isabel's life and *still* refuses to let us see things from her perspective beyond only a few small glimpses. This technique allows Isabel, on some level, to remain incomprehensible to the reader instead of being fodder for a salacious story about the plight of Afro-Puerto Ricans.

As a defensive tactic, it reflects Sommer's reference to Morrison's expression, that readers have to be left with a toy to chase to be kept out of the parts of the house a writer would not want them to see (Sommer 410). For marginalized women to tell their stories without completely opening the door, that we as readers should accept our status as incompetent and unable to experience or place ourselves in a perfect understanding of her experience. Sommer challenges readers to sit with the idea that their lack of access may actually help them better understand where the author imagined their position as readers:

> "The tangent provides a vantage point for rereading more than subaltern silence; it also promises to get beyond our habitual interpretive strategies by pointing to another ground, a ground that we cannot, or may not, occupy and that remains other. The strategically demure posture allows us to imagine, I want to speculate, a politics of coalition among differently constituted positionalities, rather than the identity or interchangeability of subjects as the basis for equality. And a political vision adventurous enough to imagine differences, yet modest enough to respect them, may be the most significant challenge posed by learning to read resistance." (421)

In this way, the reader is constantly placed in a position where they are made to substitute themselves for Luís Arsenio rather than Isabel as a protest against Isabel's life being inhabited by the reader. Instead, we are given a way to understand her positionality within the text as one where she is dangling information over us that we cannot access. Isabel's life does not need to be remembered in full for us to be able to stand in solidarity with her; Santos-Febres asserts that we should not be able to fully understand because it is not and will never be our experience, and that rather than trying to forget it, it is not something that needs to be widely shared to be able to grasp the pain that she went through. As such, Santos-Febres places readers in a position which chastens them, they are only granted cursory outlines of Isabel's experience.

5. Using the Body, Defending the Mind

We are, however, granted direct access to the interiority of two women within the text. Both Cristina and Montse deal with insanity but the ways that their characters diverge suggests something about the way that race plays a role in the production of these diverging outcomes for women. While Cristina's status is hardly romanticized in the text and is not a happy story, rejection, isolation and alcoholism were still preferrable to the options on offer for Isabel had she turned away from her plan to gain and maintain power through Elizabeth's Dancing Place. Santos-Febres characterizes Cristina as powerful, even after she begins to lose her mind. In the hospital, her instincts for caring for her son kick in and she tries to behave automatically:

> Ahora recuerda. El niño ha llegado de la escuela y ella tiene que levantarse de aquella cama, no vaya a ser que note algo raro, que se dé cuenta de que ya no tiene fuerzas, se marchita, tiene algo roto por dentro sin remedio. *"¿Dónde está Delfina? Que te traiga un café*". Cristian se aúpa en la cama. Unas gotas humedecen ojos "no madre, no se apure, ya tomé". Su hijo ya tomó café y llora al verla. Es porque la ama. Es porque no puede vivir sin ella. Es porque ya nunca la va a dejar en soledad. (Santos-Febres 213, my emphasis)
>
> Now, she remembers. The boy has returned from school and she needs to get up from that bed, so he doesn't notice anything unusual, that she has no strength left, that she is withering, that something is irreparably broken inside. "*Where's Delmira? Let her bring you coffee.*" Cristina sits up in bed. Tears fill his eyes. "No, mother, don't worry. I've already had some." Her son has had his coffee and weeps upon seeing her. It is because he loves her. It is because he can't live without her. It is because he will never leave her alone. [223]

Even in her state, Cristina believes that she has servants who she can make do things, criticizing them and forcing her will on others to deal with her loneliness. While her death is slow and undignified, she is still able to demonstrate her power as an inherent part of her identity as that part of her is slipping away. Even in the face of insanity, Santos-Febres characterizes Cristina's experience as distinctly different from that of black women's.

The only thing that saves Isabel from a fate worse than Cristina's is her decision to use the land that Fernando had handed to her as a base upon which she could keep refuge. Her only other option as a black woman is to take the path of Montse, who Santos-Febres paints as a neurotic, delusional person whose vision of herself leaves her imagining that she is little more than a martyr for taking on the care for Roberto. Montse's isolation is evident when she tells a story from when Roberto was about to be drafted into the navy and she was speaking to him at the hospital. Her words fall onto the page both as she is addressing Roberto and as she responds to him: "Yo tengo nombre Madrina. Me llamo Roberto Fernando. Yo quería que se llamara Rafael. Yo me llamo Roberto Fornarís, la enfermera que me puyó me lo dijo. Su manita en mi mano maloliente sisisisi si, en me mano hosca, sucia, vulgar, en mi mano su manita penitente…" ("I have a name, Godmother. My name is Roberto Fernando. I wanted him to be named Rafael. My name is Roberto Fornarís, the nurse who took care of me told me. His little hand in my stinking hand, yesyesyes, in my common dismal hand, his penitent little hand in mine…"; Santos-Febres 245; 256). This internal dialogue, frenetic and without pause or indication of who is speaking, shows the way in which Montse is portrayed as being quick thinking and anxious while she struggles to hold onto her sanity as her reality slips away while the Nene has to leave her or risk going to jail and leaving her anyway. She thus serves as a counterpoint to Isabel's not-so-illustrious life as the "respectable alternative" who dedicated herself to a good and godly life at the expense of her own sanity and security, as opposed to Isabel's secure life at the expense of her morality, while also reinforcing the notion that the lives of black women at the time were all restricted by the patriarchal society which interpolated them.

As Cristina is offered a slide into insanity through consumption and opulence, Doña Montse demonstrates the extent to which Isabel's path to power and stability, while brutal and

difficult and exploitative, was still preferrable to the other options laid out in front of her. As Jerome Branche argues in "Disrobing Narcissus" (2015), Isabel is far more likely to wind up like Montse than Cristina because of the determinacy that race plays in their respective fates:

> Although *Nuestra señora de la noche* does not set out to be an apologia for prostitution, as indicated above, the social and cultural contradictions that are highlighted by the life and the post-mortem chatter around Isabel Luberza offer Santos Febres an opportunity to critically review these contradictions. In so doing, she takes creative recourse, as did Rosario Ferré before her, in the literary strategy of the double. For Santos Febres, Isabel's double is not Fornaris's white wife, however; it is Montse… The sexual restrictions imposed on Montse by her religious vows, and the slowly growing hysteria that her celibacy makes compulsory, allow her to be Santos Febres's symbol for the argument against sexual repression and the view of eroticism as sinful… where Isabel is dismissive of the purported phallic power of "white males" and makes them pay for their pleasure/s, Montse lives in the thrall of her religious fantasy in which she is a Virgin in the (Holy) Trinity, with Fernando as God the Father (or el Amado), and Rafael Roberto as God the Son (el Hijo), or as el Nene, as the book sometimes refers to him (eg. 245)." (Branche 163-4)

Branche suggests that while Ferré's observation that women of both races were readily marginalized in a patriarchal society, he argues that Santos-Febres contests that these two forms of marginalization are equal. Every time Isabel was used by society, however, she either wound up homeless, as when she was evicted from the Tous household; or left with a house and no income, as with Isaac; or left institutionalized while she gave birth to her child. These racial and class dynamics demonstrate how the text uses the interiority of others to describe the fates of different women in Puerto Rican society while still denying the reader more than small glimpses into her experience, forcing us to view ourselves as outsiders to it.

