

Queer(y)ing Colonialism:

Decolonization and queer interventions in the novels of Caribbean women

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Acknowledgements

In the words of Jamaica Kincaid's central character, Xuela, "My self was the only thing I had that was my own" (159). So, it follows that my body is the only thing *I* own, and while the writing that unfurls beyond this page is, in fact, my own work; it is work that could not have come into being without the kindness and generosity of countless people. I would like to thank Dean Suzanne Keen, whose guidance challenged me, pushing me into new depths and directions. I would also like to thank Professor Wan-Chuan Kao, for graciously accepting the role of second reader even though it arrived at his doorstep, late and unannounced. And, of course, my eternal gratitude goes out to Professor T.J. Tallie without whom this thesis would have never been born. Indeed, the title is meant as a playful acknowledgement to the four years he has spent mentoring me and introducing me to the fields of queer theory and postcolonial studies. Lastly, I would like to thank the entire English department, but especially Professor Chris Gavalier and Professor Ricardo Wilson, both of whom provided endless emotional support throughout what I am unashamed to call an arduous process. Literary theory is my first love—writing, a method to make the theory real. Without the support of my professors, I could have never arrived at this culminating point where passion and knowledge cohere. Moreover, thank you to the peers who carried my heavy burdens and sadness. You had no obligation to do so, but your love was the vehicle I needed to move forward.

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Introduction: A Tribute to Fanonian Rage

The Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon is best known for his intellectual contributions to postcolonial theory. Reiland Rabaka notes in his book *Forms of Fanonism* (2010) the saliency and continued importance of Fanonian discourse on “white supremacy, patriarchy, racial colonization, racial violence, racial exploitation, racial oppression, and what it means to really and truly *be* and *become* ‘human’” (2). Indebted to Fanon, this thesis is greatly influenced by *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a text whose auto-theoretical style recites past memories alongside criticisms of totalizing colonial structures and masquerading performances; as well as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which analyzes violence as an instrument of colonial dehumanization and anger as the result of that violence. No doubt, rage is at the center of these two works. Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “The settler keeps alive in the native an anger which he deprives of outlet; the native is trapped in the tight links of the chains of colonialism” (54). Through writing, Fanon found an outlet for his anger. We can hear the resonances of anger, betrayal, and resentment in *Black Skin, White Masks* as he is confronted with the “historicity” of his body through the grotesque and grinning child who points to his body as he shouts, “Look! A Negro!” (91): “I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders” (92). He continues, “My blackness was there, dense and undeniable. And it tormented me, pursued me, made me uneasy, and exasperated me” (96). Fanon harnesses these emotions, and, like Audre Lorde, puts his anger to work.

I begin this introduction with Fanon because it is within and through his work that I find the space to ground this paper. Like Fanon, my work harbors a personal investment. As a postcolonial subject—a woman of color, the product of Spanish and African intermixing—I have found the past and its reverberations in the language I speak, the body I inhabit, and the structuring forces that shape who I am naturally, and who I am *supposed* to be by “nature.” Colonial histories carve into my flesh. They make me angry, but I am not the only one. Writing in “The Uses of Anger” (1981), Lorde declares, “My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, on that anger, beneath that anger, on top of that anger, ignoring the anger, feeding upon that anger, learning to use that anger before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life” (278). I have known it to be true that “every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being” (280). And like Lorde, I have known it to be true that anger is productive. When anger is “expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future,” it becomes “a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (280). Accordingly, the process of writing this thesis has revealed a way to transform my anger into something productive and liberating. Upon beginning this project, I asked myself, what is it that makes me angry? What is it that, like Fanon, torments me? The answers to these questions took varying shapes, mutating as my writing, research, and intellectual curiosity evolved. In its earliest stages, this thesis took the shape of an exploration of Gothic fiction and the racialized and gendered monstrosity that lurks within the genre. But now, in its final form, this paper discusses the politics of queerness within the postcolonial Caribbean. Perhaps the transition seems too vast, too disparate, but it is, in fact, quite logical. George Haggerty argues in *Queer Gothic* (2006), “Gothic fiction offered a testing

ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities, including sodomy, tribadism, romantic friendship (male and female), incest, pedophilia, sadism, masochism, necrophilia, cannibalism, masculinized females, feminized males, miscegenation, and so on” (2). Yet, this explorative space inevitably intersected with what Howard L. Malchow’s *Gothic Images of Race* (1996) identifies as a “*language* of panic, of unreasoning anxiety, [and] blind revulsion” that reflects general “malaise over cultural and sexual identity, empire, race, and nation” (4, emphasis in original).

Ultimately, nineteenth century Gothic fiction introduces and breeds into future generations a Sedgwickian homosexual panic, whose contemporary presence is rooted in “homosexual anathema” (Sedgwick *Men* 162). *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) looks back at *Between Men* (1985) to further cultivate a political signification of “homosexual panic,” one that occupies an overlapping space of “individual pathology and systemic function” (*Closet* 21). Homosexual panic, Sedgwick posits, is implemented as a tool, or ““path of control”” that defines and regulates ‘the amorphous territory’” of sexuality (*Closet* 21). In the end, it solidifies into a framework that shapes a way of life. As Sedgwick suggests, “homosexual panic became the normative condition of male heterosexual entitlement” (*Closet* 185). Hence, we hear resonances of queer fear, of homosexual panic, in daily phrases that implicitly seek to reaffirm the heterosexuality of behavior and the power inherent to its orientation. From these attempts spring the phrases, “no homo,” “that’s gay,” and in my own case, a Cuban expression heard throughout my childhood: “*Negro y maricón? Y se dice que dios no castiga dos veces.*” That is to say, “Black *and* a faggot? And they say God doesn’t punish twice.” Such phrases reveal more about the speaker than the imagined Other undergirding these words: “After all, the reason why this

defense borrows the name of the (formerly rather obscure and little diagnosed) psychiatric classification ‘*homosexual panic*’ is that it refers to the supposed uncertainty about [the] own sexual identity of the perpetrator of the antigay violence” (*Closet 20*, emphasis in original). In other words, homosexual panic echoes the visceral queer anxiety that plagues the heterosexual subject. This anxiety is triggered by the menacing touch of queerness, which threatens to strip the heterosexual of their embodied power.

Henceforth, we arrive at the answer to this introduction’s guiding question: what is it that torments me? I am tormented by this homosexual panic, by the anxiety and fear that queerness induces. I am particularly tormented by the manner in which queer identities can alienate postcolonial subjects from their communities, which are often already reeling from the trauma of violence. I am angry at the negation of queerness, at the perverseness it has acquired through conquest and Victorian moralities. I am angry at the punishment that queerness and blackness and womanhood incur. Therefore, this paper, beyond representing the product of four years of academic cultivation, represents an exploration into the nature of queerness in the postcolonial Caribbean.

Exploring the Jamaican landscape for the first time in Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Edward Rochester comments, “Everything is too much...too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (63). I am taken with this notion of excess, for it is often deployed as a framework for describing and understanding Caribbean landscapes. Certainly, the Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Spaniards who colonized the region felt similarly to Rochester. Analyzing Richard Ligon’s *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657), Karen Kupperman writes about the uneasiness felt by

settlers in the new world. She notes, “In some ways nature seemed out of control, not moderate and tempered as in England. Trees did not bear fruit in an orderly disciplined way as in Europe...; they had leaves, blossoms and fruit all at once. This fecundity was pleasing to English planters, but also somewhat frightening, especially when combined with the suspicion that nature might deceive” (10). In many ways, the Caribbean landscape is queer—too natural to the point of being unnatural, untamable, profoundly *non-normative*. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that as conquest unfolded and brought indigenous and laboring bodies under the purview of property, so too were colonized men and women relegated to the domain of the queer. From this historical point, I move outward. From here, I ask, how queerness becomes a pervasive part of the body. How does colonialism reproduce and codify its heteronormative structure in the Caribbean landscape, and to what effect(s)?

These questions induce a paper in their own right; one whose historical analysis, while important, is merely tangential to my argument. To provide a brief historical summary of the colonial forces that congeal as a single heteronormative superstructure, I turn to Catherine Hall’s essay, “Commentary” within the collection *Haunted by Empire* (2006). Hall, discussing the civilizing and moral mission of British Christian missionaries in the Caribbean, pays particular attention to the transformative possibility of Christianity: “Conversion meant...the soul was flooded with God’s grace, and there was a melting of self or individual will, a renunciation and fusion with Christ, a new state of feeling. The soul was washed clean; the penitent was born anew in Christ” (462). Conversion was often considered redemptive because its transformative power was assumed to clear the body of those sins that the racial (and implicitly sexual) Other possessed. “This renewal demanded new codes of behavior” that often occurred through the

family and within the household (463). Consequently, Christian missionaries deployed heteronormative frameworks within their Caribbean settings, regulating their colonized subjects through the figure of the father and directly teaching “Africans or Indians to be new men and women” (463). Religious missionaries were only one facet of an imperial operation that institutionalized the heterosexual family and fixed the father’s patriarchal power within the state. Of course, each of these power dynamics took shape beneath and through a system of racial caste. Anne McClintock suggests in *Imperial Leather* (1995), “A triangulated analogy among racial, class and gender degeneration emerged. The ‘natural’ male control of reproduction in heterosexual marriage and the ‘natural’ bourgeois control of capital in the commodity market were legitimized by reference to a third term: the ‘abnormal’ zone of racial degeneration” (44). From this triangular relationship emerged the “degenerate classes” who were “metaphorically bound by a regime of surveillance and were collectively figured as transgressing the proper distributions of money, sexuality and property” (44). However, as Hall demonstrates, the “degenerate” was all too often co-opted by their colonial regime, lured by the promise of power and safety. The imperial system operated in such a way where political figures, property owners, religious leaders, and recruited black and brown officials worked side by side to constitute, regulate, and preserve a heteronormative system, which—unsurprisingly—resulted in the production of “outliers,” misfits, and ultimately, the queer.¹

¹ I interject here to do some definitional work, which I will expand in the following chapter. Specifically, I want to make explicit that I employ a framework that posits “queer” as relational *as well as* sexual. Therefore, to be queer is to stand *outside* of colonial heteronormativity, to live a life that is profoundly non-normative. That is to say, to be queer is to stand in opposition to the structuring ideals of whiteness, heterosexuality, and patriarchy.

What tends to follow from this formulation of queerness is a history of negativity. That is to say, queerness becomes aberrational, the product and indication of sin and criminality. In a society that views queerness as oppressive, in a society that punishes queer people for their identities and orientations, in a culture that marks the queer as a disposable body, is it really any wonder that queerness comes to be seen among some people as a punishment from God? My interest, however, lies not within the intersection of pessimism and queerness—although it influences the work I do. Rather, my interest rests in harnessing the transformative power of queerness. How might queerness within the postcolonial context help recuperate that which was lost through conquest and subjugation? How might queerness actually liberate the body from the perpetual echoes of colonial violence that continue to manifest in the present? Lastly, how might queerness heal the “ghosts” of trauma that haunt postcolonial subjects? These questions are foundational to the work I develop over the course of this honors thesis. While my analysis is indebted to the labor of brilliant theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, Cathy Cohen, and Jasbir Puar, this entire paper is very much in the spirit of the late José Esteban Muñoz. Like Muñoz, I too am taken with the utopian longings of queerness. I am fascinated by the notion that “queerness is not yet here,” its ideality reiterating its inscriptions on the bodies of outsiders (1). Consequently, the central argument at the core of this paper is as follows: queerness, within the postcolonial Caribbean context, is carefully deployed as an *embodied identity* (one whose interiority is capacious enough to house multiple bodies) *and as a political project* (one that is rooted in utopian longing) whose central aim is the political, psychic, and emotional liberation of the subjugated body. In other words, queerness takes multiple forms to relieve the contemporary body of the crushing weight of colonial history.

What follows, then, is the analysis of queer positionalities and decolonized yearning in the novels of three Caribbean women: Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kincaid, and Shani Mootoo. Originally written in French, the first text, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986) is based on the historical record of Tituba, an enslaved woman accused of witchcraft during the Salem Witch Trials. The novel begins with the forced movement of African bodies across the Atlantic Ocean and into the island of Barbados. In Barbados, Tituba is kept as a slave until she escapes and becomes a maroon, living in a cabin she finds in the forest. She is taken in by Mama Yaya, a spiritualist who teaches Tituba about healing and earthly power. One day, she meets John Indian, a slave with whom she falls in love and marries, making the ultimate sacrifice and re-submitting herself to slavery to stay by his side. Tituba and her husband are eventually sold to the Puritan pastor Samuel Parris, a historical figure best known for his instigation of the Salem Witch Trials. While living with the Parris family, Tituba forms a close bond with the wife and children. However, the family turns on her upon hearing others accusations of black magic and bewitching the town's children. After being arrested, she is thrown into a jail cell with Hester Prynne, the main character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). While she survives the trials by confessing, she is immediately sold to another owner whose house is set afire shortly thereafter. Eventually, Tituba is set free and given passage back to Barbados. There, she renews her life as a maroon, continuing to practice the spiritual healing Mama Yaya taught her. Despite wanting nothing more than a peaceful life while attempting to carry her first child to completion, the novel concludes with the hanging of Tituba, for the owners of the surrounding plantations have accused her of organizing a rebellion.

Set on the island of Dominica, Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), follows Xuela Claudette Richardson, who recalls the past seventy years of her life throughout the course of the novel. Xuela loses her mother when she was born, and her father is frequently absent, often leaving her in the care of others, such as his laundress or business partner. After receiving her letters, her father retrieves Xuela (now seven years old) from the home of Eunice, his laundress, after having remarried. The new wife harbors severe resentment toward Xuela, often excluding her from the family. Nevertheless, the emotional abuse fails to leave a dent in Xuela's utter confidence and self-assured attitude. When she turns fifteen, her father pushes her out of the home, sending her to live with his business partner, Monsieur LaBatte and his wife. She grows close to Madame LaBatte, who treats her like a child, although her motherless past prevents Xuela from considering her as such. At this time, Xuela begins to experience and observe the bodily changes that she identifies as the emergence of womanhood. From that point forward, Xuela's world changes as she begins to navigate her body and the expectations that come with it. At the novel's conclusion, she marries a man she does not love and watches him, as well as those around her, die. Xuela is the last to go but finds comfort in death.

Cereus Blooms at Night (1996), the third novel I have selected is written by Irish-born, Trinidadian-raised author and filmmaker Shani Mootoo. Like other Caribbean authors, Mootoo faces identity crisis due to migrational patterns with strong ties to colonizing territories. However, her heritage is distinctly South Asian. Born to Trinidadian parents with Indian ancestry, this cultural background shapes the characters of *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Set in the fictional Lantanacalara, the novel's setting bears a striking resemblance to Trinidad. The story

unfolds from the narrative perspective of Tyler, Mala Ramchandin's nurse, and centers around the loss and trauma that Mala experiences. The defining moment in Mala's childhood occurs after her mother elopes with lover and childhood friend, Lavinia, leaving Mala behind with a distraught father and confused sister. Chandin Ramchandin is the son of an Indian indentured servant and the adopted pupil of a white Englishman. After having loved Lavinia for decades and feeling her painful rejection (not to mention the shame of losing his wife), he begins to manifest his anger as sexual assault and emotional abuse, the bulk of which falls upon Mala. The abuse drives Mala into madness and induces her to murder her father, a fact that is continually suggested, but never revealed until the novel's conclusion. Throughout the book, the reader learns about the personal and cultural struggles experienced by the queer-identifying Tyler, Mala's unrequited lover Ambrose, and Ambrose's transgender son Otoh, all the while echoing Tyler's concern, "what happened to Mala's escaped sister, Asha?" At the novel's conclusion, the reader learns that Asha has been writing letters to Mala for years, but the mailman, guided by a moral condemnation of Mala Ramchandin, did not deliver the letters.

Each of these women authors live within former European colonies and subsequently move through a world whose spaces were never meant to accommodate them. Condé, Kincaid, and Mootoo create characters who are either queer to, or queered by their surroundings. Their queerness is inextricably linked to their racial and gender presentations, as well as the demands of the colonial state. Living within a DuBoisian triple-consciousness, the femme characters of the selected novels are torn along lines of nationality/race, gender, and sexuality. Accordingly, their journey throughout the novel is less about fulfilling authorial plot points, and more about patching the wounds of nationhood and consolidating fractured identities. Each novel offers a

different conceptualization of femininity and queerness and together, the three novels present characters across time periods, nations, and ages. What remains consistent, however, are the expectations placed upon them by white supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. The response of each character differs, and consequently, this paper's chapter structure presents a progressive queering of the characters.

Chapter one, "In the Flesh" studies, at length, Condé's *Tituba*. The chapter begins by centering the question of "what makes a monster," providing theoretical interpretations of, and answers to the question. After offering a theoretical grounding on monstrosity, I explore the way the black femme body is rendered monstrous in Condé novel, examining the ways colonialism shapes such perceptions. The chapter ends with an exploration of how Condé problematizes notions of monstrosity. Using José Esteban Muñoz's text *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) as a guide, chapter one explores the ways in which the postcolonial femme body can be reclaimed, separated from pessimistic notions of monstrosity, and brought back into the realm of the human. Noteworthy here is the fact that while the authors of the postcolonial genre push back against ascribed notions of monstrosity and disidentify with histories of stereotyping (Muñoz 3), they do not fully refute the queerness of their bodies. Rather, queerness is transformed into a political project that reaches back into history and pre-colonial existence to construct a future space that centers the postcolonial feminine.

