

(Ab)Used, Mad, and Discarded: Successful and Failed Healing Rehearsals in Afro-Caribbean Women's Fiction

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Abstract	iv
Biographical Information	v
Introduction	1
I. The Liberated Body beyond Heteronormativity	34
II. Finding an Alternative Space: Memory as a Healing Rehearsal	62
III. Healing Rehearsals Communing with Nature and the Spiritual World	92
Conclusion	128
Works Cited	137

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Abstract

(Ab)Used, Mad, and Discarded: Successful and Failed Healing Rehearsals in Afro-Caribbean Women's Fiction examines how female characters deal with fracturing oppression and trauma to achieve healing. This dissertation argues that the more recent Afro-Caribbean women's fiction challenges the typecasting of women as post-colonial 'victims,' by exploring instead multiple 'rehearsals' that move them away from the trauma in their lives and more toward their subsequent healing process, as experienced from their varied perspectives and stances. The dissertation includes a detailed study of experience of healing 'rehearsals by female characters,' both successfully and unsuccessfully, in Dionne Brand's *At The Full and Change of The Moon*, Jacqueline Bishop's *The Gymnast and Other Positions*, Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*, Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*, and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable*. I explore a variety of healing options such as negotiating with traumatic memories, reappreciating and embodying Caribbean natural environment/landscape, and embracing sexual liberation, often intertwined with ultimate resistance to forms of violence, rage, as well as breaking away from sexual heteronormativity. This study makes significant use of Benítez-Rojo's conception of the Caribbean as consisting of random, repetitive performances of resistance, Wilson Harris' "infinite rehearsal," and Tanya Shields' concept of feminist rehearsal.

Biographical Information

Yaniré S. Díaz Rodríguez was born in Guayama, Puerto Rico. She is the daughter of Camilo Díaz Cintrón and Eusebia Rodríguez López. She graduated from Carmen Bozello de Huyke High School in Arroyo, Puerto Rico in 1990. Yaniré attended the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras where she obtained a B.A. in Humanities with a major in Modern Languages in 1995, and a M.A. in Translation in 2001. At the university level, she has taught subjects ranging from Pre-Basic developmental courses, first and second-year English composition courses to Literature and Business Communication. She has also offered her professional services as a College Board Seminar Resource, presenting workshops on Advanced English topics to teachers in the College Board Advanced Level Program

Introduction

Sometimes the river is my mother,
sometimes it's the moon.
Then I find sweet
despair in the dark folds
of a woman who knows
the stillness,
the horror of night.
And my eyes fix to the unblinking
face that guards the night;
I don't let go her gaze
until the lunging sun jabs the blanket
--the everyday rehearsal
for the last night.
When the last night comes,
I will have one mother. She will be the moon.
Ann-Margaret Lim, "Insomnia" (18)

In January 2020, gender activists in Jamaica called for a more-than-one-month withdrawal of sexual privileges in romantic relationships in the hope to raise awareness about violence against women. The strike proposed by Trinidad and Tobago writer and gender advocate Nazma Muller urging women to sexually starve men into submission was ignited in reaction to a wave of spousal violence in the region. Opal Palmer Adisa also joined the discussion saying that "she would strongly advocate for Jamaican women to also 'lock shop' in protest of gender-based violence."¹ Although Palmer Adisa supported Muller's proposal, she has also "acknowledged that women have used sexual power for personal benefit," and that "it [is] time for women to collectively challenge patriarchal values of entitlement."² Since 1910 women

¹Hyman, Danae. "Sex strike - Gender activists call for withholding of pleasure to protest violence against women." *The Gleaner*. January 28, 2020. <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/lead-stories/20200128/sex-strike-gender-activists-call-withholding-pleasure-protest-violence>

² Ibid.

from different countries have gathered to advance the movement for women's rights and in 1977, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution encouraging countries to proclaim March 8 a United Nations Day for Women's Rights. And in 1993, the United Nations defined violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."³ Shockingly, in 2021, the UN reports the prevalence of 30% of women worldwide to have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both⁴. The women's rights movement continues to highlight the issues affecting women worldwide, from abortion rights to gender-based-violence and femicide, at protests, rallies, and art performances not only on International Women's Day, but every time their rights are threatened or unacknowledged.