Weldt-Basson's interpretation of the text in her article "The White Male as Narrative Axis in Marya Santos-Febres's *Nuestra señora de la noche*" (2013) identifies the racial and gendered dynamics within the novel and their impact on the characters. As her title suggests she argues that this is because the entire text depends on an understanding of how each character approaches

and interacts with whiteness and masculinity to understand their fate and outcome. Weldt-Basson frames the activities of these two men as the principal drivers of the course of the lives of the women of the novel. She states that, “The victimization of [Cristina Rangel] leads to her insanity, while the victimization of the black lover leads the protagonist, Isabel, to become a prostitute” (Weldt-Basson 4). While she later acknowledges that Isabel turns this predicament into an opportunity to become a self-made businesswoman and powerful player in her community, Weldt-Basson’s reading diminishes the fact that Isabel was able to extract concessions from Fernando through the birth of their child, Roberto, while simultaneously being able to shed her responsibility for him. Namely, Elizabeth’s Dancing Place sits on land Fernando was required to sign over to Isabel, essentially as an apology for her pregnancy and the fact that he did not assist her. This concession can then be read as Isabel’s manipulation of her lover by playing to his desires in spite of the fact that it cost her greatly as well. When he signs over the land, Isabel characterizes the interaction as if it were simply a transaction, stating:

> Ahora que regresaba del límite, ahora que no se había muerto, podía decir que ella, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, poseía poco menos de tres cuerdas a orillas del río Portugués. “Me las regaló el licenciado”. En la sala del hospital municipal, le fue explicando a Leonor. “Llegó un buen día, sin más con unas escrituras bajo el brazo. Yo no sé si fue porque notó la barriga. Pero me los dio, Leonor. Dile que no venga más por aquí. Dile que conmigo tiene las cuentas saldas." (Santos-Febres 240)
>
> Now that she was returning from the utmost, now that she had not died, she could say that she, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, was the owner of a little less than three *cuerdas* of land on the shores of the Portuguese River. “A gift from the attorney.” She began to explain things to Leonor in the lobby of the Municipal Hospital. “He arrived one day, without warning, with some papers under his arm. I don’t know if it was because he had noticed my belly. But he gave them to me, Leonor. Tell him not to come around here anymore. Tell him that his account with me is settled.” [250]

Here we can see that while Isabel’s path is characterized as difficult, dangerous and brutal she is still able to come out of her ordeal with an investment which she is able to turn into an empire.

Effectively, by "closing accounts" with Fernando she takes control of her own narrative in a way that the other women are shown to lack. I argue it shows that the narratives of both Montse and Cristina are molded around the white males in their lives while Isabel, as the protagonist resists that molding and instead forges her own subjectivities. In both cases, we can see that the narrative axis of the story only molds around white men when the characters in question submit to this molding but does not show that this axis is a foregone conclusion.

Further, Luís Arsenio's narrative arc demonstrates the influence that Isabel's cultural capital, obtained through his father, has on the elite on the island. His development into a man who comes to accept his half-brother after he learns of Roberto's existence demonstrates the connection that he eventually makes with Isabel. Luís Arsenio eventually identifies as part of her family just as much as her son at her funeral even while the church and the rest of polite society rejects her, and the text thus shows that her influence has given him the opportunity to change his own future. The text eventually begins following Luís Arsenio as an officer in the US Navy during World War II, working in and around Manila before it fell to the Japanese. Roberto, meanwhile, had been conscripted as a means of avoiding jail, and it is as members of the armed forces that they first encounter one another. Years later, when they reconnected, they have a frank reconciliation where they learn how they are related and that through their experiences with Isabel, they are connected and begin to understand each other (Santos-Febres 318). After their conversation, Luís Arsenio asks Roberto to join him in a venture to found a manufacturing company (322), creating a union combining their talents and circumstances. This alliance demonstrates how Isabel's influence fosters solidarity over time. Santos-Febres makes this clear when Luís Arsenio carries Isabel's coffin at the time of her death:

> [Luís Arsenio] se ofreció para cargar el ataúd justo del otro lado de aquel hombre que tomaba la cabecera de la comitiva y que nadie conocía. Alguno protestó "Más

> respeto, la delantera nada más que para los allegados". Manuel hizo señas para que lo dejaran tomar *su lugar. "Es familiar" gritó, "es familiar"* … Mientras tanto, la gente miraba al sustituto, sus ojos verdes, su barba cerrada, su mentón cuadrado y se preguntaban quién era aquel familiar, por qué su cara se le hacía tan conocida. Hasta hubo quien lo mirara para después posar su vista en Luís Arsenio y encontrar asombrosos parecidos. Dos brazos firmes, uno blanco y otro negro, cargando el mismo féretro al mismo tiempo. (Santos-Febres 344, my emphasis)
>
> [Luís Arsenio] offered to carry it exactly at the opposite side of that man who took on the head of the entourage and whom nobody knew. Someone protested, shouting, "Some respect, the head is only for those who were close to her." Manolito made a gesture so they would let him take *his place. "He is family," he screamed, "he is family.*" … Meanwhile, the people looked at the substitute, his green eyes, his heavy beard, his square chin, and asked themselves who it might be, because his face was so recognizable. There were even those who looked at him and then rested their eyes on Luis Arsenio to find an astonishing resemblance. Two strong arms, one white and one black, carrying the coffin at the same time. [355]

When Manuel refers to Luís Arsenio as a "familiar", a member of her family, he acknowledges the importance of Isabel's influence on Luís Arsenio, both as an impact on him and as a topic of her interest. Not only is he characterized as pledging his solidarity to her, but the structure of the sentences postures him, implicitly, as an object in Isabel's possession. Manuel's proclamation characterizes him in relationship to her (going as far as to refer to him without a pronoun and exclusively with a verb and adjective) rather than the other way around. Thus, his narrative axis bends around her influence to indicate that Isabel has successfully challenged and reshaped the archival myth of the Puerto Rican "gran familia" to become its center, quite literally shoulder to shoulder with the Afro-Puerto Rican community. Using the notion that Santos-Febres may be trying to misdirect us from Isabel's interiority, that there is an unspoken part of the narrative that is not "for" the reader, it becomes clear that we should consider Luis Arsenio's characterization and importance in the novel as a sort of red herring which allows us to understand Isabel's influence and intentions, albeit indirectly, while we are left out of certain details of her experience as a black woman.

When we first experience Elizabeth's Dancing Place with Luís Arsenio, Santos-Febres is manipulating us just as much as Isabel is shown to manipulate him. We are left to feel the longing to return to the sort of space where there is little sadness, which is what Elizabeth's symbolizes for Luís Arsenio. The frenetic energy, which is not simply erotic, inside the walls of the brothel invite the reader to witness sheer pleasure take place only for it to be snatched away right at the last moment, leaving both Luís Arsenio and the reader something to chase throughout the rest of the novel. This energy is best described as a space overflowing with artificial joy; when Luís Arsenio first observes the space at the start of the text, we learn that:

> Era otra la alegría del Elizabeth's. Una alegría derramada pero consciente de su existencia casi imposible. Era una alegría de regalo con sonrisas de regalo, con mujeres tan diversas como uno las pudiera imaginar, prestas a hablar y a regalar su presencia la noche entera, a oír atentas y a mirar profundo a los ojos, a esquivar la mirada tan sólo para jugar un ten con ten que terminaría plácidamente en la cama. Esas mujeres eran las responsables de romper la tirantez de los machos. No había tensión, no había vigilia, no había silencio. (Santos-Febres 23)
>
> It was a different kind of joy at Elizabeth's, an overflowing joy that was yet aware of its almost impossible state. The joy was a gift, along with laughter, with women as diverse as one could imagine, ready to talk and to freely give of themselves for the entire night, to listen attentively and gaze deeply into one's eyes, to look away only to begin a game of give and take that would end up gracefully on the bed. These women were responsible for breaking down the tightness in men. There was no tension, no sleeplessness, no silence. [25]

The space, here, reads as one that is built entirely around pleasure and the process of, from men's perspective, feeling in control. However, this description reveals the artificiality of these interactions. They are offering their presence, to play the game if they need to, but which has a predetermined end. The desirability with which Santos-Febres imbues this space, I argue, drives the reader into a sense of security which suggests that this is what we are supposed to draw from the text, throwing us off of Isabel's interiority by building a carefully choreographed experience what leads us along as readers as much as it leads Luís Arsenio.