Chapter two, "Is the Uterus a Grave?" looks at the resonances of death, motherhood, and failure within Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography*. I begin the chapter by rooting the title's question in a queer theoretical framework whose antisocial and antiassimilationist argument reverberates into the 21st century. Taking these principles into consideration, I read scenes of

autoeroticism, heterosexual rejection, and unsociable femininity alongside the queer construction of the novel's main character, Xuela. These readings unfurl a queer mode of being that is profoundly the result of social failure. Using Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004) and Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), I read queer failure and self-inflicted sterility as productive and generative practices/modalities that free up the body. Within this framework of failure and liberation I locate the emergence of the femme, an important queer figure within the postcolonial state and its decolonizing mission.

Chapter three, "Trans*formations" is concerned with the intersection of queerness and citizenship within the (post)colonial state. Using Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) and Scott Lauria Morgensen's essay "Settler Homonationalism" (2010), this chapter reads the ways in which proximities, queerness, political power, and belonging overlap, connect, and refract to produce regulatory citizenship and homonationalism within Shani Mootoo's *Cereus*. The first half of the chapter focuses on the character of Chandin Ramchandin whose queer-but-not-so-queer positionality invariably plays with and disrupts a homonationalist state and field of power. Concerned with the totalizing political structure of homonationalism and its inherent disposition as inescapable, the second half of the chapter examines the ways in which queerness as a trans* modality allows the characters to redirect the power and energy of the state toward their own liberation. Examining the theory laid forth within Jack Halberstam's *Trans** (2017), this chapter looks at notions of trans* kinship as a liberatory framework for the postcolonial queer subjects.

The conclusion, "Embracing the Strange" considers the multiple definitions of queer – queer as strange, deranged, untamed, and gay. I string together the paper's three novels,

contending that the worlds and spaces constructed by Condé, Kincaid, and Mootoo are inherently queer spaces. The goal of this paper is to move toward a broader vision of queerness. In doing so, I argue that the postcolonial novels of these women authors flip European imperialism back on itself to play with traditional conceptions of normativity and subvert historical narratives of hierarchy and power. In short, these authors use queerness to dismantle colonialism. Ultimately, the three novels are as much a mediation of history as a productive construction of the future. These women find within their colonized spaces an enlightened vision for utopia, but one which is arbitrated by realism and political participation. They *transform* the submissive existence of aberrant bodies, *remove* its metaphorical shackles, and *liberate* that body through the celebration of its queered identities.

Chapter One: In the Flesh

What makes a monster? That question underlies the personal interrogations of postcolonial subjects and critical theorists alike. Certainly, Maryse Condé's Tituba ponders this same question when she asks herself, "What is a witch? ... Isn't the ability to communicate with the invisible world, to keep constant links with the dead, to care for others and heal, a superior gift of nature. ... Shouldn't the witch ... be cherished and revered rather than feared?" (17). In *Abnormal* (1999), a collection of lectures given at the Collège de France between 1974 and 1975, Michel Foucault argues that monstrosity is comprised of ambiguity and difference. "The monster is essentially a mixture. It is the mixture of two species ... two individuals ... two sexes ... of life and death ... it is the mixture of forms. ... The monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classification. ... There is monstrosity only when the confusion comes up against, overturns, or disturbs civil, canon, or religious law" (63). For Foucault, the monster "is problematic [and] challenging" both to society as well as the "medical and the judicial [juridico-medico] system" (62). Foucault's *Abnormal* is a deeply historical text. Examining past histories of "medical monsters" and heinous crimes, he contends that monstrosity is the result of bodies that "breach...human and divine [also moral] law" (64). Bodies that present "the animal and human species in one and the same individual" (64), bodies that are unnatural, bodies that "attacked the sovereign" (82)—in each of these manifestations, the body presents as a monster. Keeping Foucault's theory in mind, I would like to broaden his argument to contend that the monster is not just a body that defies natural, legal, and moral law; rather, the monster, in its broadest definition, is a body that materializes as wrong. I draw inspiration for this latter point from Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993). As this chapter progresses, I will draw on

Butler's work to explore ideas of monstrosity as it relates to Maryse Condé's award-winning *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986). Mixing history, literary theory, and textual evidence from the novel, I will examine the different manners in which notions of monstrosity are established, challenged, and overturned. Yet, monstrosity is always examined alongside queerness—as a situational manifestation, as an embodied identity, and as a political project. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to unlock the liberating potential of the queer.

Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* seeks to answer the question “which bodies come to matter—and why?” (xii). Her interrogation purposefully draws upon the double-meaning of “matter.” On one level, mattered bodies are bodies that have “materialized”; it is a body whose “contours, [whose] movements, will be fully material,” or fully real, fully visible (2). However, a body that matters is also a body that means, a body which speaks its name and value through “the reiteration of [social, or in the case of this paper, colonial] norms” (2). The process of mattering depends on the social imperatives established by the surrounding colonial framework. In particular, bodies that matter are bodies that affirm and fulfill the imperatives of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Yet, as one body comes to matter, another comes to un-matter. As Butler puts it, “The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of ‘sex’ [or, for that matter, any other structure rendered imperative by a surrounding social framework], and this identification takes place through repudiation which produces a domain of abjection, a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge” (3). In more tangible terms, a body's relationship to whiteness, masculinity, and/or heterosexuality renders it visible. Proximity to these ideals brings the body into the “domain of [the] intelligible,” while those individuals that exist outside of or on the margins the ideal structure

“produce... a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies” (xi). What intrigues me about Butler’s articulation of materiality is the question of power and wrong-ness. If the body’s materialization is related to its social acceptance and ontological status, how might those bodies that fail materialize experience their being? I contend that those bodies that fail to matter are bodies that materialize as “wrong” or in a “wrong manner.” These wrong(ed) bodies are also bodies that have been hollowed out of ontological complexity and existential presence. More succinctly, these bodies manifest themselves as black, feminine, and *queer*. I emphasize the word *queer* because my analysis specifically analyzes the intersection between materiality and queerness. How does queerness shape and outline the body? What does it mean to be queer, especially within a postcolonial context?

As readers, the first thing we learn about Tituba is the history behind her conception: “Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of *Christ the King* one day in the year 16** while the ship was sailing for Barbados” (Condé 3). It is no mere quirk that the sexualized violence inflicted upon Abena’s body occurs on the deck of a ship named after a religious figure. Accordingly, this conflict represents the tension between Christianity’s self-proclaimed message of humanitarianism in the name of Christ and the violence its followers enact on bodies that look different than their own. Through such contradiction, Condé foreshadows the religious violence that plagues the novel. Yet, this scene establishes an unmistakable intertextual relationship with most slave narratives. Writing over a century before Condé, Frederick Douglass writes in his autobiographical slave narrative: “My blood boils as I think of the bloody manner in which Messrs. Wright Fairbanks and Garrison West, both class-leaders, in connection with others, rushed in upon us with stick and stones, and broke up

our virtuous little Sabbath school, at St. Michael's—all calling themselves Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ!" (70). The intertextuality does not end there. Sadiya Hartman, writing in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), discusses the violence within *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845): "The 'terrible spectacle' that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester. ...By locating his 'horrible exhibition' in the first chapter...Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born.'" (3). Like Douglass, Tituba locates her formulation of self within the violence inflicted upon the enslaved body of her mother. Douglass begins his narrative by describing the circumstances of his childhood, each description imbued with the descriptions of "extraordinary barbarity" and "heart-rendering shrieks" (5). Tituba mimics this structure, beginning with the rape of her mother and then recalling the opening phrase of Douglass' work: "*I was born* from this act of aggression. From this act of hatred and contempt" (Condé 3, emphasis mine). No doubt, this introduction to Tituba and Abena presents us with an example of the violence and subjection that plagues the novel. Yet, it also provides us with a gaze into the queerness that characterizes relationships in slavery.

It is no coincidence that slavery is often referred to as the "peculiar institution," the adjective recalling a definition of queerness that center the strange. Furthermore, as Siobhan Somerville demonstrates in *Queering the Color Line* (2000), "it was not merely a coincidence that the classification of bodies as either 'homosexual' or 'heterosexual' emerged at the same time that the united states was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between 'black' and 'white' bodies" (3). Writing about the political power of the queer, Cathy Cohen states in her *GLQ* article "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" (1997),

Marriage and heterosexuality, as viewed through the lens of profit and domination, and the ideology of white supremacy, were reconfigured to justify the exploitation and regulation of black bodies, even those presumably engaged in heterosexual behavior. It was this system of state-sanctioned, white male, upper-class, heterosexual domination that forced these presumably black *heterosexual* men and women to endure a history of rape, lynching, and other forms of physical and mental terrorism. In this way, marginal group members, lacking power and privilege although engaged in heterosexual behavior, have often found themselves defined as outside the norms and values of dominant society. (454, emphasis in original)

Cohen alludes to the very same history of violence that Hartman discusses, arguing that in each of its forms, the mental and physical terrorism of slavery worked to establish and persist the hierarchies at work in the colonial state. These hierarchies, however, were not the sole product of white supremacy. Rather, they were deeply enmeshed in the heteronormative agenda. Violence, as Cohen posits, reinforces the individual's proximity toward heteronormativity. Thus, the violence of subjection is queer-making and queer-enacting: queer-making because it articulates which bodies defy heteronormative imperatives; queer-enacting because its methods of arbitration are non-normative. To further think through this concept, I would like to recall the enslavement of Tituba and her mother. Abena's rape is only the first of many abuses. Upon arriving in Barbados, plantation owner, Darnell Davis continues the cycle of vicious sexual and physical assault that begun on the slave ship. He forcibly obtains control over Abena's sexuality, not only through rape but by organizing her relationship to other males. Darnell's investment in Abena's sexuality is heterosexual by definition, but the behavior is queer. In exerting control

over Abena, he essentially claims her body as his own—a hyper-heterosexual act, but also one that transforms, if not dilutes, his masculinity. He gives Abena’s body to Yao, “a young warrior who could not resign himself to planting, cutting, and grinding sugarcane” (Condé 4). It was Darnell’s hope that “by offering [Yao] a concubine...he would be giving [Yao] a taste for life” (4). Darnell’s actions portray a preoccupation with male sexuality. In “offering” the body of a woman for the sexual consumption of another man, Darnell engages in indirect sexual conduct/contact that is queer by nature. This queerness is only accentuated by his role as “creator.” Referring back to Harman’s concept of the “original generative act” of violence that births the enslaved body (3), Darnell’s gender shapeshifts as he *transforms* to embody the feminine act of creation. When Abena refuses to submit her body to Darnell Davis’ desire, she is hanged, left to “swing from the lower branches of a silk-cotton tree” as her daughter watches (Condé 8). Just as the subjugation of Douglass’ aunt brings his body into the non-being of enslavement, so too does the lynching of Tituba’s mother. Darnell effectively becomes the (queer) mother of Tituba’s enslaved body. Yet, more important, through her queer coming-into-(non)being, Tituba materializes as “wrong.” As her mother is hanged, she “felt something harden inside [her] like lava” (8). The hardening she feels is her materialization, but more specifically, her materialization as an abject figure. As Tituba watches her mother, she feels “terror and mourning” (8), overwhelmed with the understanding that blackness and femininity, within a colonial state, will only result in the violent regulation of her body.

After the death of her mother, Tituba is taken in by Mama Yaya, a spiritualist living independently on the extremities of plantation land. Mama Yaya teaches her about herbs and the natural world. She teaches Tituba that “everything lives...[and] must be respected” (Condé 9).

From these teachings Tituba gains Mama Yaya's ability "to communicate with the invisible" (9). Her association with these supernatural elements labels her a witch by the other slaves and white colonizers alike. Walking through the area surrounding her home while looking for a brood of hens that has previously escaped, Tituba notices the fearful reactions:

The minute they saw me, everybody jumped into the grass and knelt down, while half a dozen pairs of respectful, yet terrified eyes looked up at me. I was taken aback. What stories had they woven about me? Why did they seem to be afraid of me? I should have thought they would have felt sorry for me instead, me the daughter of a hanged woman...I realized that they were mainly thinking about my connection with Mama Yaya, whom they had feared. But hadn't Mama Yaya used her powers to do good? Again and again? The terror of these people seemed like an injustice to me. ...I was born to heal, not to frighten.

(11-12)

Though her community kneels at her feet and treats her with respect, the respect parallels that which is given to the slaveholders. It does not come from a place of love and reverence, but rather from a place of fear, a detail which Tituba herself acknowledges. This fear results in the "terrified eyes" that shape her into an embodiment of the "object of terror," a trope that pervades the Gothic. I use, "object" to describe Tituba because the inflicted gaze is dehumanizing by nature. Even John Indian, Tituba's husband, reduces her to the very monstrosity that she repeatedly rejects. Explaining why he fears her, John Indian says, "I know you are violent. I often see you as a hurricane ravaging the island, laying flat the coconut palms and raising the lead-gray waves up to the sky'" (30). In both the eyes of John Indian and the larger community, Tituba is far from being human. If anything, she is super-human—too natural, too powerful. Her

status as super-human queers her body by pushing her outside the realm of the natural, that is, the normal. But in coming to occupy this outside or marginal space, Tituba immediately acquires markers of deviancy.

Tituba's deviance is the result of materiality. She is deviant because her body has materialized as "wrong" or in a "wrong manner." Butler describes this "wrongness" as "abjection," or "unlivable" reality. Her terminology alludes to the work of feminist critic Julia Kristeva, providing us with another layer for reading the body. In *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), Barbara Creed argues that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (7). She recalls the historical conceptualization of the female body as perverse and terrifying—in fact, "it is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother's genitals" (2). The female body, in the eyes of Creed, is a body that has materialized as "wrong" and in the process it has accrued its status as the "monstrous-feminine," a term she locates within Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1980). The monstrous-feminine, as Kristeva argues, is steeped in abjection, functioning as "a wellspring of sign for a non-object" and standing in opposition to the borders of the defined (11). Abjection carries within itself "one of those violent, dark revolts of being...that eject[s] [its subject] beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1). Accordingly, those bodies that fail to materialize (correctly) are abject because they remain outside the scope of the possible, the logical, and the real. They exist but only underground, always unable to find their way into dominant society. Yet, this only provides us with a half complete understanding of Tituba. Tituba's deviancy rests in the perceived abjection of her body, the result of her failure to align

with the normative standards that matter bodies. Yet, why is her role as deviant significant? To answer this question, I return to Kristeva:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk...I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.... *Nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. (2-3, emphasis in original)

This example of abjection registers in the mind a slew of rhyming siblings—abjection as ejection, rejection, and objection. If abjection is the elimination of the body's contents and the monstrous-feminine is the body, what does that mean for those objects and people with which the monstrous-feminine interacts? The monstrous-feminine threatens to violently expel the entities that colonize and disturb its body. To the puritan and colonial communities, Tituba is not a healer. Instead, she is a "monstrous mother with the power to give life—but who [has the option of] choos[ing] to destroy it" (Ussher 2). Her character threatens to throw people from the (new) world at any given moment. But more broadly, the monstrous-feminine bestows Tituba with a power that threatens to destabilize or queer the "symbolic order" (Creed 83). I use queer to emphasize the fact that Tituba's role as a non-normative outsider does not exist in stasis, but rather reflects the queer of her society. As Creed says, "the monstrous-feminine...speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity" (7). If we hold this as true, then in the case of *Tituba*, the monstrous-feminine reveals the surrounding society's fear of

realizing the “abject homosexuality” (Butler 97), or rather, queerness,² that is foundational to the culture.

As a result of this threatening power, the cautionary label of “black witch” is passed down and shared between the different communities of Barbados. The label follows her to Salem, where it gains a religious undertone and becomes, as Anne Putnam puts it, “someone who has made a pact with the devil” (Condé 62). Tituba’s powers—her power to heal, her power to “see everything and...do everything” (62)—makes her a witch, for they are abilities that do not arise through natural means. Labels such as “witch” play an important role in the novel, often times regulating the materiality of the bodies to which they are applied. John Indian is the first to describe Tituba as a witch. Upon accidentally scratching his little finger, he shouts, “Ow! What are you doing, little witch?” (17). From then on, the word increases in frequency. Her eyes are described as “the eyes of a witch” (25); upon boarding a ship, one of the sailors warns the captain, “Be careful, she’s one of the witches of Salem!” (135). She is also referred to as a “creature of the Antichrist” (91) and “evil itself” (77), direct references to alleged associations

² Butler uses the phrase “abject homosexuality” to describe the negation on which heterosexuality is constructed: “The very logic of repudiation which governs and destabilizes the assumption of sex in this scheme presupposes a heterosexual relationality that relegates homosexual possibility to the transient domain of the imaginary. Homosexuality is not fully repudiated, because it is entertained, but it will always remain ‘entertainment,’ cast as the figure of the symbolic’s ‘failure’ to constitute its sexed subject fully” (111). While I am in agreement with her *explication* of the concept, I prefer to move away from her *terminology*. This paper attempts to read queerness, not homosexuality, which represents an embodied sexual identity. While the latter represents a significant understanding of queerness, it does not allow for a definitional flexibility that expands into different areas, experiences, and existences.

with witchcraft. In each instance, the label of “witch” and its synonyms regulate the treatment Tituba receives. It pushes Tituba to the margins, indicating to others that she should not be approached. Susanna Endicott’s friends advise that Tituba should be watched and punished before she can inflict any harm; the sailor too informs his captain that she must be watched closely. The ministers at Tituba’s trial use the label of “Antichrist” to mark her guilt and discipline her body, while Betsey uses “evil” as a label to justify the cruel and emotional punishment she inflicts upon Tituba. Witchcraft allegations act like physical labels that append to bodies whose materiality rests in the domain of the abject, incurring the surveillance of larger society and the punishment of the individual.