One such manifestation underscoring the plight of women was the fifteen-minute performance "A Slice of Reality" by the Sistren Theatre Collective presented on March 12, 2009 before the joint select committee of the Jamaican Parliament⁵. Its purpose was to invite a deep reflection on the constitutional reforms to abortion policy in Jamaica. This is but one example of all the failed attempts to address the issues that Caribbean women face in the aftermath of colonialism. Sadly, the Caribbean archipelago the Old World conquistadores pillaged and wounded has not healed entirely from the legacy of slavery, bloodshed, and oppression, which,

³ United Nations. *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women*. New York: UN, 1993.

⁴ Violence against women Prevalence Estimates, 2018. Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. WHO: Geneva, 2021.

⁵ Heron, Taitu and Toppin, Danielle and Finikin, Lana. "Sistren in Parliament: Addressing Abortion and Women's Rights Through Popular Theatre" (December 1, 2009). *MaComere, Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*, Vol. 11, pp. 45-60, December 2009. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1748110>

to the present day, continues to afflict the collective memory and psyche of people in the region. Those who have inherited the task of coming to terms with the stark realities of postcolonialism realize that facing this oppressive, painful colonial past can often be a traumatic experience.

At its heart, *(Ab)Used, Mad, and Discarded: Successful and Failed Healing Rehearsals in Afro-Caribbean Women's Fiction* explores the multiple ways in which Caribbean female characters deal with trauma. Historically, Caribbean women, in particular, have suffered the dual oppression that their gender and race/ethnicity have left them exposed to within their respective societies or communities. From a psychological standpoint, Caribbean women's experience of trauma could be 'diagnosed' as a condition best treated with some form of psychotherapy—in its origins a 'Western' practice that may not prove entirely suitable for postcolonial contexts. Other options for dealing with trauma—such as political awareness and activism, or the cathartic value of writing fiction to face and negotiate the stigma of trauma, may be dismissed, or diminished, in terms of their therapeutic or healing value by those who look upon the plight of the postcolonial with disdain. Recent decades have witnessed a surge in Afro-Caribbean women's literature that deals openly with trauma both in terms of gender politics, as well as on a personal level, and in which the writing, *per se*, is part of a therapeutic process that includes 'rehearsal' and 'healing.' I apply the concept of "rehearsal" to examine the means to achieve a healing process through fictional narratives that explore trauma both as social and personal phenomenon.

In the context of the troubled past of the Caribbean, the terms 'rehearsal' and 'healing' take on special meanings that deserve exploring. In *The Repeating Island* (1992), Antonio Benítez-Rojo borrows from the science-based Chaos Theory to explain the continuous flow of changes and paradoxes that are repeated over and over throughout the accidental, 'chaotic'

history of the Caribbean and the peoples who were either taken in slavery or forced by different imperial interests to populate the archipelago.

In the world of theatre, 'rehearsal' involves repetition of a memorized script combined with acting out a performance. Thus, in a rehearsal, memory and repetition are tightly linked. In a similar manner, Benítez-Rojo envisions the history of the Caribbean region not as separate narratives in a group of island-nations, but as a continuous chaotic whole in which each island 'rehearses' and repeats the painful memories of a torturous ancestral past, in a never-ending chain of paradoxically 'fragmented' performances. Out of this process of repetition, memory, and rehearsal, a new understanding of the phenomenon of the Caribbean experience and Caribbean identity emerges, one that originates from the locals, rather than judged or imposed from the outside by the watchdogs of empire.

Apart from 'Chaos Theory,' another probable influence shaping Benítez-Rojo's conception of the Caribbean as consisting of random, repetitive performances of resistance is the concept of "infinite rehearsal" coined by the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, in whose highly imaginative work, as Hena Maes-Jelinek notes, the writer "has always dissociated himself from any militant notion of national or racial identity. He believes instead in the 'cross-cultural psyche of humanity' that 'bristles . . . with the fabric of encounters'" (8). Commenting on Harris' 1987 novel *The Infinite Rehearsal*, Maes-Jelinek further observes that "Man's incorrigible desire for the infinite is what led to the conquest of the world and its division into higher and lower cultures in the first place. This is further shown in *The Infinite Rehearsal* (a phrase which epitomizes Harris' writing process) . . . [in which] he conceives the kind of fiction that could redeem the world from its tyrannies and suffering" (11). Applying this 'purgative' conception of rehearsal, Harris uses a methodology that creates scenarios in which "[f]iction's truths are sprung from

mind in its illumination of the sensible body again and again and again, in its illumination of our grasp of intuitive theatre and of deprivation in the materials with which one constructs every quantum leap from the sick bed of humanity” (Maes-Jelinek 11).