The reader is then led through an erotic scene where we are made to experience Luís Arsenio's encounter with Minerva, the pace of the pleasure that he experiences and the intimacy she grants him, visiting with her on the day after New Year's Day:

> Minerva arqueó la espalda y le dio a Arsenio una probada del regalo que ella misma se estaba hacienda. Luís Arsenio se desvaneció en un millón de temblores que le surcaron la piel… Luís Arsenio se soltó una risa larga y se quedó allí, asido a aquellas caderas, respirando pesado, perdido en la curvatura de la espalda morena, en las perlitas de sudor que iban saliendo por los poros, en los quejidos de la hembra a quien no le veía la cara, pero como si se la viera, como se le viera los ojos cerrados y la boca entreabierta buscando aire, y las manos enterrándose en la carne de cualquier cosa, perdida en su cadencia, en su humedad, perdida en el roce y el embate que él no iba a cesar de darle, no hasta que la oyera gritar, no hasta que la sintiera empujarse de espaldas buscándolo, trincarse por dentro y después abrirse en palpitaciones para arrancarle a él, a Luis Arsenio, todos los líquidos que le quedaban por dentro. (Santos-Febres 115-116)
>
> Minerva arched her back and gave Arsenio a taste of the gift. Luís Arsenio dissolved into a thousand tremors that plowed through his skin… Luís Arsenio let out a long guffaw and remained there, clutching those hips, breathing heavily, lost in the curves of that dark-skinned back, in the little pearls of sweat that emitted from the pores, in the moans of that woman whose face he could not see, but as if he could see her, see her closed eyes and half-opened mouth seeking air, and the hands burying themselves anywhere, lost in her rhythm, in her wetness, lost in the rubbing and battering that he was not going to let up on, not until he heard her scream, not until he felt her backing up in search of him, wringing herself from the inside and then opening up with palpitations to snatch from him, from Luís Arsenio, all of the juices that were left inside him. [122]

The extended run-on final sentence in this sequence, by not stopping, demonstrates how the sheer pleasure that Minerva imparts onto Luís Arsenio causes the rest of the world to fade away. As the reader, we are left only with the impression that his encounter is the only thing that matters. Meanwhile, all around them Luís Arsenio periodically notices the chatter of Isabel and Don Demetrio in the background making business plans (117) but as readers, we are ushered back to focus on Luís Arsenio, only allowed to glimpse at the action taking place around him. As a result, we can see the way in which we are continually misdirected and distracted so that we forget that we lose access to Isabel's interiority.

Ultimately, this dynamic and the fact that we are made to follow Luís Arsenio makes it appear as if the text revolves around him. Instead, Santos-Febres denies us much of Isabel's perspective to obscure the fact that Luís Arsenio's will is bent around the erotic scenarios that we are made to follow, thus turning him around Isabel through the bodies of the women in Elizabeth's Dancing Place. The fact that, as Santos Febres says, these women are there to "romper la tirantez de los machos" demonstrates to the reader that the prevailing perspective of the narrative is that these women exist for the men, rather than the other way around as we learn to spot through the progression of the text. Santos-Febres describes a night with Minerva where Luís Arsenio had attempted to sleep over with her: "Aquella noche hubiera dado cualquier cosa por ser un jornalero más; cualquier hijo de vecino, realengo y sin nombre. No llevar el que llevaba y que lo anclaba a su estirpe, a su casta. Hubiera dado cualquier cosa por permanecer entre las paredes del Elizabeth's Dancing Place hasta que el mundo que afuera lo llamaba se hiciera polvo y viento." ("That night he would have given anything just to be another worker, any neighbor's son, a stray with no name. Not to be burdened with the name that anchored him to his stock and his caste. He would have given anything to remain within the walls of Elizabeth's Dancing Place until the world that beckoned him from outside turned to wind and dust."; 119; 125) This reflection shows the powerful seductive forces that draw Luís Arsenio into Isabel's space and through his eyes. The use of the past subjunctive and conditional in this passage demonstrates the desire that Luís Arsenio feels towards an experience that Isabel had constructed for him to feel this exact way, thus setting him up to remain in her grasp. Further, the inversion of social roles in Elizabeth sets Luís Arsenio up to crave this desire to give up his elite social position in the interest of solidarity, which is established early on when he realizes that he

needs to relax class and social dynamics in the space to not draw attention to himself through his interactions with his driver (Santos-Febres 21).

6. Decolonizing Desires

This is best expressed as an inversion of the psychological process of colonization described by Fanon in *L'An V de la revolution algérienne* (1959). Fanon describes the ways in which he has observed how colonial society in Algeria functions through both violent and non-violent systems which act to both acculturate and subjugate the colonized into submission and eventual assimilation. Describing the role of women in this process, he suggests that "Dans le programme colonialiste, c'est à la femme que revient la mission historique de bousculer l'homme algérien. Convertir la femme, la gagner aux valeurs étrangères, l'arracher à son statut, c'est à la fois conquérir un pouvoir réel sur l'homme et posséder les moyens pratiques, efficaces, de déstructurer la culture algérienne" ("In the colonialist program, it was the woman whow as given the historic mission of shaking up the Algerian man. Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of destructuring Algerian culture"; 21, Chevalier 39). While Fanon's assessment attributes little agency to Algerian women, he points to the role of women and the roles they accept in a patriarchal colonialist society, which in turn determines which roles the men are willing to accept to keep their status. Though Fanon's application here is different in time and place, the colonial experience of women's power exercised in private that he describes is not unique to Algeria before the revolution. Isabel's brothel served not only as a beacon for power and pleasure, but significant cultural events also took place within its walls, figures such as the singer and activist Pedro Ortiz Dávila were said to come to experience culture (Santos-Febres 26). As such, Isabel's brothel

stands as a bulwark against encroaching American culture, instead drawing American soldiers and sailors in to be wrapped in Puerto Rican culture rather than simply assimilate it on their terms.

In the passage in which Luís Arsenio is forced to leave the brothel, Santos-Febres shows how the black body can be used as a decolonial tool in service of maintaining the local culture while also fostering desire for it. Additionally, the inversion of power she describes in the carnivalesque atmosphere of Elizabeth's Dancing Place, its "alegría," gives women the agency to impact the society which denies them of their humanity outside the walls of the brothel. Thus, Luís Arsenio proclaiming his desire to stay and remain a part of this space permanently shows him having to choose to follow the expressions of culture that women whom he desires are choosing, being willing to give up some of his privilege to do so as he stated above, being willing to give anything to remain until the world ends. This demonstrates a consciousness of the power of her body, what I will go into further detail later. She uses this consciousness to ensure that she can secure her power and status using what she has at her disposal which further demonstrates the lack of options she had to be able to get where she is.

Of course, at the end of the novel we learn that Isabel had planned Luís Arsenio's encounter with Minerva from the beginning to keep him under her thumb, showing the way that the novel characterizes the exploitation of the desire for black bodies as integral to the production and maintenance of power for these marginalized women. Isabel constructs the situation by sending Minerva after Luís Arsenio. After doing so, she observes the scene unfold from the shadows and the reader is granted a very rare glimpse of Isabel's direct perspective: "Allá va el hijo del licenciado, hacia su trampa. A "iniciarse", a hacerse hombre. Allá va a comenzar con el rito de siempre, a comerse su primera mulata, negra para después intentar

dejarla atrás. Allá va a que la carne se le parta en dos, su deseo en dos, lo presiente." ("From her straw throne she watched Minerva take him to the back rooms. To "initiate" him, to make him a man. The same old ritual would be gin again there, to devour his first *mulata, negra* and then attempt to leave her behind. There he goes, and his flesh will split in two, his desire in two, she feels it."; Santos-Febres 332; 348) While this passage clearly shows the reader what Isabel herself was observing, the construction of the scene still keeps us at a distance from Isabel's position. The narrator makes references to the way that Luís Arsenio is following in his father's footsteps, that he gets to taste his "first mulatta" only to find himself unable to stop thinking about her, much in the same way Fernando Fornarís cannot forget Isabel. However, this passage also shows how Isabel intends to hijack this initiation for her own ends: the encounter is a "trampa," a trap. This scene demonstrates how Isabel recognizes that the men she takes in are subtly influenced by the women in the brothel and thus are encouraged to remain affiliated with Puerto Rican culture rather than reject it for better opportunities elsewhere. In short, the latent desire that Isabel plants in men's heads leaves them with a strong reason to keep ties with the island. This is made clear through the characterization of a brothel Luís Arsenio visits with his friend Esteban in Washington, D.C. after he has left the island for some time: "El bar, contra una esquina, reverbaba lleno de mujeres perfumadas de más, negras en su mayoría, con trajes de satén barato. Algunas se contoneaban al compás de una música triste que derramaba la garganta de un guitarrista, acompañándose de un bajo y de otro que al fondo tocaba una tímida percusión… Lugar familiar" ("The bar, in a corner, reverberated, crowded with over-perfumed women, mostly black, in cheap satin dresses. Some of them swayed their hips to the rhythm of a melancholy tune that spilled out of the mouth of a guitarist, accompanied by a bassist and another one in the back who played a timid percussion… A familiar place." 274; 285). While he

makes the internal comparison to Elizabeth's, comparing the language with that frenetic energy of the "alegría" of Elizabeth's (24), it becomes clear that this space is, while possibly comparable in function, nothing like the sort of flowering celebration that they experience in Elizabeth's. With this, Santos-Febres suggests to readers that the way that Puerto Rico has remained unique and resistant to cultural subjugation has been through the way that its black bodies have sought to maintain hooks in the minds of the island's white criollo elite.