Labels play an important role in fashioning Tituba’s queerness. I comment earlier about mattered bodies as bodies that speak their name and their value. However, a similar point can be said for those bodies that fail to materialize: bodies that do not matter are bodies whose name is spoken by others, whose value is ascribed by another. Labels function in a manner that gives power to those which utter them, often preserving the power of normative figures who “out” and punish the non-normative. In her iconic work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Sedgwick examines the role of homosexual/heterosexual binaries in structuring knowledge and thought. She draws attention to the role of the closet as a product of binaries: “An assumption underlying the book is that the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally” (3). I am intrigued by Sedgwick’s conceptualization of the closet, for its metaphorical structure coerces “sexuality back into the impermeable space where *it* belongs” (71, emphasis in original). However, as Sedgwick reasons,

the closet is not only for those who identify as “homosexual.” The closet is capacious, able to encapsulate many types of bodies. Closets are spaces that permit the body to hide in plain sight. They are also spaces in which labels fail to emerge. But if a body can hide, it can also be uncovered. When a label utters its name, it effectively “outs” the individual it describes. Labels force open the closet door. I introduce all this to say, there is a unique relationship between the queerness and witchcraft. Because society “consider witchcraft and queerness to be taboos...many witches and queers have remained ‘closeted’” (Fairfield-Artman et al. 435). Tituba never calls herself a witch, for the title is imposed upon her, but it nevertheless pushes her out from the closet since it renders her body hyper-visible to all those surrounding her. Witchcraft makes Tituba into a queer figure, emphasizing her transgressions against nature, as Foucault would posit. However, with her colonial context, queerness adopts a more active role. Queer individuals do not merely *stand* outside of the (hetero)normative, they also cross through its boundaries and push on its borders. Queerness is an active state of movement and personal reflection. As José Esteban Muñoz describes it, queerness is a dynamic display of physical and theoretical reconceptualization.

Disidentifications (1999) was born from Muñoz’s fascination with “the world making power of disidentificatory performances” (ix). As a practice, disidentification “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). It is a “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology” (11). Neither assimilating to the social representations constructed by the majoritarian sphere nor completely rebelling against ascribed roles and labels, “disidentification

is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.... This ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (11-12). Resistance is already hard work, but when envisioned as rebellion, resistance comes to require from its practitioner a dedication that is much too unrealistic and contradictory to the realities of daily living. For this reason, scholars like Muñoz reconceptualize resistance. Teresa Barnes touches on this point in *“We Women Worked so Hard”* (1999), an exploration of gender, urbanization, and social reproduction in colonial Zimbabwe. As Mrs. Agnes Kanogoiwa states, ““We women worked so hard—we were the first ones to fight, even if we didn’t hold guns” (qtd. in Barnes xvi). Resistance is not solely defined by engaging in the physical violence of the front lines. It also rests in ones attempts to “survive in an acceptable manner: to live *properly*.... [And] to live properly was to live according to one’s own...priorities” (22, emphasis in original). To live properly is to be “unbothered” by oppressive systems, to persist in an environment whose very mission is to eradicate one’s body and culture. To live as unbothered, to disidentify and break with the linearity of history and social cues, to do all this work is “the remaking of identification” (Muñoz 14). That is not to say that a disidentified individual must utterly recreate themselves—rather, they must use the tools they possess to push for an individualized liberation that does not completely abandon the whole self. Disidentification and living properly, both are deviations from prescribed maps. More importantly, both are political manifestations of queerness that seek within its depths, the potential for liberation.

Tituba never has full possession of body and self. Instead, she is constructed. Dominant society molds the idea of Tituba in the same manner Victor Frankenstein molds his monster,

creating a figure that is abject, evil, sinful, and inhuman. Gathered in the drawing room, Susanna Endicott and some of the other wealthy ladies of Barbados speak about Tituba as if she “wasn’t standing there at the threshold of the room” (Condé 24). They ask if she’s a Christian and whether or not Endicott will allow John Indian and Tituba to marry, but none of these questions are directed at the person with which they are concerned. Rather, they are directed at Endicott, for she is seen as the “owner” of Tituba’s body. This ownership recalls the queer relationship between Darnell Davis and Abena, as well as Tituba. By exerting control over Tituba’s sexuality, Susanna Endicott indirectly engages in a sexual conduct that can only be read as queer. Nevertheless, the complete disregard the women have for Tituba’s presence “strick[es] her off the map of human beings,” making her feel as if she was “a nonbeing. Invisible. [She was] more invisible than the unseen, who at least have powers that everyone fears. Tituba only existed insofar as these women let her exist.... Tituba became ugly, coarse, and inferior because they willed her so” (24). This scene demonstrates the power these women have over Tituba’s creation. The women colonize Tituba. Through their negation of Tituba’s psychological interiority, they effectively leave her as a vessel to be filled with their own views. Their description of Tituba’s eyes, which can “turn your blood cold” as well as their caution to Susanna Endicott—“[She has] the eyes of a witch...do be careful” (25)—simultaneously demonize and queer Tituba. In the normative structure of their society, Tituba comes to occupy a role that merges the monstrous-feminine with queer positionality—that is to say, Tituba becomes the monstrous-queer.

But Tituba does not merely “assimilate” to this characterization, in Muñoz’s terms. Instead, she contests the colonization of her body and mind in a disidentificatory manner.

Articulating the relationship between disidentification and critical race theory, Muñoz states, “Black female subjects are not merely passive subjects who are possessed by the well-known paradigms of identification that the classical narrative produces; rather, they are active participant spectators who can mutate and restructure stale patterns within dominant media” (29). Tituba employs this process of meaningful, yet playful reproduction and modification throughout the novel. As a young girl, Tituba was aware of the “sad, uncertain happiness of being a slave” (Condé 5). She is aware of abjectness her body shouts before her voice can even whisper. Tituba is aware of the monstrosity and queerness read onto her breasts and melanin. However, she is also aware that these same characteristics are not weaknesses. Tituba exclaims to Goodwife Parris “what is more beautiful than a woman’s body!” (43), centering queer desire and demonstrating her captivation with the body’s power to withstand and “perpetuate life” (42). She sees this persistence in others, but it also characterizes much of her behavior. Even after experiencing “exile, suffering, and sickness” (137), she could still grow to appreciate the beauty of another person’s stories, using them to find new meaning to life. When she returns to Barbados, Tituba experiences a mixture of melancholy and loneliness. Yet, later in the night, the melancholy gives way to peace as she focuses on her surroundings, which are “alive with a soft murmur” (147). The liveliness makes the past memories of Boston and Salem “lose all consistency” (147). While her body has brought her misfortune, it has also rewarded her with perpetual life. When, the novel’s conclusion, she is hung by Barbados’ plantation owning community, we do not see the end of Tituba. Her consciousness continues. She acknowledges that her “real story starts where this [previous mortal] one leaves off and [that life] has no end” (175). In the afterlife, Tituba “continue[s] to heal and cure.... [She is] hardening man’s hearts to

fight. [She is] nourishing them with dreams of liberty. Of victory” (175). The very supernatural connection that labels her a monster is the very same supernatural connection she uses to transform herself, her body, and the legacy of blackness.

Life has dealt Tituba the role of monster, but her performance in the world is riddled with disidentificatory practices. Condé chooses a title that centers the concept of labels and prescribed roles. Yet, what is fascinating about her title is the affirming tone. There is no turning away from all the different components that shape Tituba’s identity. *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, radically claims ownership over the oppressive elements in Tituba’s life. The title presents a hierarchy of different identity claims and its relationship to others—she is first and foremost, “I,” an identity known authentically to herself; she is then Tituba, a name given to her by her adoptive father to “prove that [she] was the daughter of his will and imagination” (Condé 6); thirdly, she is a “black witch” as the colonial world calls her; lastly, she is “of Salem.” At each level, Tituba negotiates her identity. However, between the identities of “I” and “Black Witch” lies a necessary and personal self-negotiation. These two labels mean that Tituba must negotiate an external simplification with her internal complexity. This task is often done through conversations with the spirits of Abena and Mama Yaya, both of whom represent the complex psychological interior of Tituba. The two women bestow upon her a feminine power that brings “hope and...tenderness” (84). Mama Yaya advises Tituba: “Misfortune, as you know, is our constant companion. We are born with it, we lie with it, and we squabble with it for the same withered breast.... But we’re tough, us niggers!” (85). Her guidance is a metaphorical interruption to the dialogue of the dominant ideology, which regularly reduces Tituba to a flattened object. Mama Yaya employs the derogatory term “nigger” in a hopeful message,

linking blackness to emotional and physical strength. The term, which in the mouths of others reduces the humanity of black people, swells in meaning when uttered by Mama Yaya. She restores the black body's fullness, declaring that despite the term's weaponization in the fight for wiping black bodies "off the face of the earth," only Tituba, "out of all of [her eradicators]...[will] survive" (85). In this case, the recycling of the word "nigger" is a disidentificatory practice. It at once maintains old terminology, acknowledging the power structures that generated them while using it as a foundation for the making of a new world that recreates the black corpus. In this new world, blackness carries value—it is a body that matters.

There is purposeful double-meaning in my previous point. A body that matters is one that is "real," but also one that has value. I take this twofold meaning from Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993), a materialist feminist revision to *Gender Trouble*. Early in the book, Butler articulates the following point:

Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of *disidentification* is equally crucial to the rearticulating of democratic contestation. Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized. Such collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern. (4)

In this instance, Butler's use of "disidentification," is largely related to her conceptualization of how bodies "materialize" and gain identities that can be regulated. She uses it as a manner of describing the sexual difference that helps distinguish between bodies. Butler's vision of the term

is not as direct a subversive mechanism as in the context of Muñoz. However, it does have the potential to be a political operation. Butler argues that bodies are constructed through the notion of matter, through “*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter*” (9, emphasis in original). When a body materializes, it becomes rigid. The social order surrounding it simultaneously undergirds and reaffirms it. Bodies that do not materialize are bodies that society refuses to construct and acknowledge as interior to its larger corpus. Rather, those unmaterialized bodies provide the “necessary ‘outside’ ... [that] qualify ... [those] bodies that [do] matter” (16). In the context of Tituba’s society, those unmaterialized bodies, those bodies that do not matter, are often black, female, and queer bodies. They present mattered bodies with a dark mirror into which they can gaze and understand their own worth. But when those same mirror bodies disidentify in the manner of Muñoz, that is a manner that is still recognizable but louder, no longer subordinate, the original system is unsettled. This unsettling lurks behind many of Tituba’s disidentificatory practices.

Condé reclaims the label of “Black Witch” within her novel’s title, a sentiment she transfers to the titular character. From the beginning of her life, Tituba reshapes the role of the witch. The witch, Tituba argues, is not born “to frighten” (Condé 12). Instead, she should be “cherished and revered” (17). When asked if she is a witch, Tituba often rejects the title because the word’s immediate connotations link it to evil. On occasion, she questions her interrogator. When Christopher asks if she is a witch, Tituba sighs, ““Everyone gives that word a different meaning. Everyone believes he can fashion a witch to his way of thinking so that she will satisfy his ambitions, dreams, and desires...”” (146). The role of the witch is the most largely contested

role within the novel. It threatens to demonize Tituba, strip her of her humanity, and at times, end her life. Yet, through her disidentification, she pushes back against conceptualizations of the witch as “someone who has made a pact with the devil” and is “evil itself” (62, 77). Tituba uses her powers, what she calls “her art” to do good. She tells Benjamin Cohen d’Azevedo, “death is merely a passageway and the door always remains open” (124), offering to bring back the spirit of his wife, if only temporarily, so as to ease his emotional pain. Upon seeing his wife Abigail for the first time since her death, Benjamin “falls to his knees” and soon asks Tituba if he can begin to bring his eldest daughter to their meetings (125). Tituba’s interventions do not harm Benjamin, but rather bring him peace. He begins to call her his “beloved witch” (131). This peace, however, is short-lived when the Massachusetts anti-Semitic community “dressed in the sinister Puritan fashion” burns Benjamin’s house and murders his children (132). Condé’s description of the puritan community as sinister is purposeful, transferring qualifications of monstrosity from Tituba to the white, Christian community that surrounds her. Tituba transforms the identification of “witch” from one that connotes evil to one defined by a desire to heal. In maintaining the label and continuing to practice a supernatural intervention that goes contrary to traditional definitions, Tituba straddles the middle ground between assimilation and counter-identification that Muñoz locates in disidentification.

At the same time, disidentification manifests in Tituba’s “mutation” of dominant social dialogue through a confirmation of the very fear that propels the behaviors of her white oppressors. That is to say, Tituba shows the interconnectedness between black and white bodies. In particular, she highlights the monstrosity behind the actions of slaveholders. For Tituba, monstrosity lies not in the socially conditioned status of the individual. Neither is it purely a

category and embodied positionality, or a state onto which something is imposed. Rather, monstrosity is an active engagement, a verb rather than a noun. Monstrosity finds itself in the cruel torment of slaveholders that negate the dignity of the tormented. Accordingly, Condé locates the true monstrosity of the white male within the punishment of the “monstrous” slave. As a child, Tituba witnessed “several times...scenes of brutality and torture. I saw men go home covered in blood, their chests and backs striped in scarlet. I even saw one of them die under my very eyes, vomiting a violet froth of blood” (Condé 7). The language surrounding these scenes of brutality is necessarily descriptive for the purposes of intentionally enacting horror and inquisitiveness. The bodies Condé describes are not explicitly racialized. They are not black, but red, violet, and scarlet—intense and violent colors that jump off the page. This temporary suspension of race immerses the reader in the utter violence of the scene. They are focused on the punishment of a body they are allowed to view as their own because of a lack of racial distinction. This pushes them toward empathetic reaction. It begs the questions “how” and “why”—how can someone be so cruel, and why? Such emotional investment often produces horror, a feeling of revulsion and shock (at the treatment of, at the appearance of the body).

The process of enacting horror is essential to the process of problematizing monstrosity, for we can only feel horror if we feel our own humanity is at stake. To further think through this point, consider the gothic “object of horror,” which in a racialized text such as *Tituba* becomes a *body* of horror. The object of horror is a thing with physical presence, but almost never a whole object; the haunted house is a meeting of four walls, but its interior is defined by empty space. Similarly, bodies of horror always possess a physical presence—it is the first thing to be noted—but what they specifically lack is a psychological interiority, a shared knowledge and

dialogue between spectator and spectacle. Horror stems from this emptiness. As David R. Castillo argues, this emptiness, or “absence” produces a “fundamental feeling of attraction/revulsion” (87). Absence horrifies us; it spawns in us the realization and fear that our humanity may be lost, obscured. When we feel horror, it is because we feel our own humanity being threatened. Bodies of horror remind us that we may at any time become them, we may, at any time, lose ourselves to them. Dracula terrifies because he threatens to convert the human to monster. Black bodies terrify because they threaten to reveal the inhumanity of those who subject them, by either reversing the subjugation or refuting the hypocrisy of their self-construction as human. Each of these revelations is relative to perceptions of fullness and emptiness. Particularly, they are relative to one’s perception as fully human, fully white, fully good. The horror we experience upon seeing the subjugation of grotesque bodies reveals to us that it is not the body of horror that is empty, but rather ourselves. We are void of morality, of empathy; we are void of all of the things that make us human. Condé calls attention to the brutality of white slaveholders to question the very emptiness that makes fullness possible. Slaveholders are able to rationalize violence against black bodies because they have stripped them of humanity through claims to savagery and immorality. However, through Tituba, Condé makes these same claims against the slaveholders, calling into question the legitimacy of the rationality. If black bodies need to be punished through brutality to avoid the outbursts of brutality supposedly inherent to their inhuman bodies, does not the enactor of brutality then also become inhuman? These claims to hypocrisy lie at the core of Condé’s problematization of categorical monstrosity.