Just as Harris conceives the Caribbean as containing a seemingly infinite cycle of theatrical rehearsals in the imagination that transcend geography and political boundaries, similarly the idea of the Caribbean experience that Benítez-Rojo proposes is that the Caribbean experience is continuously constructing and deconstructing itself, with no preplanned script or political formulas to guide it. This is evident, I hope to prove, even in how the experience of trauma is processed and ‘rehearsed,’ eventually leading to healing practices in the lives of key female characters analyzed here.

In light of the need for an in-depth exploration of trauma as a political and psychological postcolonial phenomenon, more recent Afro-Caribbean women’s fiction challenges the typecasting of women as postcolonial ‘victims,’ by exploring multiple ‘rehearsals’ that move them away from the trauma in their lives and more toward their subsequent healing process, as experienced from their varied perspectives and stances. The female characters’ multiple ‘rehearsals’ and successful or failed healing processes include the options of (1) affirming personal and/or sexual liberation (2) wrestling with memory, sometimes opting to embrace madness, and (3) grounding in nature and spirituality.

Tanya Shields in her book *Bodies and Bones: Feminist Rehearsal and Imagining Caribbean Belonging* (2014) employs a concept she describes as “feminist rehearsal” as an analytical tool for a literary text that “promotes multivalent readings and foregrounds gender,” as well as “unity and consensus” (2). For Shields, “rehearsal” involves (1) repetition leading to mastery; (2) reexamination of achievements, and (3) the suggestion of rehearsal as a verbalized

and bodily experience. As Shields notes in her study, “transformative fiction” (which is a type of rehearsal) can be of use for a closer look at the ongoing experience of trauma endured by Caribbean women, which she understands accurately describes the political realities facing oppressed Afro-Caribbean women in particular—a torturous, traumatic legacy, the result of multiple imperial hangovers. Shields offers a critique of Caribbean conceptual frameworks where “repetition” and “rehearsal” are in the foreground or upfront. She rightly points out that gender is “the factor” missing from formulations of “rehearsal” as proposed by Benítez-Rojo. Despite this, Shields’ efforts to establish a connection between the idea of “rehearsal” and “the bodies and bones” of Caribbean history via that of the metaphor of the cadaverous, processional “hearse” often remains “tenuous,” according to reviewer Maja Horn. Furthermore, Horn observes that Shields “remains vague about the concrete manner in which ‘feminist communities of consensus’ appropriating feminist rehearsal would cut across regional, racial, class, and other differences among Caribbean women, and successfully displace the masculinist nationalist constructions that the book repeatedly critiques” (Horn 161). Although Shields’ conceptualization of feminist rehearsal is perhaps a bit over-ambitious in its attempt to encompass the fullness of very complex, multi-ethnic and multi-class Caribbean political ‘realities,’ her theoretical concept of rehearsal can be applied profitably to various scenarios of oppressed Caribbean womanhood, not only in the *political* realm as Shields argues, but on a deeply *personal* level of self-affirmation and identity, even in the face of oppressive and male-dominated socio-political structures that remain in place with viral strength.

A pressing question that needs to be addressed in the discussion of feminist rehearsal is: What happens when an oppressed woman desperately needs *healing rehearsal* and yet cannot wait for certain favorable political structures to fall into place? For a healing process to take

place, I propose, women must move beyond a certain kind of social determinism that casts their affirmative efforts in a pessimistic light and stereotypes them as ‘victims’ who are unable to succeed unless a given political order rises to power. Drawing upon, but also moving beyond Shields’ concept of feminist rehearsal as a political/communal ideal, I explore the concept of *rehearsal* as it applies to key female characters who endure trauma, by focusing on how they attain healing from painful memories of their intimate family history, often at the expense of facing resistance or violence from other women in their society.

Before an in-depth exploration of the process of trauma and the healing rehearsals experienced by key female characters in the following chapters, I will discuss key elements in trauma theory in relation to literary narratives to contextualize the postcolonial situation in which the women wrestle and come to terms with their respective experiences.