7. Mystic Sainthood: Seductiveness, Submission and Syncretic Religion

Isabel's seductive nature is portrayed, even by other narrative perspectives, as nearly mystical, whether the authors who wrote about her life view it as evil or not. The legendary status of her seductive prowess is the fulcrum around which her life revolves in most narratives about her. This facet of her life, while of course significant in Santos-Febres's interpretation of her role in history, is not the sole facet of Isabel's being. Moreover, Santos-Febres takes pains to examine the ways in which her mystic aura is carefully maintained through both her ingenuity surrounding business and prowess as well as the aesthetic that she cultivates to keep an air of godliness about her. These tendencies, combined, show how Isabel's persona is one which is constructed around her to give her an aura of godliness both African and Christian to subvert the dominant cultural tendencies that seek to Americanize and whiten Puerto Rican culture, actions which further marginalize her already precarious communities.

This trend of admiration is not something that is simply affirmed externally through comments about her body, Isabel herself is aware of her form and seems to take pride in it, noting the value to herself. Even as a young girl, Isabel is shown to be deeply aware of her own beauty. She compares herself to the young woman whose family has taken her in, thinking:

> Todavía la niña Tous era un amasijo de carnes sin forma. En cambio, a Isabel le crecía un cuerpo espigado, de carnes duras, con sus pechitos a punto de salir

> disparados entre las costillas. Criaba caderas anchas, anunciando a la mujer que vendría a habitar las carnes de Isabel, de un tinte azul bruñido…. No pudo evitar mirarse las carnes y sonreír, haciendo un plan mental de cómo eran mejores que las de la niña Virginia. Más fuertes. Duras. (Santos-Febres 76)
>
> The Tous girl was still an amorphous jumble of flesh. Isabel, on the other hand, was growing a slender body, with hardy flesh, and her breasts were at the point of shooting out from her ribs. Her hips were beginning to widen, announcing the woman who would live in her flesh, in that shade of burnished blue… She couldn't help looking at her flesh and smiling, making mental calculations of how it was superior to the girl Virginia's. Stronger, "hardier." (81)

Not only does Santos-Febres characterize her body as beautiful through its striking and nearly surreal blackness (constantly described as blue-black throughout the text), here she shows us that Isabel's beauty is constantly being contrasted against that of white women and they are left wanting. Virginia, a name which implies purity as much as desirability, is described as an "amasijo de carnes sin forma" which contrasts starkly to the fullness and incipient adult body that Isabel would take. Further, it demonstrates the way in which the black body is portrayed as desirable in this context, something to be admired and used, even if the person who inhabits it is marginalized. This trend is not exclusive to Santos-Febres's characterization, however, suggesting that her ability to amass power did indeed lay in her desirability and the way that she was able to wield it.

Méndez Panedas demonstrates in her reading of *Nuestra Señora,* "El sujeto caribeño o la seducción de la alteridad en *Nuestra señora de la noche* de Mayra Santos-Febres" (2009) that Isabel is portrayed as a seductive figure who inhabits the saintliness of the patroness of Cuba, the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre[35] and the Orisha Ochún, the Orisha of love in the Afro-Cuban religion Regla de Ocha. Méndez Panedas takes pains to point out that this Orisha figure is

[35] Our Lady of Charity, as she is referred to in English, is a figure who is affiliated with miners, particularly black and mixed-race workers both during and after slavery in the mining town of El Cobre. She is housed in the Basílica de la Virgen de Caridad del Cobre in Santiago de Cuba.

affiliated with the river and is associated with destiny, beauty, and fertility, all of which Isabel proliferates through her brothel alongside the Rio Portugués and her own self-image of herself that she paints. At the same time, Isabel is often affiliated with the color blue which typically associates her with the dark-skinned Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre while at the same time the color yellow can be found stitched within, which is a typical color presented with the Orisha: "Su piel era azul, azul Pantera, azul sombra de ojo hambriento. La hacía resaltar el traje Amarillo en seda cruda y las manillas de oro macizo que le colgaban del brazo que sostenía una boquilla de cigarros… Sabía además que su piel era una provocación y que bastaba mirarla para impresionar a cualquiera" ("Her skin was blue, panther blue, blue like the shadow of a hungering eye. The yellow dress in raw silk made her stand out, as did the solid-gold bracelets dangling on her arm, which held a cigarette holder… She also knew that her skin was a temptation and that a mere gaze at it would impress anyone"; Santos-Febres 24; 24). The interweaving of yellow, a color for which Isabel demonstrates her own fascination throughout the text, such as in her attraction to Isaac (166) and her own mother's eyes (36), it is clear that she views the color as somehow special and as one which draws people into her orbit. Luís Arsenio's observation of her body affirms this effect, particularly against her nearly surreal skin. Méndez Panedas explains that this phenomenon through the way in which Isabel embodies Ochún: "Ochún es una deidad que no posee límites en su juego seductor, es la diosa del amor. Ríe pícaramente mientras se sabe mirada y deseada por los hombres; pero, a pesar de que éste es su rasgo fundamental, la diosa encarna también la independencia femenina, la dominación erótica y la sexualidad libre, libertaria e independiente" ("Ochún is a deity that does not possess limits in her seduction game, she is the goddess of love. She laughs cunningly while she knows herself looked at and desired by men; but, while this is her fundamental characteristic, the goddess also embodies feminine

independence, erotic domination and open sexuality, libertarian and independent"; Méndez Panedas 6; my trans.). This inversion requires a continual affiliation with the culture which is being preserved within the walls of the brothel (both Yoruba/Vodoun practices and Afro-Puerto Rican culture). This affiliation serves as a bulwark against which the flourishing of marginalized groups can grow while simultaneously *appearing* to be embodying a role which she is required to play in order to maintain the power which she attains through sinful means, which she achieves through her blue-black skin helping her associate with the Virgin Mary, specifically the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre.

As the title of the novel suggests, the narrative is full of references to Catholicism and saintliness which weave into the "sacrilege" that Isabel's line of work represents in modern Catholic dogma. The novel's two first person voices, Montse and Cristina, are more closely affiliated with the Virgin Mary either through direct comparison or dialogue with her. Many of Cristina's chapters come in the form of prayer, often seeking to strike Isabel down for the role she played in the creation of her loveless marriage (Santos-Febres 104). But the novel's title also suggests an irony in the way that "Our Lady" is presented. Indeed, while Montse directly confuses herself with the Virgen de Montserrat to other people, on which Roberto has to correct her (Santos-Febres 237), Isabel is more often given aesthetic markers which directly suggest her proximity to the Virgen de Caridad de Cobre, but as an inversion of her saintliness. When Luís Arsenio first sees her in Elizabeth's Dancing Place, her physical characteristics are almost like a challenge to Mary, rather than appearing humbly, Santos-Febres describes her as "una mujer imponente" (24) before going on to describe the irreality of her beauty and her blue-black skin, which I examine above. Aware of the fact that she was "una provocación", while she is still shown to be godlike in her presence, again suggesting that while she is indeed holy, her holiness

does not spring from the same source which drove both Montse and Cristina insane in their submission to men. Isabel's story is thus made to be the inverse of a martyr narrative, the way that Cristina and Montse characterize themselves, in its role as a contribution to the historical archive by being both semi-mythical in its presentation of her abilities to use her body and those bodies she cultivates to seduce and control men and its refusal to look backwards with any nostalgia. At the same time, Isabel does not just draw on Christian traditions like the tragic figure of Montse and instead draws her power from goddess figures such as Ochún which are a part of her genealogical past as the descendant of slaves, thus presenting her as a martyr for the secular goal of consecrating Puerto Rico's African culture as a major contributor to its national character.