While Tituba's monstrous characterization recurs throughout the novel, they are always balanced out by claims against her accusers. After meeting Hester, Tituba questions the legitimacy of her imprisonment: "This woman, who was as good as she was beautiful, was suffering martyrdom. She was yet another case of a victim being branded guilty. Are women condemned to such a fate in this world?" (Condé 98). In her question Tituba articulates a criticism against society for punishing bodies according to their presentation. By referring to Hester as a victim, she shifts the blame off of the female body, accusing men of enacting cruelty on women with no just cause. She makes the question of who is truly guilty of a crime, hinting at an answer that shirks wrongful claims of deviancy. Earlier in the novel, Tituba speaks to Sarah, the servant of Goodwife Priscilla Henderson, who is asking her for help. Tituba tells Sarah not to be like the white members of Salem, "knowing only how to do evil" (68). Sarah in turn describes Tituba's situation in Salem as being "among monsters who are set on destroying us" (68). That is, her and all others whose bodies do not conform. This moment of subversive dialogue reveals another interrogation into the active labelling and monstrification experienced within Tituba's society. Black bodies are considered deviant, but the behavior of white subjugators is admissible. Tituba recounts the crimes committed against slaves: "My mother had been raped by a white man. She had been hanged because of a white man. I had seen his tongue quiver out of his mouth, his penis turgid and violet. My adoptive father had committed suicide because of a white man" (19). None of these actions resulted in the punishment of white men, but rather the destruction of the black body upon which such violent actions were inflicted. As John Indian comments, "sailors with rings in their ears, ship's captains with greasy hair under their cocked hats, and Bible-reading gentlemen with a wife and children at home," white men of all walks of

life, “get drunk and swear and fornicate” when unwatched (46). These actions reveal “the hypocrisy of the white man’s world,” for these sinful behaviors are never punished. However, unsubstantiated claims of “bewitching the inhabitants of a peaceful, God-fearing village. [And] call[ing] Satan into their hearts” can garner the lynching of a black woman (172). In playing with the contradiction of colonial society, Condé shows how religious often comes into conflict with lived realities, but how the resolution of such conflict is guided by racial presentation. At the same time, she collapses the line between (white) humanity and (black) monstrosity. Pushing forward the question “who is the real monster?”

So far, I have primarily used disidentification as a tool for evaluating different contestations of racialized monstrosity but have neglected to consider the queer origins of the term. Muñoz uses disidentification to evaluate the performances, off and on stage, of bodies that present as brown and whose queer sexuality intersects with and is informed by ethnicity. Tituba’s sexuality is an integral part of Condé’s novel and often at the center of much of her suffering. As her mother’s spirit laments upon Tituba’s first meeting with John Indian, “‘Why can’t women do without men?’” (Condé 15). Tituba is often at the mercy of men, losing her freedom, her body, her humanity to their power. But more importantly, the male gaze is precisely what renders her a queer figure. We can consider this point through Cathy Cohen’s groundbreaking article, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” (1996), which expands the definition of queerness to envelop those bodies whose sexual orientation may fall under the umbrella of heterosexuality, but who nevertheless possess queered identities. In discussing the issue of “heterosexual on the (out)side of heteronormativity,” Cohen writes, “I want to be perfectly clear that there are, in fact, some who identify themselves as queer activists who do

acknowledge relative degrees of power, and heterosexual access to that power, even evoking the term ‘straight queers’” (453). Cohen cites the example of the welfare queen whose “sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support” (442). The welfare queen is a queer figure because her sexuality is non-normative, excessive. With a body characterized by reproductive excess, Tituba comes to parallel the welfare queen.

Sexuality is at once an identity and a political project. Tituba’s queerness encapsulates an alternate sexuality as well as a purposeful disidentification with the non-normative. Only through the former’s relationship to the latter’s methodology does Tituba pursue self-liberation. Particularly, Tituba finds liberation through her queer relationship with Hester in which the two women embrace the non-normative to articulate a rhetoric of feminist empowerment. This case is made by Ardel Haefele-Thomas in her chapter “Queering the Female Gothic” in the Edinburgh Companion on *Women and the Gothic* (2016). Haefele-Thomas draws our attention to the scene where Tituba and Hester first meet, each imprisoned for having “transgressed the Christian patriarch laws of the land” (Haefele-Thomas 173). There is a clear attraction between the two women, each one treating the other with a tenderness neither has received in years. Hester calls Tituba a “poor creature” (Condé 95) and reassures her, ““You cannot have done evil, Tituba! I am sure of that, you’re too lovely! Even if they all accused you, I would defend your innocence!”” (96). Tituba is remarks that Hester is “young [and] beautiful...[with eyes] black like the benevolent shadow of night” (95). Then, “moments later, Tituba writes, ‘I was so moved [by Hester] I was bold enough to caress her face and whispered: “You, too, Hester, are lovely!”’ (96). From this moment on, the pregnant Hester and Tituba become lovers until Tituba’s release from prison” (Haefele-Thomas 173). Between conversations, Hester “hugged [Tituba] in her

arms and showered [her] with kisses” (Condé 101). When she was upset, Hester would “slip between [Tituba’s] lips a little rum that one of the constables had given her” (102). Such tender behavior demonstrates the care the women have for one another.

Even after leaving the prison, Hester’s presence remains with Tituba and their relationship leaves a mark on her. Upon learning about Hester’s death, Tituba suffers an acute pain: “I screamed down the door of my mother’s womb. My first broke her bag of waters in rage and despair. I choked and suffocated in this black liquid. I wanted to drown myself” (Condé 111). She laments to the spirits, “Hester, I would have gone with you” (111). Such a pronounced reaction demonstrates the love the two women had for one another as well as the value Tituba placed on her relationship. Prior to Hester’s death Tituba described her relationship with Hester as a “friendship” (102). However, after the physical loss of her lover and companion, Tituba comes to learn the reality of her feelings:

That night Hester lay down beside me, as she did sometimes. I laid my head on the quiet water lily of her cheek and held her tight. Surprisingly, a feeling of pleasure slowly flooded over me. Can you feel pleasure from hugging a body similar to your own? For me, pleasure had always been in the shape of another body whose hollows fitted my curves and whose swellings nestled in the tender flatlands of my flesh. Was Hester showing me another kind of bodily pleasure? (122)

In her reflection Tituba reconstructs the dichotomy of sexual organs upon which heterosexuality is founded. She considers the contrasting nature of “hollows” and “curves,” “swellings” and “flatlands,” male organs and female organs. She considers the bodies to which she has previously experienced sexual attraction and contrasts it to that of Hester. In this moment, lying with the

spirit of Hester and coupling herself with her partner's feminine energy, Tituba fully realizes the queerness of her body and self, both sexually and physically. What is intriguing about this scene is not so much Tituba's coming out, but rather its utter clarity. In this scene Tituba experiences her liberation. This moment marks the point in which Tituba moves out of the fog—"I had the feeling that the darkest hours were behind me and I would soon be able to breathe again"—and into the metaphorical light (122). Only after this scene of clarity, of self-realization, are Tituba's chains are broken, both metaphorically and literally as the blacksmith "with one skillful blow of the mallet...smashed [her] chains to pieces" (122).

Queerness physically liberates Tituba through the shattering of her chains as well as metaphorically through mental clarity and galvanized hope. However, one crucial point, which Haeefe-Thomas conveys is that queerness, particularly Tituba and Hester's queer relationship introduces Tituba to notions of feminism. She points to the last pages of the novel where Tituba remarks that Hester "'is pursuing her dreams of creating a world of women that will be more just and humane' (Condé 1992: 178)" (173). While Haeefe-Thomas does not further unpack this quote, my interest in it lies in Tituba's acknowledgement of other worlds. Particularly, she explicitly finds humanity and justice, that is, liberation within the world of women, within the world of queer relationships. However, as Haeefe-Thomas goes on to argue, "Tituba is queer beyond relations of the flesh...in death Tituba moves beyond being the lover of people of all genders and ethnicities to become a bird, a goat or even 'the sound of the wind as it whistles through the great trees on the hills' (179). Tituba's queerness and strength lies in her liminality and her ability to shapeshift" (173). In shapeshifting and taking multiple forms and resisting any singular definition of the body; in resisting the prescribed meanings of labels and finding her

own signification through emotion and love; in practicing this ever-mutating process of self-creation: Tituba practices the queer aspect essential to disidentification. As Muñoz argues, “to perform queerness is to constantly disidentify, to constantly find oneself thriving on sites where meaning does not properly ‘line up’” (78). With no body, no applicable labels, and no regard for the materiality of those former and the latter, Tituba necessarily fails to line up properly. Still, this failure remains her greatest strength. Through this ultimate act of queerness and disidentification Tituba can finally declare, “Yes, I am happy now” (178).

Chapter Two: Is the Uterus a Grave?

The title of this chapter refers to Leo Bersani's piece, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Published in 1987, Bersani's essay responds to the homosexual panic and misogyny underlying the media's depiction of homosexual men and the AIDS crisis. In one of the essay's most revelatory sections, Bersani brings us to the conclusion that gay men bear a striking resemblance to the female prostitutes of the nineteenth century: "The realities of syphilis in the nineteenth century and of AIDS today 'legitimate' a fantasy of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased; and promiscuity in this fantasy, far from merely increasing the risk of infection, is the *sign of infection*. Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction." (211, emphasis in original). In a footnote to this point, he elaborates: "The fact that the rectum and the vagina, as far as the sexual transmission of the HIV virus is concerned, are privileged loci of infection is of course a major factor in this legitimizing process" that solidifies the hostility targeted at the queer community (211). For Bersani, as for Michel Foucault whose work deeply influences the essay, sex and sexuality is about power. Accordingly, "in a world of male power—penile power—fucking is the essential sexual experience of power and potency and possession" (Dworkin in Bersani 214). Yet, if we continue with this assumption, what might happen when penetration results not in sexual victory and vigor, but in loss and infection? Then, it would seem that the risk of infection threatens to disrupt the very power that is culturally inherent to the phallus. Infection threatens to reverse the "passive" sexual position of the rectum and the vagina, placing it back onto the "penetrator" and catapulting the realization that "*to be penetrated is to abdicate power*" (212, emphasis in original). Bersani's essay introduces us to a queered positionality that is inextricably linked to death, but this is a positionality that should be

“celebrated”; if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal...of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death” (222). If the rectum is a grave, it is a grave that opens up new worlds.

Through this chapter’s title, I invoke the work of Bersani and Lee Edelman who finds himself taken with Bersani’s anti-assimilationist argument as well as the “antisocial force that queerness might better name” (Edelman 39). But more crucially, I shift the essay’s emphasis away from the rectum and toward the uterus as a site of power, reproduction, and death. In a 1997 interview with Michael Silverblatt on the KCRW radio show *Bookworm*, Jamaica Kincaid declares, “We live in a world where...for many people, the happy ending is death. ... [Where] for many people, the happy ending is [saying], ‘Look, I don’t have to do this anymore. I’m dead’ ... I don’t believe in happiness. I don’t believe in romance. I believe that all of these things [are] the aspirations of the defeated” (Kincaid, 00:20:00 – 00:20:47). While happiness and romance are universal values, the often move through deeply feminine worlds. Examining the genre expectations of romance fiction readers, Janice Radway finds that the majority of (women) readers expect romance plots to end with a happy ending (67). Additionally, “women generally agree that bed-hopping or promiscuous sex, a sad ending, rape, physical torture, and weak heroes have no place in romance” (73). Thus, happiness and romance are not only the desires of the “defeated,” they are also in part, the desires of the feminine.³ Yet, what does it mean to link

³ I find it important to interject and make clear that my intention is not to reinforce the gendered expectations and stereotypes that surround traditional (and overly simplistic) conceptualizations of femininity. Rather, I want to emphasize the particular legacies that underwrite Kincaid’s quote and how it radically challenges those same legacies. Unfortunately, Kincaid’s status as a female author signifies a slew of expectations surrounding romance, love, and woman’s relationship to men within her writing. While her response addresses the claim that her fiction is

together ideas of femininity and defeat? Certainly, it recalls the histories of gender-based domination that Bersani and other scholars articulate. But beyond that, it calls forward the death and feminine non-being that pervades Kincaid's historically-rooted novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). Reflecting on her marriage to Philip Bailey, Xuela, the narrator remarks, "Romance is the refuge of the defeated; the defeated...need a sweet tune to soothe themselves, for their whole being is a wound" (Kincaid 216). This image of the "defeated" repeats throughout the entire novel, often taking the shape of Xuela's absent mother who belong to "the Carib people [that] had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden" (16). Accordingly, the "defeated" connotes more than loss, it represents a body that is feminine, a body profoundly shaped by colonial subjugation. Yet, this same body is oriented toward death—the death of Xuela's mother, the death of the indigenous people that came before her; her body is, as Xuela states, a giant and gaping "wound," an image that recalls a terminal existence and the yonic symbol of femininity.

All this explication is not to take us away from the matter at hand. The question still remains, is the uterus a grave? In posing this question, I seek to queer femininity while also preserving Bersani's anti-assimilationist celebration of non-normative positionality. Using Jamaica Kincaid's fictional *Autobiography*, I argue that femininity carries with it a radical potential for liberatory queerness, primarily (and ironically) through the avenues of reproduction. I will begin my argument by considering the ways in which femininity can be, and ultimately is, queered, paying particular attention to the construction and emergence of the "femme," an

"merciless," it too comments on the presumption that a female author, the paragon of tenderness, *cannot* be so merciless—that cruelty and stoic sorrow is the content of male writers.

embodied position that “is inherently ‘queer’” (Brushwood Rose and Camileri 13). In investigating the “femme,” I turn to Kincaid’s Xuela, examining the ways in which she is queered by her society and how she consequently queers herself. I find it important to note that queerness is often imposed, but when identity is claimed by its subject and action done to one’s self, queerness becomes agential. How, then, is agential queerness enacted within the pages of Kincaid’s novel? This question stands central to this chapter’s analysis. One of the biggest points of discussion resides in the process of reproduction, childbirth, and motherhood. For this discussion, I borrow extensively from Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004), which argues that queerness “is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end” (19). Edelman proclaims a vision of queerness that is inextricably linked to death through the queer body’s failure and refusal to reproduce. However, this disruption to “reproductive futurism” is deeply political, existing as an “oppositional politics implicit in the practice of queerness” (16). I read the idea of failure alongside Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), which suggests that failure is also deeply ontological. Halberstam contends that “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well,” but failure can also propose “more surprising ways of being in the world” (3-4). Thus, failure becomes generative—it births not a child, but the self. Failure and death, I argue, free up the body. It rejects, or perhaps even releases, the expectations and impositions that cut into and defeat one’s body. Hence, through queer failure, especially the queer failure of the uterus, subjects can find freedom.

Early in the novel’s introduction, Xuela reveals to the reader with the aphoristic narration we come to associate as her voice, “In a place like this, brutality is the only real inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given” (Kincaid 5). Brutality and cruelty are, of

course, the gifts of colonialism. It is no coincidence that “the first words [Xuela] learned to read” were from a map entitled ““THE BRITISH EMPIRE”” (14, emphasis in original). As Anne McClintock writes in *Imperial Leather* (1995), “European imperialism was, from the outset, a violent encounter with preexisting hierarchies of power that took shape not as the unfolding of its own innate destiny but as untidy, opportunistic interference with other regimes of power” (6). Imperialist outposts in the Caribbean “imported” structuring hierarchies of class, race, gender, and sexuality which were then reoriented and molded to fit into the existing social structures of colonized societies. These hierarchies shape the “position that [Xuela and others like her] were expected to occupy” (Kincaid 18). Namely, the position of feminine submission, heterosexual alignment, racial inferiority, and impoverished dwellings. These demands manifest as visceral sensations for Xuela: “To my teachers I seemed quiet and studious; I was modest, which is to say, I did not seem to them to have any interest in the world of my body or anyone else’s body. This wearying demand was only one of many demands made on me simply because I was female” (41-42). Life as a woman comes with “wearying demand[s]” that silence the individual’s voice and the body’s desire. Consequently, the women that surround her are some variation of dead, either failing to exist physically, or existing solely as abject figures or the possessions of men. Xuela’s mother died at her birth, leaving nothing behind but her name and a sense of loss that left her daughter “vulnerable, hard, and helpless” (4). Xuela’s step-mother competes with Xuela for her husband’s love. She speaks to her step-daughter in French Patois, “an attempt...to make an illegitimate of [Xuela], to associate [her] with the made-up language of people regarded as not real” (30-31). Through the rejection of Xuela’s existence, her step-mother reveals the emptiness that underlies female existence, for language allows woman to be so easily be undone,

pushed into the zone of non-being. The step-mother attempts to reify her “self” and her “liveliness” not through the occupation of a human positionality, but by making herself more readily available to a male’s grasp, as if she were an object. Likewise, Xuela’s teacher, “a woman who had been trained by Methodist missionaries... found in [her African ancestry] a source of humiliation and self-loathing,...[wearing] despair like an article of clothing, like a mantel, or a staff on which she leaned constantly, a birthright which she would pass on” to her students (15). Her relationship to an objectified despair and shame too renders her an object, one whose interiority relies solely upon extrinsically imposed affect.

Xuela’s mother, step-mother, and primary school teacher provide a one-dimensional vision of femininity in which traditional formulations of womanhood are embraced alongside colonial values. They are the products of a particular body logic, a “bio-logic” as Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí posits, shaped by imperialism. For Oyèwùmí, Western thought colonizes brown and black women’s bodies, inflicting on their surfaces a “body-reasoning and bio-logic that derives from the biological determinism inherent in Western thought” (x) and which elaborates body-type “in relation to and in opposition to another category: man; [as a result] the presence or absence of certain organs determines social position” (ix-x).⁴ Following Oyèwùmí’s argument, queer bodies are those that fail to cohere to the logic of white heteronormativity. Cathy Cohen further elucidates this point:

⁴ Thus, women are not seen as subjects, and hardly ever people, in their own right—instead, women become perverse, biologically “wrong” representations of the male. The overly abject positionalities that characterize these women places them within the demarcated lines of white heteronormativity.

There must be an understanding [within queer theory] of the ways our multiple identities work to limit the entitlement and status some receive from obeying a heterosexual imperative. For instance, how would queer activists understand politically the lives of women—in particular women of color—on welfare, who may fit into the category of the heterosexual, but whose sexual choices are not perceived as normal, moral, or worthy of state support? (442)

That is to say, queerness is profoundly non-normative. Sexual preferences only comprise a portion of the shifting orientations (to race, to masculinity, to class, etc.) that circumscribe the body. Moreover, queerness is deeply shaped by the aberrations foundational to the colonizing narratives. Consequently, Xuela, by enacting a sexuality that is entrenched in excess and self-love, firmly roots herself in the realm of the queer.

Xuela's sexual desire and love is never directed at or shared with another individual; rather it always refers to her self. Reflecting on the contemptuous manner in which her step-mother taught her to wash her body, Xuela says:

My human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on me. I responded in a fashion by now characteristic of me: whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm, the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing—those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted. (Kincaid 32-33)

As she teaches her how to wash, her step-mother's hands are "cold," causing Xuela pain and reminding her that the two women "would never love each other" (33). The cold hands recall an emotionless relationship, but they also reflect the subjugating nature of relationships under colonialism. The two women do not touch one another; rather one imposes touch on the other. This touch is restrictive, enforcing rules about how the body is meant to materialize. Significantly, this touch occurs during a scene where Xuela is taught about cleanliness. As McClintock states, "Soap and cleaning rituals became central to the demarcation of body boundaries and the policing of social hierarchies" (33). Notions of cleanliness reinforced ideas of who was human and who was inhuman, natural and unnatural. The notion of naturalness rejects the patriarchal bio-logic that posited "the male body [as] the standard for the 'normal' or 'neutral' [or 'natural'] body in accounts of experience and subjectivity" and positioning "women's bodies and female experience...as essentially deviant" (Dolezal 107). Thus, cleanliness becomes less about hygiene and more about body control, about "disciplining" the body and "appointing the behaviors that are appropriate" for it (107). Xuela's self-love is subversive, reversing the disciplining rhetoric of shame and dehumanization. Even though parts of her body cause "offense," she continues to love them. The smell of her "unwashed mouth" and "unwashed feet" are not sources of shame, but rather pride. She reclaims her body by calling it a "human form" and listing her anatomical features while describing them as lush and "natural."

As Xuela grows older and experiences puberty, her self-love transforms into self-eroticization. That is to say, the admiration of her body develops sexual connotations:

It was around then, too, that the texture of my body and the smell of my body began to change; coarse hairs appeared under my arms and in the space between my legs where there had been none, my hips widened, my chest thickened and swelled up slightly at first, and a deep space formed between my two breasts;.... I used to stare at myself in an old piece of broken glass. ...The sight of my changing self did not frighten me.... And so, too, the smell of my underarms and between my legs changed, and this change pleased me. ...My hands almost never left those places, and when I was in public, these same hands were always not far from my nose, I so enjoyed the way I smelled, then and now. (Kincaid 58-59)

As a child, Xuela's self-perception relied heavily on scent. However, upon experiencing hormonal changes, her focus shifts to that which is visual. Zones which were previously gender neutral and non-erogenous morph into erotic flesh and Xuela falls in love with those aspects of the female body that are often sexualized—the hips, the breasts, the vagina. She remarks that her hands “almost never left those places,” emphasizing the manner in which her body becomes a vehicle for pleasure. Smell still plays an important role to her, but its purpose is redirected toward a sexualized pleasure. It is precisely her smell, its “pungent [and] sharp” nature, that pleases her (58). The erotic emphasis of her body queers Xuela's self-love. That is to say, her (erotic) love stands counter to, or against the heterosexual model of womanhood. Gazing into her makeshift mirror, Xuela expresses desire for the female form, and even more specifically her own. Not only does this celebration reject the social shame that disciplines women, but it also renders the male unnecessary, for the phallus plays no role in the formulation of Xuela's pleasure. This realization is particularly damning to a heterosexual model that cannot fathom

women with man, sexual desire without male presence. While autoeroticism should not be conflated with homosexuality, there is something to be said for the connection between self-love and queer love, or the love for a body similar to one's own. Just as queer love is often seen as an "unconventional" method for expressing desire, so too erotic self-love presents an "unconventional" method of expressing desire and summoning female pleasure (Rosenman 87).

Xuela's self-love takes over her relationships with men. Her first sexual encounter is initiated after Monsieur LaBatte finds her behind the house "running the fingers of [her] left hand through the small thick patch of hair between [her] legs" (Kincaid 70). As LaBatte and Xuela hold each other's gaze, she removes her "fingers from between [her] legs and [brings] them up to [her] face" so as to smell herself. (70). He eventually approaches her and asks her to remove her clothes, then the tryst moves to the "room in which he counted his money" (70). As the encounter continues, Xuela details the "long sharp line of pain...and pleasure" she felt as well as the "cry of sadness" that escapes her throat (71). These seemingly negative responses display a combativeness inherent to the scene, transforming Xuela from a passive recipient to an active participant. Sex, for Xuela, represents another avenue to pursue her pleasure, and it continues to exist as separate from male presence while simultaneously borrowing the phallus for her own purposes. She expresses this very sentiment, maintaining that "the body of a man is not what makes him desirable, it is what his body might make *you* feel when it touches *you* that is the thrill, anticipating what his body will make *you* feel" (70, emphasis mine). Xuela's narration objectifies the male body—a man is not a "he" but rather an "it"—and treats it as a tool for making love to one's own self, as tool to execute one's own desires. This tendency extends toward the other sexual relationship Xuela pursues. As with LaBatte, whose "unbeautiful" body

fails to have any real appeal, Philip Bailey's body makes Xuela uncomfortable. "I could not bear to see him naked...so I closed my eyes and turned around and removed his belt" (154). In both instances, the male body figures as unnecessary and unpleasant. Xuela's investment lies not within intimacy and closeness between her and her partner, but rather within a desire for her own pleasure. She describes the encounter in a matter-of-fact series of events:

I secured [the belt] tightly around my wrists and I raised my hands in the air, and with my face turned sideways I placed my chest against a wall. I made him stand behind me, I made him lie on top of me, my face beneath his; I made him lie in back of me and place his hand in my mouth and I bit his hand in a moment of confusion, a moment when I could not tell if I was in agony or pleasure; I made him kiss my entire body, starting with my feet and ending with the top of my head. (154-155, emphasis mine)

This quotation emphasizes each occurrence of "I" to demonstrate the active role Xuela takes in the scene. This active position challenges the narrative of women as passive recipients of sex, a point I find in Bersani as articulated earlier within this chapter. No sexual act is done to her; rather she does it to herself.⁵ The repetition of "I made him" strips away Philip's agency,

⁵ I want to emphasize and acknowledge the fact that Xuela's sexual encounters are largely influenced by power dynamics. This sentence in particular recalls an anti-rape rhetoric that places the culpability of sexual assault on the woman—the "she asked for it" narrative, if you will. While I read the sex between Xuela and Philip as consensual, I find it irresponsible to continue without recognizing that other readers may find the opposite to be true. My intention behind this sentence and the contextualizing close reading is not to reject the possibility of rape; neither is it an attempt to whitewash what happens in the scene. Instead, I seek a new mode of examining interracial sexual relationships in the postcolonial context where the (formerly) colonized agent is capable of making choices in reference to and in spite of history.

rendering him a pleasurable object that Xuela merely uses. Exploring the topic of Sadoomasochism in the novel, Gary Holcomb and Kimberly Holcomb write, “She is the one who is ‘fascinated’ by the feelings she takes from exposure and restraint. She is actively aroused and in pursuit of pleasure rather than the object of someone else’s desire” (972). As in the case of Monsieur LaBatte, Xuela’s autoeroticism drives her engagement to Philip. She is more intrigued by the notion of making love to herself through another being as opposed to making love to another. Thus, sex becomes less about the relationship between (and separation of) “I” and the “Other”; instead sex, trapped within a Lacanian mirror stage, is about the love of “I” and the desire to exert control over one’s own body.

The majority of Xuela’s sexual relationships are with white men, playing out a sexual taboo of “white male master [and] black female slave” (Holcomb and Holcomb 972). As Xuela and Philip Bailey begin to undress each other, she notes that she must close her eyes, for “his skin in its almost skinniness would remind [her] of the world, the world that was outside the room which was the dark night, the world that was beyond the dark night” (Kincaid 154). Philip’s white skin reminds her of a “history of suffering and humiliation and enslavement” (48). At the same time, the emphasis on color and flesh recalls Xuela’s memories of her father who “had inherited the ghostly paleness of his own [white] father” (49). With the word occurring at least eighty times throughout the text, the figure of the father plays an important role with Kincaid’s *Autobiography*. For Xuela, the father represents histories of sexual exploitation and body possession. In a statement with unmistakable colonial undertones, Xuela declares, “I did not want to belong to anyone; I did not want anyone to belong to me” (Kincaid 104). Xuela says this in response to her father’s comforting assertion that she, along with her half-siblings and

step-mother, “belong” to him. While her father’s comment seeks to replenish the familial legitimacy others have often diminished, the paternalistic tone invokes particular colonial histories of patronizing fatherhood, heterosexual family, and the nation-state:

Since the subordination of woman to man and child to adult was deemed a natural fact,

hierarchies within the nation could be depicted in familial terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature. The metaphoric depiction of social hierarchy as natural and familial—the “national family,” ...the colony as a “family of black children ruled over by a white father”—depended in this way on the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere. (357-358)

No doubt, the image of the family undergirds many of the demands faced by colonized women.

Women, as colonized subjects, must submit to men, for that is the structure the family takes; they must become objects, for that is the manner in which the family is formed—through the “filling” of a passive female vessel so that she may produce a child. At the same time, the image of the family, held within itself the violence of colonization. Fatherhood was not just a familial position, but a subjugating position that reinforced the property status (as chattel, as forced labor, as sexual objects) of women of color. Accordingly, the high social status and racial mixing that characterizes Xuela’s father cannot be overlooked. In saying that Xuela “belongs” to him, her father says that Xuela “belongs” to the colonized portion of his identity, to the flesh that “looked more like the victor (the Scots-man) than the vanquished (the African people)” (Kincaid 186).

This belongingness reiterates the possession likely to be behind her grandparents’ relationship:

“His mother [her paternal grandmother] would not have been born into slavery, but her parents most certainly would have been enslaved people; and so, too, his father then could not have been

an owner of slaves but his parents might have been” (182). Xuela claims there is only one person to whom she would have consented to “own” her, yet that person—her mother—“had never lived to do so” (104). Xuela refuses to “belong” to anyone, especially a man. In refusing to “belong” to anyone, Xuela also rejects the basic familial and sexual principles that structure her heterosexual society. In this way, she is also queer.

The spectre of motherhood follows Xuela throughout the novel, both literally and figuratively. Each chapter is encased by a “slowly fill[ed] out photograph of a West Indian woman [dressed] in her finery of patterned skirt, plain blouse, scarf, and headscarf” (Sharrad 54). The woman is presumed to be either Xuela or her mother. Just as the portrait repeats, so too does the dream image of the dead mother who “come[s] down a ladder,” perpetually moving down, but with little else of herself revealed—“only her heels, and the hem of her gown” (Kincaid 18). But attached to the image of the mother is the child who she births, loses, and/or raises. This repetitive image of the child recalls the work of Lee Edelman, who considers the emphasis society places on the role of reproduction, and subsequently, the child. Central to Edelman’s thesis is the notion of reproductive futurism, which he defines as “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of queer resistance” and existence (2). For Edelman, reproductive futurism has profound political meaning used by individuals to “affirm a structure, [and] to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (3). The figure of the child is key, for the Child “remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention” (3). That is to say, political discourse is

pursued in the name of the Child. We undertake political projects for the benefit of this imagined child and the promise of a better future for him. However, this discourse of reproduction and its focus on the Child inevitably excludes the queer body, for the process of heteronormative and biological reproduction is alien to queerness. Queerness, as Edelman states, “names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3). Yet, not only is the queer body marginal to the political center, Edelman expands his thesis and posits that through its exclusion from reproductive futurism “queerness...figures, outside and beyond...[into] the place of the social order’s death drive: a place, to be sure of abjection expressed in [a] stigma, [that is] sometimes fatal” (3). He cites the P.D. James novel *Children of Men* as a potent example of “pro-procreative ideology,” for “‘If there is a baby, there is a future, there is redemption.’ If, however, there is *no baby* and in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments [and queers] understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of...life itself” (13). Thus, the queer body not only suffers from the very same socio-political death articulated by Orlando Patterson within his iconic work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), but also the queer body becomes a metaphorical site of decay, which renders its flesh invisible and its values irrelevant.

What, then, does it mean for Xuela to have “broken her [womb] deliberately” (Kincaid 157)? To begin with, Xuela’s self-inflicted sterility represents what feminist activists have termed “*seiz[ing] the means of reproduction*” (Murphy 2, emphasis in original). Seizing the means of reproduction is a form of reclaiming control over the body, over how and when it produces a child. Too, it “severs the chains of a patriarchy that fundamentally depended on the

uneven material distribution of mammalian biological reproductive labor into male and female bodies” (5). If the child is the vehicle through which the father—the husband, the man—controls the mother—the wife, the woman—then self-inflicted sterility is the means through which a woman inhibits such bio-discipline, and through which woman comes to belong only to herself. Yet, alongside the man, self-inflicted sterility purposefully rejects, or casts out the child.

Following her affair with Monsieur LaBatte, Xuela grows sick. As Monsieur’s wife, Madame LaBatte, holds Xuela in her arms, she informs her that she is ““with child”” (Kincaid 81). Xuela is “struck [with] terror”: “At first I did not believe her, and then I believed her completely and instantly felt that if there was a child in me I could expel it through the sheer force of my will. I willed it out of me” (81). Words like “expel,” “force,” and “will” depict the fervor and violence with which Xuela separates herself from the child. Through this abortive act that leaves her sterile for the rest of her life, Xuela demonstrates her utter unwillingness to reproduce and as Edelman would argue, look toward the future. Xuela confirms this sensation, stating, “I did not see the future, and that is perhaps as it should be. ...I did not look straight ahead of me, I always looked back” (139). In looking back, Xuela resigns herself to the realm of the dead. Like her husband, she has “no future” (221). In rejecting the child, in rejecting the future, Xuela embraces “a queer negativity...[whose] value...resides in its challenge to values as defined by the social, and thus...radical[ly] challenge[s] the very value of the social itself (Edelman 6). Xuela posits herself in relation to a queerness that resists the social signification of a “better future” whose execution inevitably reproduces the past. “And so,” as Edelman writes, “what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here” (31).

Through its queerness, its backwardness (that is, its profound *unfutureness*), and above all, its eradicated results, Xuela's self-inflicted sterility comes to embody failure. Jack Halberstam, writing in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) asserts, "for queers[,] failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon 'trying and trying again'" (3). Yet, while failure may be queer, so too is it feminine. Halberstam recalls the Freudian conceptualization of "a femininity defined as a failed masculinity" (125). He also notes that "from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures" (4). In saying that Xuela fails at femininity, I mean to say two things. First, she fails to align herself with patriarchal demands that require her passivity and hidden sexuality. Secondly, she fails to orient herself toward motherhood, eviscerating the concept of the Child and the potentiality of the womb. History is well acquainted with visions of failing women, especially as it pertains to the topic of infertility and (absent) motherhood. Discussing the historical implications of fertility in *Body Failure* (2013), Wendy Mitchinson quotes a medical text written in 1944 by James William Kennedy and Archibald Donald Campbell: "The value of the uterus is to be estimated by its probable sterility or fertility" (133). She explicates,

The problem of infertility was often directed at the woman [never the male, a theme which continues to persist]. Not only did her body represent the problem but the problem affected her worth or the worth of the uterus, one of the major organs that differentiated her from man. A failure in its function resulted in a perceived uselessness and lessened

the differentiation between the two sexes—in essence made the woman less womanly.

(133)

The failure of the uterus is two times queer, subverting womanhood through its opposition to sexual and maternal construction. That is, the uterus becomes queer by taking a “less womanly” shape, in narrowing its distance to man; and queer (i.e. askew) because it cannot ever become a mother. In failing its “function,” the uterus literally becomes a grave. It cannot perpetuate life; sperm enters only to then die, buried alive in a fleshy coffin. While infertility marks the uterus as a literal grave, the fertile uterus, despite its fecund ground, exists as a metaphorical grave for many.