These aesthetic markers ascribed to Isabel's body are not simply an accident: Santos-Febres characterizes Isabel as not just a body but a brilliant, bookish young woman who was interested in political theory and labor organizing just as much as popular culture, which also suggests that Isabel would know how to manipulate her own body in such a way to manipulate these signs. In "Las niñas del Caribe y la 'conciencia corporal': Apuntes para una descolonización encarnada" (2017), Nadia Celis Salgado describes the ways in which the body can be used as a site of decolonization specifically because of the ways in which it is used as a site of oppression. In essence, Salgado shows that Santos Febres's text explores subjects who attempt to navigate the power politics of their time and place and the roles that their bodies play in those politics. Salgado states that "Al inscribir la batalla de niñas por vivir en 'un cuerpo propio', las escritoras ponen de relieve las distintas fuerzas que circunscriben la sexualidad de sujetos históricamente explotados bajo la norma colonial, racial y heteropatriarcal que dio lugar a la pirámide social caribeña" ("In writing the battle over the right of girls to live in 'their own body', the writers put distinct forces in prominence which circumscribe the sexuality of

historically explited subjects in colonial, racial and heteropatriarchal norms which assigned place in the Caribbean social pyramid"; 90; my trans.). In this interpretation, Isabel recognizes that in the act of "playing along" with her status as a black woman and having her body reduced to sexual desire, she can actually circumvent the restrictions placed on her and draw her own boundaries beneath the surface which is an indicator of her bodily consciousness[36]. She makes this point in her conversation to don Demetrio when she says that she does not really think about love and relationships and does not care much that her life will be lonely: "Quiero ser una mujer de medios, montar mi propio negocio… Ay no, ni parejos, ni hijos, ni nada. No me quiero ver regalando barrigas, porque no las puedo mantener" ("I want to be a woman of means, I want to own my own business… Oh no, no partners, no kids, nothing. I don't want to end up having to give up newborns because I can't support them."; Santos-Febres 85; 91). Santos-Febres demonstrates Isabel's intelligence and ability to use her body clearly in the way that she is able to amass power on her own simply through her body and those bodies of the women who she first sought to protect and then employ. The power this grants her is considerable and it helps her maintain her air of mystery:

[36] I borrow this term from Salgado who has been developing it for a number of years as a way to better explain how black women's sexuality in Caribbean culture is inscribed with the history of pleasure and violence of which black women's experience with sex in the region has been centralized. She describes Isabel's characterization by Santos Febres as being a figure *par excellence* who understands the role of black women's bodies and uses that to her advantage as such: "Su sofisticado manejo de estas fuerzas delata, por un lado, el rol político del control del cuerpo en medio de la estructura colonial, poscolonial y neocolonial, al igual que la violencia simbólica, física y sexual con la que se ha ejercido ese control sobre los cuerpos de las mujeres negras. Por otro lado, la lectura de los cuerpos que le permite a Isabel administrar el deseo sugiere un conocimiento profundo de la polivalencia de la sexualidad en el Caribe, testimonio de lo que Santos Febres denomina "una filosofía afrodiaspórica", que concibe la sexualidad como "fuerza social que trabaja el cuerpo desde el espacio de la negociación; tú negocias con las otras fuerzas a través de lo material y lo erótico" ("Her sophisticated management of these forces denounces, on one hand, the political role of the body in the colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial structure as a means of control, as much as it denounces the symbolic, physical and sexual violence which this control exercises over the bodies of black women. On the other hand, the Reading of the bodies which permits Isabel to manage desire suggests a profound understanding of the polyvalence of sexuality in the Caribbean, testimony to what Santos-Febres calls "an afrodiasporic philosophy," which conceives of sexuality as a "social force which works with the body as a negotiating tool; you negotiate with other forces with the material and the erotic"'; 227; my trans.).

> El bar estaba lleno a capacidad. Isabel encendió otro cigarrillo. No le gusta el sabor del tabaco en su boca, ni se traga el humo, pero le sirve el efecto en que la envuelve, una mujer cubierta en la neblina de un humo que de repente desaparece. Su nube se convierte en el escenario de su aparición. … pero su bar estaba lleno de gente importante. Allá al fondo, un senador de la nueva coalición unionista se daba algunos tragos con un juez federal. En la esquina opuesta el representante Merced, del Distrito #4 discutir estrategias de partido con un líder de la Cámara del Comercio. Mae Lin le acababa de abrir la Puerta a otros dos pejes gordos. (Santos-Febres 330)
>
> The bar was filled to capacity. Isabel lit another cigarette. She didn't like the flavor of tobacco in her mouth, but she made use of the effect, a woman covered in a fog of smoke that suddenly disappears. Her cloud became the stage of her apparition… But her bar was full of important people. There in the back, a senator from the new Unionist coalition drank with a federal judge. In the opposite corner, Representative Merced from the Fouth District discussed party strategies with the leader of the chamber of commerce. The hostess had just opened the door to two other influential personages. (345-346)

This view of the bar demonstrates how important Isabel and her brothel are. She is witness to and facilitator of important political and social events in Puerto Rico because of this space, which started because of the way that she used her body and later, the bodies of others. The use of her body becomes a site at which she can negotiate her position. Isabel, then, clearly is able to use her body and those of the women in her orbit intelligently. She cynically exploits its charm to achieve what her brain is capable of and in doing so draws the potential for new futures through the decolonization of the body.

The narrative goes as far as to show that Isabel's potential is effective but limited, effectively demonstrating that hers were tools provided by the master, which ultimately would not take him down. To wit, as Santos-Febres said, Isabel is not a feminist figure; she was a ruthless capitalist who exploited the bodies of women to make her own gains (353). When she dies, she is refused burial in the church cemetery and must be interred elsewhere. Given her contributions to the church to keep her detractors quiet and the law from harassing her enterprise,

Bishop McManus[37] is portrayed as an antagonist trying to deny her a place in history, effectively attempting to erase her from the picture. Having raised Luís Arsenio's consciousness through Minerva and making some amends to Roberto, however, she is able to take her place in history because she cultivated a legacy network through these individuals that can show up and push back against her erasure by claiming their solidarity (and familial ties) with her to secure her in Ponce's memory. This is further reinforced by the spectacular attendance of her funeral which allows her to be seen for her actual role in the community rather than having her status circumscribed by the powerful institutions which would have just as soon preferred to forget that she had ever existed. Though her burial happens on a rainy day:

> Con todo y eso, una multitud se dio cita en los prendidos de la casa del Barrio Bélgica. Eran personas de todos los caminos de la vida. Putas niñas y matronas, antiguos clientes que se quedaron debiéndole a Isabel algún favor, representantes de todos los partidos políticos, ancianos y lavanderas, cantantes de poca monta y artistas de renombre internacional. Todos fueron a darle el último adiós a La Negra. La cola para entrar al responso era enorme y enorme la comitiva que esperaba afuera a que empezara el desplazamiento que recorriera el pueblo entero. Bajo paraguas, acodados en los dinteles de las casas, apertrechando de cuerpos el balcón de la casona, una muchedumbre esperaba silenciosa. (Santos-Febres 341-342)
>
> But still, a large crowd showed up at the house in the Bélgica barrio. There were people from every walk of life there. Girl prostitutes and matrons, old clients who still owed Isabel some favor, representatives from all the political parties, old men and washerwomen, small-time singers, and artists with international reputations. All of them came to say their last goodbyes to La Negra. The line to get into the prayer session was enormous, as was the entourage outside awaiting the journey across the town. The porch of the mansion filled with people under umbrellas, and the large crowd waited silently. (352)

The influence that she held over the entire city made itself known not through her own actions necessarily, but through the actions of those who passed through her influence in Elizabeth's

[37] McManus was a genuine historical figure, the bishop of Ponce from 1947 until 1963, an outspoken critic of Isabel's, he insisted that the Church should have some say over affairs in Puerto Rico's governance, which Santos-Febres insinuated in *Nuestra señora de la noche* to include the continued operation of Elizabeth's Dancing Place.

Dancing Place. Her brothel, a synecdoche of black women's bodies including her own, has the most influence in impacting and shaping Puerto Rican culture and history through its handling of important and unimportant people. In this way, Santos-Febres shows how the impact of black bodies on the island creates the conditions which allowed the culture to continue to flourish and develop in the face of new masters shaping the island around them. Santos-Febres has, in effect, bent the narrative of the island around the bodies of black women.