As with infertility, failure is often accompanied by a narrative of passivity—no one ever *truly* wants to fail; no woman ever *truly* wants to be infertile, childless. The logic of undesired failure is wholly subverted within Kincaid’s novel where death, the failure of life, is pervasive and often idealized. Xuela experiences menstruation for the first time at the age of twelve: “It appeared that first time so thick and red and plentiful that it was impossible to think of it as only an omen, a warning of some kind, a symbol; it was just its real self, my menstrual flow, and I knew immediately that its failure to appear regularly after a certain interval could only mean a great deal of trouble for me” (Kincaid 57). The image of the menstrual blood—red and plentiful as if something has just died—denotes the death Xuela comes to associate with her fertility. It is through the child, through the reproductiveness of the uterus that woman comes to die, losing her independent self. Accordingly, Xuela’s visions of motherhood often unfurl alongside visions of death. This relationship is reflected both through her constant references to her dead mother as well as through the natural imagery that structures Xuela’s settings. She describes flowers,

traditional symbols of femininity and fertility, as “sweet [and] sickening [the] smell of something dead, something animal, rotting” (62). At first, she loved the “white flowers [that fell] from the cedar tree,” whose petals “still fresh, a soft kiss of pink and white” rested gently on the ground. But as the day gave way to night and then day again, the flowers, “crushed, wilted, and brown, [were] a nuisance to the eye” (17). Considering this reading alongside Xuela’s claim that her menstrual blood was “just its real self” reveals the distance she places between her and the signification of motherhood and fertility. The menstrual blood is not a part of *herself*, rather it is its own self, separate from Xuela. This first menstruation scene foreshadows Xuela’s self-inflicted sterility as she reflects, “Perhaps I knew then that the child in me would never be stilled enough to allow me to have a child of my own” (57). Hence, when met with a budding pregnancy, Xuela turns to Sange-Sange, a local woman who gives her “a cupful of thick black syrup to drink” whose contents cause the blood to flow “from between [her] legs slowly and steadily like an eternal spring” (82). For Xuela, uterine failure is a choice:

I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew then that this refusal would be complete. I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children. I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. ...I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. I would cover their bodies with diseases, embellish skins with thinly crusted sores...I would condemn them to live in an empty space frozen in the same posture in which they had been born. I would throw them from a great height; every bone in their body would be broken...healing never at all.

(96-98)

The superb imagery of this scene depicts Xuela as a supreme force, the only force in control of her being. She constructs herself as well as those around her and like a “god,” the other’s existence is so intertwined with her own that at every moment her potential to destroy life is massive. Xuela chooses “not to choose the Child” (Edelman 31). In doing so, she rejects the very structures that overstate the Child’s importance and understate her own existence. Intriguingly, she draws a distinction between “being a mother” and “bearing children,” asserting that she would never become a mother. Motherhood becomes a stand-in for the oppressive social regimes that regulate women. However, “bearing children” comes to indicate what Halberstam would articulate as “alternative productions of the child that recognize in the image of the nonadult body a propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure” (120). Thus, the children Xuela bears are different iterations of herself; and her destruction of them, a perpetual growth—she is always being reborn.

Through Xuela, we come to see a failure as purposeful, and while failure need not be purposeful, seeking it out and reinterpreting its structure allows for new “modes of unbecoming” and “unbeing,” which “propose a different relation to knowledge” (Halberstam 23). Queerness and failure allow the body to constantly reinvent itself, “escap[ing] the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (3). Failure’s anarchist nature “lays claim to rather than rejects concepts like *emptiness, futility, limitation, ineffectiveness, sterility, unproductiveness*” (110, emphasis in original). In this manner, failure becomes productive, generative even. Through her purposeful destruction of the uterus, Xuela severs her ties to

traditional formulations as well as the option of reproductive futurism. She generates a new approach of womanhood that unravels those historical precedents set forth by the colonial state. The Edelman account of this action would focus solely on the way queerness and failure reject a sociopolitical rhetoric that actually constructs and oppresses the body. However, in reading Kincaid's "colonial rage," Halberstam proposes a differing interpretation with more solid ontological roots. He posits that Xuela "literally refuses her role as colonized by refusing to be *anything at all*" (131, emphasis mine). "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies" (2008), a paper delivered at Tel Aviv well before the publication of *Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam writes, "Kincaid provides her readers with a motherless protagonist who, in turn, does not want to be a mother, to reproduce under colonialism or to claim kinship with her colonized father. She opposes colonial rule precisely by refusing to accommodate herself to it or to be responsible for reproducing it in any way" (149). Xuela's actions recall the decisions of enslaved mothers to whom "having children was understood to be an obstruction to escape and no protection against sexual abuse. To prevent children from following their fate, slave mothers sometimes resorted to costly measures—among them, running away, infanticide, or abortion" (Fleischner 179). Thus, abortion and self-inflicted infertility become methods of resisting colonial subjugation. They are methods of halting the cycle of violence and possession. Moreover, failure and negativity establish Xuela's feminism, which does not "resist through an active war on colonialism, but [through] a mode of femininity that self-destruction and in doing so brings the edifice of colonial rule down one brick at a time" (*Failure* 133).

So much rejection plagues Kincaid's novel and Xuela's relationship to gender that it becomes much too easy to align her with the male body. Let us note, however, that Xuela,

despite rejecting femininity and motherhood, does not wholly reject womanhood. Describing the manner in which Madame LaBatte convinced her husband to marry her, Xuela says, “she [Madame LaBatte] fed him food she had cooked in a sauce made up of her own menstrual blood, which bound him to her” (65). Wonder paints her narration as she, like Monsieur LaBatte, is bewitched the seductive energy of woman. The “witchiness” of this scene provides firm ground upon which to inquire how Xuela relates to womanhood. Quite simply, Xuela finds feminine power and energy in those representations of womanhood that are subversive and transgressive. To reiterate Halberstam’s argument, Xuela finds womanhood to be most powerful when it is failing (to be passive, to be normative, to be colonized). As a result, Xuela is queer—not because of homosexuality, but because she *radically revises femininity*. She inscribes within womanhood a new mode of being. And from this revision emerges the “femme,” a queer figure whose very nature rests upon failure.

In the introduction to *Brazen Femme: Queering Femininity* (2002), Chloë Brushwood Rose and Anna Camilleri describe the “combative” and shifty nature of the femme: “What cannot be seen, what cannot be held or pinned down, is where femme is—she cannot be domesticated” (11-12). While the femme is a queer figure, her queerness stems from “the broadest application of the word—as bent, unfixated, unhinged, and finally unhyphenated. Released from the structures of binary models of sexual orientation and gender and sex” (12). Femme also has roots in “a way of being that cannot be described as quintessentially feminine” (13). In other words, it springs from modes of being that fail at traditional, oppressive femininity. Like Xuela who “came to know [the world as] full of dangerous and treachery,” the femme moves through unsafe spaces, but too like Xuela, the femme does not “become afraid” or

“cautious” (Kincaid 41). While Xuela’s existence and identity is incredibly intertwined with her body’s presentation and structure, her femme identity “is never tied to her biological sex” (12). Instead, it is tied to the limits and choices she imposes upon her biology. That is not to say that the femme identity as a gender experience is solely performative. As Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh elaborate within *Brazen Femme*’s conclusion: “She [the femme] makes a scene...steals the show,” but that is because “she *is* the show” (165). The femme does not perform and cohere her gender to predetermined “rules,” she creates her own world, her own self: “And now, in the postmodern reign of The Queer, the fem(me) reappears, signifier of another kind of gender trouble. Not a performer of legible gender transgression, like the butch and his sister the drag queen, but a betrayer of legibility itself” (167). Through disruption and unpredictability, the femme practices an agential queerness that liberates the body. The femme, aware of the “naturalized notions of femininity” that haunt her (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 14), breaks up and breaks with the heterosexual feminine skin originally given to her by society. This break from the normative delivers her to herself, permitting a fullness of being, a fullness of inhabiting the body.

The femme-queer births herself. The femme as Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker argue, is a “model of critical reshaped femininity and assertive sexuality,” one whose modulation is “transgressive, disruptive, and *chosen*” (1, emphasis mine). This notion of the chosen is vital to the formulation of liberatory femininity. Therefore, to be a femme is to choose an identity; femme(ininity) is truly possessing a body, especially one whose construction occurs in spite of the external pressures of colonial patriarchy. This moment of self-creation is most clearly visible in Xuela’s abortion scene. As she lies on the ground of Sange-Sange’s home—pain stirring her

insides, blood flowing from between her legs—she becomes morphs into “a new person” (Kincaid 83). Like a newly born child, Xuela delivers herself: “I had carried my own life in my own hands” (83). In this moment of utter defiance, Xuela “avoids love, family, and intimacy...disconnect[ing] herself from all of those things that would define her” (Halberstam 132). The death of “love, family, and intimacy” is wrapped up in the death of the uterus, in its utter infertility. Yet, the uterus’ deadness is radically dynamic, never stagnant, for its death symbolizes the death of an oppressive feminine regime and the birth of something new—the femme. Examining the traditional model of femininity as presented to her through Madame LaBatte, Xuela comments: “I was alive; I could tell that standing before me was a woman who was not. It was almost as if I sensed a danger and quickly made myself a defense; in seeing the thing I might be, I too early became its opposite” (Kincaid 66). The “opposite” to which Xuela refers is not masculinity, but a femme-ness that undoes its elder counterpart. This undoing is liberating, freeing up the body and its possibilities. After a sexual encounter with Roland, Xuela reflects on the longing and loss in his gaze:

Feeling my womb contract, I crossed the room, still naked; small drops of blood spilled from inside me, evidence of my refusal to accept his silent offering. And Roland looked at me, his face expressing confusion. Why did I not bear his children? He could feel the times that I was fertile, and yet each month blood flowed away from me, and each month I expressed confidence at its imminent arrival and departure, and always I was overjoyed with the accuracy of my prediction. When I saw him like that, on his face a look that was a mixture—confusion, dumbfoundedness, defeat—I felt much sorrow for him, for his life

was reduced to...the number of times he brought the monthly flow of blood to a halt; his life was reduced to women. (175-176)

Xuela describes Roland in a pitiful manner, focusing on the confused eyes that gaze upon her as she stands before him “refus[ing] to accept his silent offering.” The offering is, of course, pregnancy. Rather than allow him to speak, she repeats his question in her own voice, “Why did I not bear his children,” maintaining the control she exercises over the childbirth narrative as well as her own body. This control is expressed in other ways, specifically through her “confidence” and “overjoyed” reaction to her body’s indication of infertility. With Xuela in full control of her body, Roland loses agency and the power that has historically defined the male. In this way, he becomes a pitiful figure, confused and dumbfounded. But beyond such pity, Roland is defeated. Xuela has defeated Roland by refusing his seed and preserving her freedom. She comments further, distinguishing herself from Roland, for her livelihood and self-perception does not reply upon anyone other than herself. Xuela exists as her own and for her own self. Roland, however, lives a life “reduced to women.” In building his life around women, Roland fails to live for himself. Thus, Xuela’s being stands in direct opposition to Roland, her inability (refusal) to exist inside of male power undoes her femininity, allowing space for the femme to develop and emerge. Knowing that Xuela’s mother died the moment her daughter was born, the title begs the question, who is the mother? Kincaid answers with a femme character who refuses to be defined by anyone. Xuela is the mother of herself, “manifest[ing] herself through her words” and actions (Schine “A World as Cruel as Job’s”). Through self-creation the body can grow freely; it can take shape without the suffocating mold.

To return to the chapter's question, is the uterus a grave? The answer is yes. The uterus and its fecund possibility signifies the end of woman—the end of her power, the end of her independence—and the triumph of oppressive forces. Thus, the uterus becomes the metaphorical grave in which woman buries herself upon becoming a mother. Yet, this metaphor can give way to a literality that posits the uterus as a “dead zone,” a corporeal site where sperm go to die and the promise of the Child withers. Metaphorically and literally, the uterus is a grave. That said, we should not view the grave as a wholly negative thing. There is productive possibility within the literal grave. In voiding motherhood, in rejecting a traditional femininity whose existence is entirely wrapped up in the uterine cave, the infertile uterus permits woman to be liberated from the obligatory function of motherhood. The literal uterine grave and its abject failure invites woman to explore new modes of being, new modes of existing and moving through a space that structures itself around childbirth and feminine subjugation. Is the uterus a grave? Yes, but from its rotting flesh can grow a new plant whose queer circumstances produce entirely new worlds. Like the “primrose bush [that] bloomed unnaturally” in Xuela's front yard, “its leaves too large, its flowers showy, and [its] weeds everywhere” (Kincaid 170), the liberated femme grows from the queer circumstances. This femme, the paragon of productive failure, of regenerative death, of radical womanhood—this femme invents a new world and self, permitting the body new ways of being, new ways of decolonizing.

Chapter Three: Trans*Formation

I begin this chapter by asking, what is citizenship? In what ways is it inextricably linked to space, belonging, and movement? Considering these questions, I turn to the work of Jasbir Puar and Scott Lauria Morgensen, two scholars who examine the role of queerness in the process of nation building and citizenship. U.S. homonationalism, according to Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), is a field of power characterized by "the dual movement in which certain homosexual constituencies have embraced U.S. nationalist agendas and have also been embraced by nationalist agendas" (Puar xxiv). This embrace is a toxic touch, often occurring at the expense of the "orientalist other," and resulting in a framework that posits "queer as regulatory" (11). That is, through the negation of the other, a mission that "work[s] in conjunction with patriotic propaganda," homonationalism constructs an acceptable and tolerable queer body whose mainstream status relies upon the production of "the 'queer terrorist'" (xxv), a politically queer representation of the brown, abject, anti-nationalist body. Morgensen's definition, while similar, reads the concept through a lens of indigenous studies, re-inscribing U.S. colonial histories into Puar's term, which is much closer to contemporary American imperialism. Morgensen's essay, "Settler Homonationalism" defines the titular term as "the product of a biopolitical relationship between the sexual colonization of Native peoples and the normative settler formation of modern queer projects in the United States," but also outside the American context (106). Though operating within different marginalized communities, both Morgensen and Puar discuss the creation of a coalitional politics that meets the needs of one group at the expense of another. More succinctly, a coalitional politics founded upon imperial power that marginalizes the queer to reinforce the centrality of the heteronormative. Homonationalism provides us with a lens

through which we can examine the way bodies belong to, live within, and move through space(s). In what ways does the queer body cohere to or disrupt the nationalist structure? How does their shape react to surrounding national frameworks? Shani Mootoo's queer novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) examines these very questions in the context of ethnic spaces located within an overarching colonial state. Using Mootoo's novel as a starting point, this chapter will examine queer theory and transgender studies alongside post-structuralist readings of society and the nation state. I argue that Mootoo's novel provides us with a space whose diverse bodies find multiple modes of existence that challenge the nation state and its homonationalist agenda. Yet, despite its different modalities, the queer body carries with it a trans* quality—a quality that crosses and moves. This quality covers the body with a shiftiness and indeterminability that inhibits definition and possession. In other words, through trans* modalities the queer body finds room to escape colonial subjugation.

Before proceeding, I would like to acknowledge the fact that I use trans* in a nontraditional, and perhaps, as some may argue, incorrect manner. Writing in *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (2017), Jack Halberstam explains his investment in the asterisk: “The term ‘trans*’ uses the asterisk to hold open the many histories of variant bodies and the many ways in which those histories have been deployed” (51-52). Halberstam also cites Eva Haywood and Jami Weinstein who celebrate the “ranginess” of the asterisk:

The asterisk, a diminutive astral symbol miming a starfish's limby reach, follows trans and attaches to it, attaches it to something else.... Trans* is meant, in part, to break open the category of transgender, transwoman, or transman. It is recognized as “an effort” to include all noncisgender identities. The * is a paratactic: it denotes a database search, it

designates multiplication, it can be a disclaimer indexing the fine print, it indicates pseudonyms or names that have been changed, and, in computer code, asterisk around a word will embolden it. The multi-pointed asterisk is fingery; it both points and touches.

(52)

Trans* is capacious, able to encapsulate the variability of gender, its multiple shapes. Yet, it captures a categorization beyond gender. Returning to Haywood and Weinstein's example of computer code, the asterisk is commonly used to construct "regular expressions," a string of text used by search engine functions. In regex, the asterisk asks the program to look for all variations of words that begin with the letters that precede it. Thus, trans* may return the values "transgender" or "transsexual," but it may very well return "transcend," "transform," or "transcribe." In bringing this connotation to the surface, I do not mean to strip trans* of its gendered signification, but rather to elucidate its power and bring it out of the realm of identity politics, a goal Halberstam too places at the core of his work. I reiterate the alternate conceptualization of trans, one which Jasbir Puar articulates in the conclusion of her *TSQ* article "Disability" (2014): "trans as a motion, *not* an identity, and trans as a continuum of intensity, *not* identity" (80, emphasis mine).