Even after moving on from prostitution to being the madam of her own enterprise, Isabel's status as a goddess needs to remain the same. The narrative shows Isabel taking in the scene at Elizabeth's while simultaneously putting on a performance to her patrons to keep the illusion going, marking the first time the reader receives any evidence that Isabel may have put up a façade. For example, in the passage examined above describing Isabel in her element, Isabel lights a cigarette, even though she dislikes smoking to the point that she will not inhale the smoke, but she realizes that it plays a role in her self-mythification. In essence, she plays a role to maintain her power within the inverted, carnivalesque world that she created within the walls of her brothel. This front gives her the ability to blend into the background: "no le gusta el sabor del tabaco en su boca, ni se traga el humo, pero sirve para el efecto en que la envuelve, una mujer cubierta…" (330), she thus becomes a presence within the bar as if she is, as the title suggests, its patron saint or as Branche and Alicea suggest, an embodiment of the Orisha Ochún, thus embodying the traits of divinity, femininity, beauty and love. The scenes between Luís Arsenio and Minerva, for example, display an intense eroticism which borders on the mystical, reinforced by the fact that Isabel recognized the potential of Minerva for manipulating men (Santos-Febres 332). In the brothel, then, the quiet space where Isabel is seated gives the reader small glimpses into her quiet interiority and the ways in which her survival equally imprints onto

the culture as the boisterous resistance that is more often remembered, as elucidated in Quashie's reading. At the same time, this consecration works in two ways: not only does it portray her as a saintly figure because she protects the marginalized, but it also helps the reader better understand her presence as a human being rather than a living legend. In this way, her portrayal throughout the text represents a kind of unsentimental consecration which allows the reader to examine the time period that she comes from more critically, having borne witness to the conditions which she had to endure to gain as much power as she did.

Isabel is also characterized in her interactions with Fernando Fornarís as refusing to fall for any tricks of men, being grounded in her womanhood in a way that gives her the upper hand. Instead, she allows Fernando to believe that she's in love with him in the interest of getting something out of him for her liquor and prostitution ring. She cynically exploits him as a young woman after her romantic interest Isaac, a soldier, who seems to be the last person she loved, also saddled her with significant debt in the form of a house she couldn't afford and isolation which led her into near-starvation. After Fernando begins telling her to drop formalities and address him as an equal rather than as "don" Fernando, she thinks, "Dejó que se le perdiera la mente en el horizonte, entre los números y las cifras que le bailaban en la cabeza. Hablaría con Leonor en cuanto llegara a la casa. Tendrían las dos juntas que hacer economías para poder comenzar con la operación" ("She let her mind wander to the horizon, in the numbers and figures that danced in her head. She would speak with Leonor as soon as she got home. They would both have to economize to begin their operations"; 204; 214). While Fernando has expressed deep affection for her with this action as black people would rarely be granted an opportunity to address a white person as an equal, Isabel sees it as an opportunity to secure her future. Her previous experiences with men have shown her that the only way to gain anything out of this

exchange in the long-term is by leveraging her position while she has a grip on his heart. This thought and the fact that she must let herself follow it shows that with her entryway into Fernando's heart, she finally has some hope to establish herself and begin making money from the other marks which she has readily identified through her ex-husband, the soldier: the ever-increasing population of American servicemen hanging out in and around Ponce because of the development of Loosey Fields. This entrepreneurial characterization demonstrates her ability to identify her desirability and exploit it in the interest of producing the outcome that she wants out of her highly marginalized position. This process requires, in essence, that she use a source of her oppression, her black body, to allow men to think they are in control while she, in fact, uses them, revealing herself as a figure of femininity and great strategic thinking.

8. Isabel at Arm's Length

On the other hand, this cynical consciousness of the folly of powerful men comes from experience, as a consequence of the traumas and tribulations Isabel faced in her youth. Isabel's younger life is marked by two major tragedies which help demonstrate what is in store for Afro Puerto Rican women who are left without the means to find a better life for themselves by any means necessary. After the death of her godmother, she finds herself in a particularly vulnerable position. She is still working for the Tous family, for whom she had been contracted to work by her godmother, meaning she would have nowhere to run if something went wrong. It is at this point, where she is both vulnerable and less watched-over, that the father of the house Aurelio Tous attempts, but ultimately fails, to rape her. The scene is written in what feels like slow motion, operating slowly from the moment that Aurelio enters her room to the point that she is thrown on the bed as if we are required to experience every detail of Isabel's tragedy. The denouement of the scene ends as such:

> Aurelio Tous la levantó en vilo y la depositó sobre el colchón, le quitó el camisón, lo tiró al suelo. Isabel mantuvo los ojos cerrados pero sentía el peso exacto de los ojos de Don Aurelio mirándola despacio, como queriendo aprenderse de memoria el contraste de su piel contra las sábanas… Una luz se escurrió por las rendijas, recortando una silueta contra el dintel. Brazos en jarras, jadeo desafiante. La voz de Doña Georgina se hizo oír contra las paredes del cuartito… -- Tal parece, Aurelio que te equivocas de alcoba. (Santos-Febres 98)
>
> Aureliano Tous picked her up and put her on the mattress, took off her nightshirt, threw it on the floor. Isabel kept her eyes closed, but she felt the exact weight of Don Aureliano's eyes deliberately looking at her, as if wanting to memorize the contrast of her skin with the bedsheets… A light seeped in through the crack, outlining a silhouette by the door frame. Doña Georgina's voice made itself heard on the walls of the little room, from end to end… "Aurelio, I think you have the wrong room." (104)

While harrowing enough on its own, the outcome for Isabel also constitutes a punishment. The next day she is summarily marched out of the house, told that she is no longer needed, and her things are packed for her while her friend Lorenza informs her that "Te salvaste por un pelo. Si la señora no hubiera llegado a tiempo, el patrón te hubiera comido como a un pajarito" ("You were saved by a hair. If the doña hadn't arrived in time, the *patrón* would have eaten you like a little bird"; 99; 105). While Lorenza recognizes the tragedy of what is occurring in front of her, she also recognizes that this is a much preferrable experience to the sure sexual assault Isabel would have experienced otherwise. In essence, Lorenza gives her the grim reality that the Tous family firing her was preferrable to Aurelio raping her.

This scene thus demonstrates the narrow and degrading choices available to black women at the time and the way that those possible outcomes in turn paved the way for Isabel's future. Davis describes Isabel's experience as a common occurrence among black domestic labor in the Americas:

> Since slavery, the vulnerable condition of the household worker has continued to nourish many of the lingering myths about the "immorality" of Black women. In this classic "catch-22" situation, household work is considered degrading because it has been disproportionately performed by Black women, who in turn are

> viewed as "inept" and "promiscuous." But their ostensible ineptness and promiscuity are myths which are repeatedly confirmed by the degrading work they are compelled to do. (Davis 92-93)

In the passage depicting Aurelio's attempted rape of Isabel, the slowly emerging details convey the danger that Isabel is in during the scene, but at the same time signal the mundane nature of it all. It also reveals to the reader that she is taking notes of what is happening, as she comes to understand that that the desirability of her body is an asset which she can use for leverage against men, preferably in situations which she is much more able to control, as will happen later with Fernando Fornarís when she gets out ahead of his insinuations and seduces him first, thus eliminating the danger he represents to her as her boss.

While Isabel is shown to be able to use her body to attain her goals through clever means, this does not save her from the fact that the state still finds ways to impose strict and brutal regulations on the bodies of black women which strip them of their agency. Rather, it shows simply that Isabel was able to find ways around it through solidarity and strategy. Davis points out in *Women, Race and Class* that there are few places in the world where the female population has been experimented on for birth control (largely through sterilization programs) as much as in Puerto Rico. While making the point that while bodily autonomy is a goal that black and white feminists should share in theory, she argues that the systems devised by the reproductive rights movement led by Margaret Sanger starting in 1939 amount to eugenics and as much denial of bodily autonomy as anti-abortion laws would afford (Davis 219). One of the principal systems of oppression in the early 20th century in Puerto Rico was the Hygiene Regulations, a series of laws meant in theory to control the spread of venereal disease but in practice existed to control women's bodies and harass sex workers.

Designed as a way to strictly control the movements and bodies of prostitutes, the Reglamento de Higiene de la Prostitución para la Ciudad de Ponce (1894) stated in articles 20 and 21 that "En la Alcaldía se practicarán los trabajos correspondientes de las casas de lenocinio estableciendo los registros correspondientes de las mujeres que se dedican a este tráfico… Además de estos registros se llevará otro en la sección que comprenda los nombres de las amas y puntos en que tengan establecidas sus casas" ("In the city hall the corresponding works will be enacted in the bordellos, establishing corresponding registers of the women who dedicate themselves to this traffic… In addition to these registers there will be another which contains the names of the masters and the locations at which they have their houses established"; *Reglamento de Higiene de la Prostitución para la Ciudad de Ponce* 6; my trans.). While Isabel is sitting with a group of women at the laundry, she hears them discussing the pain and suffering they experienced at the hands of the law. One of them tells the story of her cousin who was picked up by the health department,

> muchacha, no la ha tocado ni el aire, la agarraron una noche que a su patrona le dio por que se quedara remendando unas sábanas. Tuvo que ir mi tío y dos vecinos a reclamarla al cuartel y ni así la soltaron… Cuando se dieron cuenta de que era [virgen], la soltaron. Pero quedó mal mi prima, porque en el barrio todo el mundo se enteró y ella, de la vergüenza, se fugó para la montaña donde nadie la conociera. Ahora se muere de hambre recogiendo café por fardos. Tan bien que le iba aquí en el pueblo. (Santos-Febres 162)

> *muchacha*, who hasn't even been touched by the air, was grabbed one night she had to stay late because her *patrona* made her darn some sheets. My uncle and two neighbors had to go claim her at the police station and even then they wouldn't let her go. 'But you see, my daughter is a virgin,' Uncle Chabelo told them, and my cousin screaming while they stuck that thing in between her legs. When they found out that it was true, they let her go. But she didn't come out of it well, because everyone found out about it in the barrio, and out of shame, she fled to the mountains where nobody knew her. Now she is starving, picking coffee beans by the bale. And it was going so well for her in town… (172)

The brutality of the story that Isabel hears about womanhood and blackness in Puerto Rico demonstrates that her tactics are also borne out of a need to combat and challenge controls against women through solidarity. While the laws were supposed to only harass prostitutes, in effect they became ways for black women's bodies to be more strictly controlled and stigmatized. Isabel uses Elizabeth's not only as a space for gathering wealth and power for herself, but she clearly uses it as a shield for the women inside who are given the private and safe space to engage in sex work while she can use her abilities to manipulate men to render them less harmful to the women who work in the brothel. Towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Minerva was rescued, again, from an experience that we are not allowed to fully understand and only Minerva is allowed to interpolate, saying "La rescató de un tío que la estaba desgraciando" ("She had saved her from an uncle who was making her miserable"; Santos-Febres 331; 347). This scene demonstrates again how the space that Santos-Febres constructs in Elizabeth's serves as a vector for solidarity because it symbolizes taking control rather than submitting to an imposed control.

This understanding of the power of her body and the bodies of black women is how Isabel is able to fashion a different future in which the stand-in for the central, patriarchal figure of Puerto Rico, represented by Luís Arsenio, has to prostrate himself ask for the honor to be her pallbearer by posturing himself as family, as demonstrated by the way in which the crowd originally rejects him by proclaiming him to not be a close ally only for Manolito to recognize and accept him. This is a direct result of the readers having to follow Luís Arsenio's narrative so that Santos-Febres could keep Isabel's life more obscured from the prying eyes of the reader. Rather than being allowed to occupy her experience, we are invited to stand in solidarity with her. In effect, Santos-Febres describes the ways in which desire and black bodies have the ability

to manipulate men who would seek to oppress those bodies into doing what they desire. This sort of honey-trap demonstrates how, even at the margins of society, these black women have massively consequential impacts on history through their institutions, culture, and political power. Afro-Puerto Ricans, particularly the women of their community, are shown to be passing Puerto Rico's history around in their hands and creating the groundwork for its future. It is this knowledge which gives way to understanding that Isabel is able to manipulate history through a tool which those who would seek to colonize her body *think* they control. Using the master's tool, Isabel reclaims her interiority, her power, and her rightful place in history while passing on the new tools she has created so that someone who comes after her can finish the job of dismantling the master's house.

9. Conclusions

It is at this point that we need to revisit Audre Lorde's most famous words and examine if Isabel has lived up to the ideas proposed. Lorde implores her audience that,

> Those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde 2)

We as readers might then ask whether Santos-Febres believes that Isabel was using the master's tools or her own to gain power and influence. As I have argued throughout this chapter, Isabel's characterization and the contextualization of suffering and passion in black women's experience at the time reveals what Santos-Febres believes Isabel can show us about Puerto Rico's history. While Isabel's status allows her, indeed, to beat men at their own game for a long while, her contribution to the canon and what makes her into a mythical figure within it boils down to the

fact that the tool she uses, black bodies, is shown to be a powerful way to mold new tools that have never been used by the master. Most important among these is a declaration of familiarity by a powerful white man whose economic power secures her half-black child's future as an equal to a white criollo through their shared business. Thus, she creates the conditions for someone down the line to be able to dismantle his house. The bodily consciousness that Isabel uses opens the door to new futures Santos-Febres offers at the end of the text when Luís Arsenio and Nene carry Isabel's body shoulder-to-shoulder. The tool that she used to gain her status, her body, breaks down as soon as she is denied space at the burial plot, but that paves the way for the two brothers to use their new relationship to forge a new future for Puerto Rico.

Saints in the Christian tradition rarely succeed in their goals, which is why their unshakable faith leads them to martyrdom. Isabel's life and death are no exception, and her consecration as "Our Lady of the Night" ultimately comes as a result of her role as the madam of Elizabeth's Dancing Place, a space in which Santos-Febres inverts the hierarchies which could have bound Isabel to a life of destitution. There is, of course, a subtle irony in this proclamation, as ladies of the night are a euphemistic way to refer to prostitutes—often construed as an impious profession. At the same time, her veneration as a popular saint is uncontested. The historical Luberza's popularity and historical impact in Ponce is well-documented, a street in the San Antón neighborhood where Elizabeth's once stood is named after her as "Calle Isabel la Negra". Isabel is converted to the patroness of the marginalized, protector of women from both the state and domestic oppression and a nexus of power which runs parallel to the structures which are designed to oppress women. In that space, men's bodies rotate around her narrative and are manipulated through her strategic use of the black bodies of her women to create the space for genuine change. In this way, I argue that Isabel takes tools from the master and breaks them

down, back into constituent parts to be reformed, to create the potential for new futures using the same materials. While Isabel is not able to outrun the master's game, she does ultimately succeed in building a tool to be passed on which can do what she strove to do. It is because of Isabel's power and ingenuity, as well as her manipulation of the systems of oppression, that her successors can write a new future for Puerto Rico.

Further, Santos-Febres succeeds in creating an enigmatic, highly ambiguous text that tends to escape a broader understanding by scholars who seek to fully break it down. As Sommer writes, "Always, we assume in our enlightened secular habits that the books are happy to have our attention, like so many wallflowers lined up to be selected for a quick turn or an intimate tête-à-tête. If the book seems easy, if it allows possession without a struggle and cancels the promise of self-flattery for an expert reading, our hands may go limp at the covers. Easy come easy go." (Sommer 407) I contend that these "easy readings", suggesting that a novel fails to challenge the prevailing tendencies of Latin American myth or that it revolves around its white and male characters, fail to closely examine what the text demands of its readers. As Sommer suggests, we are not invited to stand in Isabel's place but instead are invited to stand next to her in solidarity, to recognize her struggle and the fact that we cannot share in her experience or even approach a genuine understanding of it. In this regard, Santos-Febres constructs a narrative that, much like the tools she portrays for Isabel, *looks* like a tool used by the master: historiographic metafiction. In reality, the novel inverts the entire premise of the genre and instead creates an archive through a demystification of a figure whose saintly aspects are revealed to be all too human. Santos-Febres's interpretation of Luberza Oppenheimer thus cuts new pathways for black women in Puerto Rican history by showing the reader the fantastic and mundane ways that

they were able to thrive and inscribe themselves into history in the face of unthinkable, incomprehensible brutality and oppression.

V. Conclusion: Unwinding Time in a Foreclosing World

Throughout this project I have examined how three black woman authors who exist within the Global South—Werewere Liking, Paulina Chiziane, and Mayra Santos-Febres—all engage with the generative process of imagining alternative futures by writing themselves into the past and the present. They achieve this imagination by examining gender relations, colonial and postcolonial relations to women, the role of subaltern women in governing narratives, and the ways in which they invert and sabotage power structures to build alternative futures. They contest patriarchal visions of the present and the future, fighting back against both personal and general perceived notions of women and their roles in society. They achieve all of this in the service of redefining boundaries around womanhood and femininity to give women the space to imagine better futures through the information that they gain in the process of undergoing this precarity. Ultimately, they succeed in challenging both the patriarchal visions of the future and the governing narratives surrounding women's roles in the past and present through their ability to trouble and hijack genres of writing as well as institutions for their own gain.