Foucauldian resonances reside within homonationalism, for the concept is deeply biopolitical in both its foundation and production. Specifically, the foundational biopolitics of homonationalism "make subjects of queer modernities 'regulatory' over queered and 'terrorist' populations that are placed under terrorizing state control" (Morgensen 108). And the productive biopolitics of homonationalism "delineates not only which queers live and which queers die...but also *how* queers live and die" (Puar xii). Though simplistic, conceptualizing this

relationship between Foucauldian biopolitics and homonationalism will help us understand the way citizenship, queerness, and belonging operate within *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Within Mootoo's novel, queerness adopts a twofold meaning. Queer, in its most basic sense, is an embodied identity; it is the state of being outside of heteronormativity. In its second formulation, queer functions as a relational category—that is, queer as the state of constantly “being in flux, to be passing across sexualities, genders, desires, and practices” as well as a different manner of occupying space (Cunningham 170).⁶ Despite this twofold meaning, all queer bodies stand contrary, apart from, counter to the nation state. Tyler's desire to leave Lantanacamara reveals his inability to belong within or even dwell along the national structure:

After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacamara had much...more [to do] with wanting to be somewhere where my “perversion,” which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence.... I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. (Mootoo 47-48)

Although he does not explicitly name it, Tyler's “perversion” is a very pointed reference to his queer identity. Lantanacamara society imagines homosexuality as a perversion because of the manner in which it transgresses colonial heteronormative structures. It quite literally overturns the standards that construct the nation. Thus, that which is queer is outside the heteronormative, but also outside of the nation state. It is deeply anti-patriotic, as Puar would argue. Tyler's desire to leave Lantanacamara is not merely a projection of his failure to belong. More potently, his desire to leave is a response to a forceful push outward. That is, his desire to leave reflects a

⁶ Recall here, the shiftiness and perpetual movement embodied by trans*

political agenda that excludes the queer to cultivate a nation build upon “sexual exceptionalism,” a term which “signals distinction from [the aberrant] as well as excellence [beyond the aberrant]” as it pertains to a nation’s sexual subjects (Puar 3).

Puar’s definition of sexual exceptionalism makes explicit the term’s ability to carry bodies that are “both heterosexual and otherwise” (3). In other words, even those bodies that are relationally or sexually queer can be “exceptional.” Accordingly, the exceptional queer body regulates the aberrant queer. From this particular relationship one begins to wonder, what powers are bestowed to the exceptional queer that allows for such regulation? Morgensen argues that queer acceptance depends on adherences to the disciplinary processes residing behind colonial biopolitics: “The spectacular violence of a sovereign right of death was incorporated into the deadly logic of disciplinary regulation. Colonial brutality always targeted sexual transgressions to control Native communities...and [ultimately] defined Native people as racial and sexual populations for regulation” (111). In order to be accepted into the colonialist machine, bodies must find ways to reorient themselves toward white heteronormative values, a task which is achieved by disciplining the body. Through discipline, the body is molded and modified, identity is constructed, and “subjects are made” (Ehlers 4). Yet, disciplinary practices cannot operate without a structuring ideal. There is a reason why the presence of difference within the body often constitutes as an error, “a fall from grace, *a derivation from the original type*” (Oyèwùmí 1, emphasis in original). Race, gender, sexuality—each of these categories is constructed as an idealistic pedestal from which we can fall. Judith Butler too reveals this discovery, positing that heterosexuality is “an impossible ideal, a ‘fetish....’ It offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody,” and for this reason, so many are labelled sexual deviants

(Butler 155). Reading Susan Koshy's "Morphing Race into Ethnicity" (2001) alongside homonationalism, Puar discusses how disciplinary practices manifest as a self-regulation and orientative plays with distance that effectively break from one's prescribed groups: "These 'operations' [of race and class] involve what Koshy describes as 'class fraction...' produced through 'changed demographics, class stratifications, new immigration, and a global economy...thereby enabling opportunistic alliances between whites and different minority groups'" (25). Fractioning allows the aberrant body to "'escape scrutiny' because the distance impel[ed] from whiteness in cultural terms is abrogated through its proximity to 'whiteness as power through...class aspirations'" (26). The process of fractioning can also be conceptualized through corporal figurations that bring the body closer toward the very cultural imperatives (of heterosexuality, patriarchy, and whiteness) that determine their status as normative or queer, exceptional or aberrant.

I introduce concepts of discipline and homonationalism to theoretically ground the behavior and narrative of *Cereus Blooms at Night*. In particular, I borrow these concepts to contextualize the character of Chandin Ramchandin. Shifting between past memories and the present tense, *Cereus* begins with the story of Chandin Ramchandin, Mala's father. Chandin is the son of an "indentured field labourer from India" living in the part of Lantanacamara primarily inhabited by colonized subjects (Mootoo 26). After a visit from Reverend Ernest Thoroughly whose namesake resides in the English-settled Shivering Northern Wetlands (SNW), Chandin is taken in as the adopted son of the Thoroughly family. He attends Reverend Thoroughly's seminary and provides the brown community of Lantanacamara with the promise of being "the first one of all of we to get profession" (29). While this promise takes the shape of

an accomplishment, its purpose is stepped in a colonial homonationalist rhetoric. To further understand the latter concept, we must examine the juxtaposing characterizations of the Reverend and Chandin's father. The Reverend is described as "graceful, walking "with as much dignity as age and fatigue would allow" (27). His presence cannot be ignored as "the crunch of gravel and the ruckus of the horse and buggy [ride over] the dusty path" (27). The Reverend's sense of grandeur contrasts with Chandin's father whose depiction emphasizes modesty. Old Man Ramchandin's spine gives way to a "curvature" that stresses his own fatigue (49). His exhaustion comes from field labor, but also from keeping "himself awake...worrying about the future of his only child" (26). Scent is highlighted in the descriptions of Chandin's family. His mother, Janaki, who has spent the day cooking, "smell[s] of coals and charred eggplant and a sweat that embarrass[es] him with its pungency" (27). The home also becomes a point of comparison. Unlike the "harsh reality" of the Ramchandins' "two-room ajoupa quarters in the barracks" (27), the Reverend's home is marked by luxury. The Reverend's house has rooms to spare, including a living room that the family visits daily "for an hour of relaxation" (31). Hanging over the middle of the room is a chandelier with "leaf-shaped pendants that kicked off flickers of blue, red and violet light" that mesmerizes Chandin (31). Observing the chandelier, Chandin wonders "how many of the people in the cane field barracks had ever seen such a fine thing. He wishe[s] he could show them not only that item, but also the fine cabinets, carved chairs and side tables and lamps with fancy shades" (31).

In juxtaposing the appearances and homes of Old Man Ramchandin and the Reverend, we come to see the shame Chandin reads onto his family, and beyond that, his own skin. The scent of coal and sweat—indications of the family's poverty—embarrasses Chandin. The

memories of the barracks and cane fields almost haunt him, reminders of the lower status his parents occupy. Soon he begins to view the Reverend as “smarter-looking” and “smarter-acting” (Mootoo 30), and his community’s disadvantages as the “result of apathy and a [lack] of ambition” (31). Thus, whiteness is constructed into an idealistic racial (perhaps even race-less) pedestal. Attached to it are principles of behavior and appearance—to be white necessitates confidence, wealth, a scentless body—but Chandin’s family fails to achieve these precise standards. Their relationship to whiteness is therefore oppositional and places them on the outside normativity. At the same time, his family’s queerness undergirds Chandin’s own self formation. As the son of Indian immigrants, he is, by nature, a queer subject of Lantanacamara, his race and nationality marking him non-normative. As in the case of Tyler, Chandin’s queerness often manifests as a dis/belonging. Upon seeing her son at a church service and alongside his new adopted family, Janaki is shocked to see him, “sitting up there in the front, looking very foreign in spite of his dark skin, all dressed up in his jacket and tie, right next to the Reverend’s wife” (29). In this instance, the word “foreign” takes on a double-meaning; foreign as in strange, but also foreign as in the opposite of an imagined “native,” “natural,” and most importantly, white national identity. Chandin’s racial markers, namely his complexion, separate him from the others in his adopted family. Yet, this foreign-ness is only “in spite of his dark skin,” for it does not derive solely from the flesh, but instead from the body’s relationship to its clothing. Chandin is foreign because the clothes he wears are not meant for his body. While his father wears a “white kurta and dhoti,” uniquely cultural garments that clearly demarcate his ethnicity, Chandin wears a formal jacket and tie typically reserved for and associated with white bodies.

There is a particular colonial history underlying Chandin's moment in the church. In his article "Sartorial Settlement: The Mission Field and Transformation in Colonial Natal" (2016), T.J. Tallie describes the project of cultural transformation undertaken by many Christian missionaries. Discussing the role of clothing in this religious colonization, Tallie argues, "Clothing became a primary means of comprehending the seemingly disordered world of indigenous Africans and a means of denoting hegemonic success for Christ's ambassadors in Natal" (399). Beyond molding the body into a more "palatable" shape, "clothing [made] manifest internal spiritual (and civilizational) change among Zulu peoples" (399). Tallie's research, while concentrated to the African continent, nevertheless parallels the influence of religious missionaries in Mootoo's Lantanacamara. Clothing becomes a colonial import and its imposition on the body signals a simultaneous imposition of colonial values.⁷ Standing beside

⁷ Tallie further examines the queering nature of clothing in the fourth chapter of his forthcoming manuscript entitled *Unsettling Natal* (2018). Christian missionaries

Viewed the "uncivilized" African as a queer threat to the proper growth and reproduction of civilizational norms in the colony. The very nudity of the African body presented a danger, a contagion that could be caught by the white settlers and therefore had to be ameliorated in careful degrees. African nakedness, then, offered more than a disgusting spectacle; it also offered a destabilizing challenge to the heteronormativity civilization Christianity...sough to enact. In this way, the pathologization of the African body is more than mere hegemonic racism or cultural chauvinism; it is a form of queering that juxtaposes the African body as a threat to the continued existence of White civilization in Natal. (22)

Similarly, brown skin in Lantacamara destabilizes and offends the white heteronormative sensibilities of the British colonial presence. Western clothing, or rather the lack of it, characterizes the queer populations of Lantanacamara for the overwhelming brown-ness of the body stands contrary to the racial imperatives promulgated by the colonial machine. By introducing brown subjects to "Jesus and pants," the British missionary attempts to do more than take

the Reverend and his wife, literally covered by British imperial values, Chandin is presented as a new convert, as a newly civilized subject. At the same time, this scene is marked by a particular kind of “straightening,” a rectification of deviant paths. I use the phrase “deviant path” to call upon Sarah Ahmed’s influential *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), which contends that subjects “follow lines” (17) that provide them with prescribed courses of action and modes of being. Lines are social, “function[ing] as forms of ‘alignment,’ or as ways of being in line with others” (15). Inevitably, lines “exclude things for us,” transforming all points “off” of the line into queer directionalities (15). Thus, to be straight is to follow one’s prescribed line, it also “means that we not only have to turn toward the objects that are given to us by heterosexual culture, but also that we must ‘turn away’ from objects that take us off the line” (21). Chandin, like all colonial subjects, is presented with a line structured by white heterosexuality. Yet, like the pedestal structure upholding these identifications, this prescribed line is unattainable for those bodies that fail to present in the normative matter. For this reason, Chandin presents as a queer subject. However, his adoption into the Thoroughly family signals a conversion to those aligning ideals of colonial civility. During his moment in the Church, Chandin is unveiled as a newly straightened subject whose proximity toward white heteronormativity has significantly increased.

Writing about the colonized subject proximities, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) maintains, “The more the black Antillean assimilates the French language [and culture], the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being” (2). The process

the queered brown corpus underneath its wing. In transforming the body into a grotesque representation of whiteness, the missionary attempts to absorb the body into the nation state. The queer is straightened, albeit artificially, and embraced by the nationalist agenda that then repurposes its body for further biopolitical regulation.

of “becoming a true human being” presents an ontological restructuring of the colonized body. It quite literally transforms the subjugated into the subjugator. It is an absence that suddenly becomes present. But again, this status is located within an idealism that remains unattainable to those whose impurity cannot be erased—that is, to those who try as they may, cannot erase their black or brown skin. While Fanon theorizes this new ontological mode, he does not confirm its possibility. Instead, he perpetuates it as a mere potentiality that the subject can only “approach.”

I am taken with this image of bodies barely touching, the image Adam’s and God’s hands, fingertips only inches away; and I attempt to expand the notion, for it represent the relational state that frames the “straightened-queer” subject. I attach the latter two terms to one another because they are, in fact, inseparable. Introduced to the religious community as the product of civilizing and straightening, Chandin’s relationship to whiteness is proximate, not exact. In other words, he does not walk the line of whiteness ascribed to purer subjects (subjects with white skin); rather, he walks a parallel line reserved solely for impure bodies aspiring to white ideals. In this manner, Chandin occupies a queer positionality constructed upon the heteronormative imperatives of a state. Despite his place among the British colonizers, Chandin remains distinctly Indian. Repeatedly, we see Chandin note his status as “the first” or “the only” person of his color. Upon first noting the Reverend’s chandelier, he “renew[s] his promise to be the first brown-skinned person in Lantanacamara to own one just like it” (Mootoo 32). During his first days at the Reverend’s school, Chandin acknowledges that he “was the only person of Indian descent at the seminary. He was, in fact, the only non-white person there” (38). Despite being one of the few brown people in a community of white settlers, Chandin is often rendered invisible. Perhaps the most painful disregard he receives is at the hands of his beloved Lavinia.

Her “fail[ure] to notice him” pushes Chandin toward “anger and self-loathing” (33). He begins to “hate his looks, the colour of his skin, the texture of his hair, his accent, the barracks, [and] his real parents” (33). In the words of Fanon, Chandin displays an “internalization or rather epidermalization of [the] inferiority” colonial society projects onto his skin (xv). Chandin detests his ethnic markers because they recall the queerness he so desperately attempts to straighten and escape. Gazing into the mirror, he sees “what he most fear[s]: a short and darkly brown Indian-Lantanacamaran boy with blue-black hair” (Mootoo 34). He compares his body to those of the “boys in his class and from the barracks in the fields,” reading onto his appearance a liminality that mediates the queerness he connects with men like his father and the straightness of the “rigid” Reverend (34). Through this unique occupation of whiteness mediated by Indian-ness, Chandin claims the role of a straightened-queer.

Yet, what does it mean to be a “straightened-queer”? What does it mean to possess a queer body that has been embraced and molded by the nation state? Here, we return to Puar’s conceptualization of “queer as regulatory” (11). When queerness is regulatory, it adopts a “modality through which ‘freedom from norms’ becomes a regulatory *queer ideal* that demarcates the *ideal queer*” (22, emphasis mine). That is to say, regulatory queerness is gifted the illusion of freedom, which produces an ideal state of being queer and therefore, an ideal type of queer identity. Puar’s use of “regulatory” evokes the image of queerness as a biopolitical project whose goals she encapsulates in four different points, my emphasis of which resides in the first: “Queerness as automatically and inherently transgressive enacts specific forms of disciplining and control, erecting celebratory queer liberal subjects folded into life (queerness as subject) against the sexually pathological and deviant populations targeted for death (queerness

as population)” (Puar 24). Morgensen upholds this aspect of Puar within his settler homonationalism: “We will see that if non-Native queers become sexual subjects of life, they will do so by joining a colonial biopolitics of modern sexuality that functions to produce modern queers as settler subjects in relation to Native peoples” (121). In becoming subjects of life, settler subjects become “‘queer as regulatory’ over Native peoples,” exerting power of the necropolitics of the other’s body (121). From these excerpts I wish to draw out the body’s orientations toward life and death. Those queer bodies that are “ideal” or “exceptional” in their formulation are accordingly oriented toward life, for in their existential formulation they perpetuate and reproduce the national programs that structure their power. Reproduction, in this sense, is not sexual—it is not the continuation of life. Reproduction, in this sense, is violent—it is the destruction of life. The exceptional queer can only exist through the death of the aberrant queer. Chandin’s subjecthood depends on this “colonial necropolitics” that frames the un-straightened body “as queer populations marked for death” (106). In order for him to continue to possess the gift of citizenship, he must fulfill his given role(s) and subjugate the un-straightened bodies that surround him.

Chandin’s relationship to the “regulatory queer” is neither subversive nor inauthentic. He dwells within the role and finds within it a melancholic comfort. The colonial necropolitics of his role accept, demand even, that he cut emotional ties to the queer brown bodies whose relational distance to whiteness remains too far away. As a result, Chandin severs his emotional ties to his parents, as well as to Sarah, his wife, and his two children, Mala and Asha. Repulsion characterizes the relationship he holds with his wife and daughters. As Chandin thinks about his wife, he feels “strangely distant from her, unrelated to her; as if a thick veil had dropped between

them. His children's skin seemed suddenly too dark and their manner of talking crude" (Mootoo 51). Chandin feels "distant" from his wife and daughters, not because of any physical gap, but rather because their bodies are "too dark." Accordingly, he wishes "to remove himself from his wife and his children" and does so by withdrawing emotionally (51). In a similar manner, Chandin's childhood relationship with his parents is also marked by emotional retreat. Upon visiting his parents' home for the first time after leaving for the Thoroughly's home, Chandin "noticed that the number of statues of Hindu gods and goddesses lining the walls had increased.... Sometimes sacred camphor and incense used in Hindu prayers coloured the air, and always a faint cloud of Pooja smoke permeated his parents' hair and clothes" (30). "Embarrassed" by his parents' inability to orient themselves toward whiteness, Chandin stops visiting, erasing his relationship with their Hindu identity (30). Chandin's retreat from these relationships preserves his ontological status but at the expense of the brown bodies around him, relegating them to the realm of the dead. In severing his emotional connection to his parents, wife, and children, Chandin erases their presence. He marks their bodies as politically unviable and ready for death.