In Chapter 1, I show how Werewere Liking is engaging in an affirmative sabotage in *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* by using the ritual as a space for generating an initiation process as a sort of theater production to guide the reader on an initiation process through which she puts the narrator, the misovire. In effect, she creates an entirely new style of the French language to engage in this ritual. She sabotages language to create a new vision for the future out of an oppressive framework which limits the imagination, in this case, the French language and European mythologies. In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how in *Niketche: Uma história de poligamia* Paulina Chiziane twists what is traditionally considered a patriarchal institution, polygyny, and effectively turns it into a power-sharing network between the narrator and her co-wives so that

they can build an effective power base which allows them the flexibility to break free from their abusive husbands in a post-civil war Mozambique. In Chapter 3, I show that Mayra Santos-Febres sabotages the purpose of the historical novel to introduce a more nuanced and human-like vision of a notorious madam in Ponce, Isabel la Negra to replace the larger-than-life, grotesque and legendary version of her present in the historical archive up until then. Santos-Febres sabotages the historical archive by placing a fully-fledged human who used her body to cynically exploit those who would desire it.

In the sum of their parts, these narratives all accomplish their goals using Spivak's concept of affirmative sabotage, a term which she coins. In her conceptualization, she demonstrates how Fanon intentionally misread Hegel's work to better fit the dynamics of colonial subjugation. Spivak in turn proposes to read Fanon in such a way that his concepts can be turned towards postcolonial/decolonial feminism. She argues that this rereading can be used to read texts more imaginatively, giving us as readers the agency to imagine new futures and utilizations for even ossified texts. By using genres, narratives, and historical archives for uses other than their original intention, Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres all succeed in hijacking these established narratives and rerouting them to serve their purposes, which allows them to envision a better future through this re-writing of the past and present. Affirmative sabotage works to intentionally read texts "incorrectly" to challenge prevailing theories about what exactly they mean, allowing for new interpretations to fall out of even old texts. These tools operate just as well in the hands of other marginalized people, who can see their own struggle as part of the chain of liberation necessary to create a better world; those other visions of a better world are just as necessary to applying this radical imagination as praxis in the material world. This praxis

can then be utilized to open up alternative future pathways that exist along temporal lines that have not yet been followed.

Affirmative sabotage has an inherently generative quality that has been described in several different concepts that all surround the notion of critical consciousness as examined by Paulo Freire. Freire argues that engaging in praxis as an oppressed subject, like the protagonists of the narratives I examine, is an act of love which is inherently generative. The protagonists in the novels are portrayed as finding these pathways by responding directly to their material conditions and sharing that information with similarly marginalized people in their orbit as an educational tool. They then use the surrounding culture as a foil rather than responding to crises through reactive policies. I define this as grounded normativity, which is a concept developed by Glen Coulhard and further elaborated by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson about using material conditions to respond to immediate problems on a day-to-day basis, rooted in the indigenous practice of politics-as-living. Each of the authors in this project utilizes a similar response mechanism. This style of responding to things as they happen on the ground allows for the writers to describe a sort of dynamism which is necessary for writing a better future out reconceptualizations of the past and present which fit women in them better.

The scope of this argument is rooted in the fact that I read these texts through the transnational lens of the Global South as theorized by Mahler. She explains that the Global South is not a region but rather describes a reterritorialized space that represents the uneven development of all places throughout the world. Thus, the Global North and Global South are mixed together and built on top of and around each other, only describing a place's access to capital. As a result, the interterritorial, transnational form of study that I engage in throughout this project contributes to this same sort of thinking, allowing us to find unique connections

between regions that may not have previously been considered. This building of connections broadens the network available to these authors which in turn allows their ideas to travel beyond the bounds placed on them by regionalist or generic boundaries and allows for a globalized, transnational network which builds critical consciousness through its information networks.

While Liking, Chiziane and Santos-Febres engage in goals that could be classified as feminist, the fact that two of them (Chiziane and Liking) do not identify themselves as such and even eschew the label troubles this notion. They insist instead that they are either feminine writers, in the case of Chiziane, or that they view themselves without gender throughout the writing process, as Liking has stated. In part, this has to do with the fact that in their interpretations of history, African women's liberation movements stem from local traditions and are wary of the engagement of outsiders who can either appropriate, hijack, or take credit for the development of their homegrown movements. Because of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States, the Caribbean and Latin America, its relationship to feminism is more straightforward and closely intertwined with what Moraga calls the American women-of-color feminism and the broader women's liberation movement in Latin America, which is more intertwined with other styles of American feminism. In spite of this discrepancy, the goals and perspectives of each of the authors is shown to be similar enough that they are at least comparable within their own localized needs. In short, these movements remain legible to each other when viewed through a transnational lens, granting these networks of information a promise of greater spread.

All three novels engage with the idea of blackness from a specific perspective. Each of these authors lives and writes in the wake of the *négritude* movement, which was a literary and social movement advocating or the affirmation of the legitimacy and history of black and African

cultures. While each of them engages with *négritude* through their individual works, they take a specific approach. Rather than focusing on the idealized black past, each author follows the conceptualization that blackness should be understood as a category opposed to whiteness, which is then able to reflect the lived social conditions of colonized people, thus allowing them to engage with the ideas of blackness transnationally and speak a similar language of injustice. Much like with the use of the term feminism, each of them encodes blackness into their texts in specific ways, but all of them reject the idea that they need to accept the terms of those above them with greater access to power and instead push for a notion of *négritude* on their own terms.

Listening to these sorts of stories creates the potential for new imaginings of the future, even beyond those that have recently come to the forefront. Returning to Mahler, she roots her arguments in our shared present:

> it would be difficult to deny that we have witnessed a new era in solidarity politics in which resistance movements increasingly view their local struggles as interconnected within a global one. This is, in fact, a central paradox of our time: the deregulation and international integration that are the hallmarks of the global financial system are also the very tools through which transnational movements of opposition to that system are formed… alter-globalization movements… have thus far tended to reproduce a rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism, failing to address forms of racialization both within the system they protest and within their own ranks. (Mahler 31)

Here, Mahler critiques the fact that many anti-imperial movements fail because they use the same systems which oppress them to fight against them. Many of these alter-globalization movements in the Americas are trapped within the system that creates them, a hallmark of post-Cold War politics. At this point I ask a similar question to the one which opened this dissertation: what could these anti-imperial movements learn from the imaginative, dynamic movements of the subaltern women in the Global South?

Of course, we can see that these authors have taken it a step further than simply using the same tools to escape the trap of global power. They instead critique and imagine new cultures for themselves, give and take to others generously, and share strategies for escaping the brutalities of patriarchal systems of power. They don't simply look forward; they draw from the past to find worthwhile strategies and respond to their present needs to reformulate ideas on how to shape the world into something different. Spivak, at the end of her talk "Fanon Reading Hegel" implores the students to continue interrogating texts as she outlined:

> The adventure is yours. I have carefully shared with you how Fanon prepares me to read Hegel. I say to you: I hope I have made you feel that next time you read an extract, it is necessary to look at the way in which it is being prepared for reading, whether the teacher requires it or not. What the teacher requires is the absolute minimum. Do not let the teacher be your master. And, of course, try to find a way of accessing problems in translation. (Fanon Reading Hegel 19)

Spivak's conclusion invites us, as scholars, to challenge ourselves to read across boundaries that either we or the established scholarship have created, it is through these means that alternative futures are produced. We must learn to hijack and re-wire dominant narratives, even of radical texts, to force them to serve our purposes better. What's more, we must learn to listen to authors and scholars at the margins of canonical literature and examine their work for the evidence that they have rewired a dominant narrative that we can then examine. At a time when many sources of media suggest that opportunities for change are narrowing, that the future is more-or-less set in stone, the power of imagination becomes more important than ever. The audacity required to dream of something different in the face of silencing, marginalization, and precarity shows the capacity for these sorts of narratives to proliferate change in the real world, if only we began looking in the places we may have least expected it.

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