Most affected by Chandin's colonial necropolitics is his daughter Mala Ramchandin. Early in her childhood, Mala is marked ready for death. Her too-dark-skin and creolized manner of speech is too uncivilized. Yet, unlike the others, Chandin directly enacts violence upon Mala's body. After being abandoned by his wife, the drunk Chandin, "in a fitful, nightmarish sleep, mistook Pohpoh [Mala] for Sarah" (Mootoo 65). In this moment, Chandin transforms Mala into an entity beyond his daughter. She is no longer his daughter, but a childlike copy of his absent wife. The violence he inflicts on her body is queer-making. As Chandin put his arm around her,

“Pohpoh opened her eyes. Frightened and confused by this *strange*, insistent probing, she barely breathed, pretending to be fast asleep. ... Then he brought his body heavily on top of hers and slammed his hand over her mouth. She opened her eyes and stared back in terror” (65, emphasis mine). His sexual assault redefines the functions of Mala’s body, inflicting upon her a biopolitical power that controls the life her body is able to breathe. Ultimately, Mala’s rape represents an action beyond cruelty, it represents Chandin’s metaphorical and emotional murder of his daughter. Hence, it is no coincidence that Pohpoh and her sister consider the cemetery “their safest place” (83). The other children “never enter for fear of being attacked by people who made their homes under the roofs of crumbling tombs or, worse, of being whisked away by restless corpses to some remote place from which there was no return” (83). Yet, Mala has already moved beyond the “place...[of] no return,” she has already moved into the realm of the dead (87). Mala’s “death” also marks a particular transformation. Mootoo’s focus on Chandin’s gaze during the rape scene recalls Laura Mulvey’s *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989) and the idea of coming into being: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). Correspondingly, women are figured as silent and, through their bodies, hollowed out of meaning, “woman...[is] tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning” (15). The gaze brings the subject into being, or more specifically, the gaze brings into being, *the subject-as-queer-object*. The initial sexual assault marks the transition from Pohpoh, the childhood name used in the first part of the novel, to Mala, the hardened adult born from the abused child. Mala’s name draws upon the Spanish

word meaning bad, but even more so, it presents a skewed and perverted motherhood, a queer positionality—mala being only one letter away from the absent “mama.”

I highlight the transformative aspects of Mala’s character not to take away from the very real pain and humiliation inflicted upon her body, but rather to consider the way in which Mala may effectively trans* the national structure. One of the most invaluable lessons taught to us by bottom-up historical analysis is that the political realities faced by the everyday subjects often manifest as indirect interactions. That is to say, the everyday subject will only rarely come into direct confrontation with the colonizing machine. Rather, the everyday subject will find that their daily life is always already enmeshed with the mission of colonizing powers. The everyday subject will often find that the ideologies of empire trickle down into conversations with their neighbor or coworker, or in the case of Mala, into interactions with family. This notion of “trickle-down colonialism” characterizes the relationships of *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

Homonationalism is not “active” in the same sense as rolling recruitment, but active as a “field of power” that indirectly shapes and mediates human thought and interaction (Puar “Keynote”).

Accordingly, Chandin is not “recruited” by a homonationalist regime. Instead, he observes powerful modes of being and follows his desire for power into the homonationalist center.

Because homonationalism is comprised of a singular and close-knit center with multiple margins, the structure profoundly necessitates that bodies be located within its structure. What, then, does it mean to stand outside of homonationalism? As in the case of Chandin’s family, to be outside is to be dead. Accordingly, in order to subvert this all-consuming necropolitics and the oppressive power of the homonationalist state, queer figures must operate from within their respective margins. The aberrantly queer characters of *Cereus* operate from within these margins

while reshaping, testing, and pushing its borders. This figurative movement makes the characters into trans* figures while creating trans* spaces.

To understand trans* we must necessarily reinscribe the element of movement into the term. We must refigure trans*ness as a literal force beyond (and at times, behind) identity. Doing so highlights the term's shiftiness, its "indeterminate movement" (Puar "Disability" 80).

Providing a blueprint for the act of transing (or rather, trans*ing), Lucas Crawford, identifies the five principle characteristics of the action in *Transgender Architectonics* (2015):

1. Transing [as] an aesthetic operation does not entail a move from one gender or materiality to another (or one gender to ambiguity) but instead to the very ubiquity of *transformation for all*. In this sense, the figure of "transing" (like queering) does not "add" something non-trans, but instead *draws out the always-already trans quality* of materiality...
2. Transing will be relocated from the life of the sovereign subject to the acts and *collaborations that happen across bodies, buildings, and milieus*.
3. As such, transing ... is not only outward-facing but also traverses and undoes the demarcation of a body's inside and its outside. *Transing is, then, an act of folding and unfolding*.
4. Acts of transing, therefore, cannot be owned or claimed like identities. They are *happenings or movements rather than objects or presences* ...
5. Transing shows *the inherent instability and décor* of even the most "foundational" or "inner" architectures ... (14, emphasis mine)

Crawford's definitional work is detailed and brilliant. I quote extensively from his blueprint to articulate with precision the manner in which I use trans*ness and trans*ing within the analysis that follows in this final portion of chapter three. The only way in which Crawford's definition varies from my own is in his omission of the asterisk. Otherwise, the act of trans*ing is profoundly about movement as well as the disruption of knowability and linearity.

As Eva Hayward argues, the trans* body evades "classification...[and recalls a] prefix weighted with across, beyond, through (into another state or place—*elsewhere*)...suggesting the unclassifiable." (68). In the end, "to be trans- [or rather, trans*] is to be transcending or surpassing particular impositions, whether empirical rhetorical, or aesthetic" (68). This element of transcending recalls the movement of Crawford and others' definition, but it also depicts an image of a force that push outward. This push outward constructs new spaces and modalities that offers alternate paths of existential movement. These paths break from the "straight line" Ahmed conceives while signaling alternate structures. One of these structures, is the queer house evoked by trans* kinship, a notion rooted in Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, which explores the queer ball culture of New York City's black and brown communities. The queer house brings into being new ways of relating to other bodies and the foundational structures of citizenship. Explicating trans* kinship, Halberstam quotes Pepper Labeija's explanation of houses in the documentary, "A house—they are families for a lot of people who don't have families, but this is a new meaning of family. The hippies had families, and no one thought nothing about it. It wasn't a question of a man, a woman, and children, which we grew up knowing as family; it is a question of a group of human beings in a mutual bond" (65). Labeija's interpretation of the house "remakes understanding[s] of family, kinship, and

cross-generational care” (65). Picking up on the perpetual movement and recycling of roles within the house, Halberstam begins to lay out a framework of trans* kinship articulated through the work of Marlon Bailey: “Houses...recreate the actual networks of care upon which conventional families have reneged. They unite their members through performance practices, shared experiences of hardship, and a joyful interaction with forms of glamour and fame that otherwise seem out of reach” (66). The haptic function of houses and trans* kinship emerges upon the realization that its purpose is to reaffirm the humanity of which queer and trans* bodies have been stripped. Touch plays a significant role in the healing formation of the house: “The concreteness of my hand, touching things, confirms my existence, connects me with the world of things, phenomena,” people (McTighe 6). Indeed, the hand, “with all its associations with the human, humanism, and anthropocentric understandings of our place in the world” (6), seeks another’s solid flesh to affirm itself. Houses and trans* kinships deal in these haptic meetings, proposing “new practices of association, identification, coalition, and desire” (72) through tactile measures so that the queer can “survive a world hostile to their very existence” (77).

Trans* kinship poses a radical opposition to the homonationalist framework that deploys the grammar of the house for the purpose of suffering. Homonationalism within *Cereus* most immediately traffics in the area of the home so that Chandin, the regulatory queer father, negates the existence of his daughter before she can even come into being. The home for Tyler is also a space of dis/belonging. He is rejected by his bible-reading grandmother after failing to be “boyly enough for her church-going satisfaction” (Mootoo 24). For Otoh, the home is a site of utter de-regulation, for it is centered around a passive father who is only awake a single day in the month, and a mother who resents her husband’s physical and emotional absence. Otoh’s parents,

so “embroiled in their marital problems to the exclusion of all else, including their child, ... hardly noticed that their daughter [then named Ambrosia] was transforming herself into a son [now named Otoh].” (109). Such parental absence drives Otoh into withdrawal and silence, hindering him from inhabiting his full self. Furthermore, despite the women he brings home Otoh cannot use the space of his home to pursue his sexuality:

“The woman was attempting to arouse him by drawing circles and figure eights with the tips of her fingers on his delightfully hairless chest. He was silently perplexed, examining the sensation as her hand made sly and furtive contact with the nipples atop his muscled breasts. ... He was ... just about to start unzipping his trousers, readier than ever to risk the wrath of Paradise, when he was launched out of bed by a dreadful commotion.” (110-111).

Mootoo’s descriptions of Otoh’s body is filled with gender ambiguity and mediated by the anxiety of discovery. Overcome by lust and yearning, Otoh is willing the “risk the wrath of Paradise”—that is, willing to incur the anger and rejection of his community upon their discovery of his transgender identity. Thus, even in a home with absent parents—a dynamic that differs greatly from Mala or Tyler whose parents are much too devoted to the path of their children’s development—the family’s investment in heteronormative standards continue to undergird and shape the child’s behavior.

I would like to bring to the forefront, the crucial distinction that exists between the *home* and the *house*. While the home, consumed by the homonationalist field of power, subjugates the body; the house, resting in a state of vacillation, allows the body to exhale and exist in its fullest embodiment. In other words, the *home* is built upon the political power of the heterosexual

family unit and serves as a domestic cover and intimate center for a homonationalist system; meanwhile, the *house* is constructed by queer relationships, existing within the literal and metaphorical margins of that very same homonationalist system. The trans* kinship underlying the structure of the house manifests through the relationship between Tyler, Otoh, and Mala. Both Tyler and Otoh, find “a shared queerness with Miss Ramchandin” (48). Through their relationship with Mala, the house mother symbol, Tyler and Otoh are able to find liberation. Tyler reflects, “Lately restraint and I have been hostile strangers to one another. I find myself defying caution. To hell with Toby. I have powdered my nose on days that were not visiting day. To gentler hell with Sister and the nurses. I must, as a matter of life and death, wear scent in the crock of my elbows. I am readier than ever to present myself like a peacock in heat” (246). Otoh has also transformed, carefully deploying a more cultivated and heightened masculine identity. Tyler “recognize[s] and appreciate[s] the studied swagger of the lone bushwhacker [Otoh] has cultivated since [they] met” (246-247). Trans* kinship allows Tyler and Otoh to “unabashedly declare” themselves while building a house within and amongst each other (247). Their relationship with Mala effectively trans*es the regulatory structures that surrounds them. It thrusts them into a repetitive back and forth movement that inhibits society’s shaming definition. At the same time, such trans*ing reveals the nation’s utter constructedness, stripping it of the power it gains from its claim to authenticity. Moreover, within the new space trans*ing creates, the two queer figures can find and express the humanizing concern their bodies fail to sense underneath the direct auspices of the homonationalist frame. Tactile sensations such as when Tyler reaches over “to brush the soil off the knees of [Otoh’s] pants” allow the two to share intimate ways of knowing each other that re-inscribe humanity into queer interactions (248).

Touch, then, profoundly becomes about love, the erotic, and collaborations between and across bodies (Crawford 14). Touch becomes the manifestation of trans*ness' utopic vision that describes a "respect for otherness, and concomitant loss of self in the presence of the [Other]" (Marks 20). In other words, the intimate and vulnerable touch becomes a way to move beyond the oppositional nature of the homonationalist regime.

Conclusion: Embracing the Strange

Indeed, “queer,” a single word, carries with it multiple significations. Fascinated with its transitive meaning, Eve Sedgwick traces the etymology of the word in the foreword to *Tendencies* (1993): “the word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root *-twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse). Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*.... The immemorial current that queer represents is [as] antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relation, and strange” (Sedgwick xii). Searching in the archive of queerness’ meaning, we find representations of peculiarity, hate, empowerment, derangement, homosexuality, homosociality, failure, death, life, authenticity—the list truly goes on. What’s more, queerness can mean all these things both at once or by itself, as a collective or as a singular. If there is one thing I have endeavored to demonstrate throughout this paper, it is the capaciousness captured by queerness. Perhaps Cathy Cohen put it best when she wrote, For those of us who find ourselves on the margins, operating through multiple identities and thus not fully served or recognized through traditional single-identity based politics, theoretical *conceptualizations* of queerness hold great political promise. For many of us, the label ‘queer’ symbolizes an acknowledgement that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility. At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics. (440)

The utopic longings in Cohen's statement are unmistakable. She desires a world that is ready to be occupied by queer subjects, a world with "radical potential" (438). From this radical potential grows "a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* positions of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work" (438).

Cohen's utopic tendency precedes and informs José Esteban Muñoz, whose book *Cruising Utopia* (2009) presents a hopeful queer manifesto. Muñoz's text responds to queer theory's antisocial turn, an emergence best seen in the work of Lee Edelman, a proponent for the acceptance and embrace of "ascriptions of negativity to the queer" (4). Edelman's "here and now" of queerness stands almost counter to Muñoz's visualization of a "queerness [that] is not yet here" (1). The intertextuality between the two works becomes even more evident through Muñoz's almost narratorial interventions:

The moment in which I write this book the critical imagination is in peril. The dominant academic climate into which this book is attempting to intervene is dominated by a dismissal of political idealism. ...The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn war chest of poststructuralism pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that delineate the concept of critical utopianism. (Muñoz 10)

Within the first page of the text, Muñoz paints the image of queerness as an ideality, as a Utopia. Emphasizing the motif of movement in reference to the body's relationship to queerness, Muñoz writes, "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present" (1). While Edelman views queerness as a project rooted within the domain of identity politics and imperfectabilities, Muñoz sees it as a Utopian program. That is, queerness is the product of a Utopian impulse that has "turn[ed] [itself] into a conscious Utopian project"

(Jameson 8); it is the culmination of “a variety of covert expressions and practices” (3) that have made their way to the surface in the form of a structure that can and does exist in varying degrees of literality. Muñoz argues, “The future is queerness' domain.... [And] the here and now is a prison house. ...we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds ... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 1). Both Edelman and Muñoz preoccupy themselves with the relationality of queerness in and to the world. However, Edelman’s thesis leans toward a discourse that Muñoz “describe[s] as a ‘certain romance of negativity’” (12). In describing *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz asserts, “I respond to Edelman’s assertion that the future is the province of the child and therefore not for the queers by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity and hope” (11). Queerness is about longing and hoping for something better.

While I make extensive use of Edelman within the pages of this project, I am not wholly sold of his queer self-abnegation and implosive futurity. In fact, his fatalistic readings are often tempered by progressive imaginations of communal anti-sociality, that is an anti-social disposition whose ultimate goal is the creation of a community. No doubt, Muñoz has been on my mind throughout this entire paper. World-building is central to self-creation and self-creation, in a setting designed to control people and make bodies, is the center of liberation. Through “queer,” a term and conceptualization that lends itself to constant redefinition, reworking, reinscription, and resistance, I open up the word’s roomy inside and allow several bodies to enter. Tituba is queered by her non-human status, which stands contrary to the structures of (white) humanity within Condé’s novel. However, by harnessing the queer power of

disidentificatory practices, she breaks from categorizations of monstrosity. She disidentifies, dissociates from her body, building a new bodyless world whose strange shiftiness liberates the body. In a similar manner, Xuela disidentifies with the role and idea of woman, formulating her own sense of self through self-creation and fem(me) emergence. That is the radical revision of womanhood and femininity and the long-awaited arrival of the self, of “me.” While Condé posits bodylessness as liberating, for Kincaid the freedom comes from disrupting the social signification and biological function of the uterus. The explicitly and implicitly queer characters of Mootoo’s novel embrace the power of trans* modalities, embracing its perpetual movement and variability as a safe space for escaping the ravenous colonial machine that feeds on the bodies of colonized subjects. Each of these queer interventions are subversive in their own way, but they are also ambiguously positive—after all, almost every character within the three novels meets a cruel end (Tituba is hanged, Xuela dies alone, Chandin is murdered by his daughter, and his daughter is left utterly traumatized). On the surface these novels can be characterized as “hopeless, nihilistic, or cynical,” but they offer “instead a hope against hope, the possibility of politics not simply as hope for a different or better world, but as the ardent refusal of *this* world” (Bliss 93). This ardent refusal unfolds the current world, it opens different spaces and modalities, many of them reverberating with the rosiness of a utopia. Nevertheless, a resounding question remains, one whose focus is beyond the scope of this brief theoretical endeavor: how can we—as queer beings, as postcolonial subjects—truly embrace the strange and bring utopia into the contemporary moment?

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