In their literary production, contemporary Caribbean writers have vividly illustrated the existential significance of the pain suffered by enslaved Africans in the Middle Passage and/or the indentured laborers of the *Kali Pani*, whereby slavery and colonialism, not just as an individualistic experience, but also as a collective ordeal generating deeply-rooted emotional scars, still linger today in the ancestral memory. However, the New World experience was a traumatic phenomenon that impacted not only slaves and laborers, but everyone who lived and endured it, regardless of their position in society. As Derek Walcott argues in “The Muse of History,” the conquest and exploitation of diverse imperial powers was a “historical degradation” that affected and afflicted all. “But who in the New World,” he writes, “does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge?” (38-39). As the poet would seem to suggest, the newer generation of Caribbean writers must get beyond the historical “stasis” of the victimizer

and the victimized, along with its vicious cycle of desire for pardon or retribution, or, more positively, for deliverance and affirmation, that have kept the region in an uneasy problematic of opposing forces and agendas. While fiction alone cannot pretend to provide a solution to the historical stasis, it can help clarify the questions and the issues that need to be addressed for substantial healing to take place. In this context, the fictional process of rehearsal can play an important salutary role in effecting social and political change. Any major change in a social or political paradigm requires awareness of the nature of the issues involved. In its critique of social relationships, gender issues, class matters, and economic inequality, healing rehearsals can shed light on the path to both individual and collective reparations.

While I choose to use the term healing rehearsal, Laura Murphy's concept of "the suffering of survival," also influences my conceptualization of the text as a healing and transformative tool. In her essay, "The Curse of Constant Remembrance," Murphy argues that trauma involves "the suffering of survival" (55). The phrase describes the after-effects of trauma on two distressing levels: the affected person's actual process of *enduring the pain* of trauma as such, plus the effort to *recuperate* from its aftershocks.

Murphy further states that while some psychoanalytic theorists propose that the traumatic event lasts only for the lifetime of the affected individual, others argue that the effects transcend the life of individuals and find ways of affecting the collective psyche in subsequent generations. One holding such a view is Marianne Hirsch, whose study on the second-generation children of Holocaust survivors indicates that they too continued to experience the deep sense of grief endured by their first-generation forebearers, even though the former never actually experienced the genocidal, traumatic event. Regarding Hirsch's research findings, Murphy observes that

[although] the second generation did not personally experience the Holocaust, they lived with the constant haunting specter of that traumatic era in their lives nonetheless. Naming this condition “postmemory,” Hirsch argues that the memory of a past that a person has never lived can persist, though it has ceased to exist, because many second-generation survivors feel compelled to ‘re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair’. . . Despite their inability to intervene in the conflict, they are nonetheless sentenced to live with its aftermath. (53)

Using Hirsch’s research as a point of departure, Murphy further elaborates on the significance of the ‘postmemory’ concept to postcolonial trauma studies:

Theorists have thus indicated that transgenerational trauma is possible and that work to investigate postcolonial memory allows us to explore [it as] experienced among those people Freud labeled “primitive,” traumas that might otherwise have been overlooked because of Freud’s own political, racial, and imaginative limitations . . . Furthermore, reading the work of postcolonial writers in dialogue with notions of [the condition] adds geographical context and historical specificity, both of which challenge and expand upon our somewhat codified, limited, and (in some cases) Eurocentric definitions. (54)

The historical development of trauma theory-related studies and research has produced a crop of divergent, even opposing analytical approaches to the subject. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century to the present, trauma theories have emerged in the fields of psychology, psychiatry, as well as in postcolonial, feminist, and cultural studies. All of these fields of

learning have contributed valuable insights on the phenomenon of trauma, both on the personal and collective levels.

In literary theory, trauma theorists—particularly in Europe—initially embraced the psychoanalytic approach to the subject as proposed by Freud and others. During Freud’s theoretical reign, trauma theorists held on to his views almost indiscriminately: Freud was considered the authority on these matters. For example, Stephen Mitchel in his book *Freud and Beyond* observes how “Freud’s theory of sexuality became the dominant, popular understanding of sexuality in Western Culture (Simon and Gagnon 1973); much of the current feminist thinking about gender and sexuality, both within and outside psychoanalysis, was defined in reaction to Freud’s classical theorizing (218). Gradually however, practitioners of the emerging science of psychiatry began to severely question the alleged ‘scientific’ premises and research validity of some of Freud’s most cherished ideas, including his take on certain aspects of trauma theory.

Additionally, Freud’s psychosexual theories, influenced as they were on assumptions about women in the Victorian period, cast women’s psychological and psychosexual predicaments in a biased, unfavorable light. Cecily Devereux, in her article “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender Revisited: The Case of the Second Wave,” points out Freud’s key ideas on women, hysteria and the Oedipal complex:

Freud’s early theories situated hysteria not in a physical lesion but in a kind of internal psychological scar produced through trauma or repression . . . Later, Freud would pathologize the condition both more vaguely and problematically, as ‘characteristically feminine’ (“Female Sexuality” 227), the condition of femininity traumatized by women’s own inevitable *lack* [of a penis]. . . Hysteria would emerge in Freud’s writing, . . . as the effect of women’s inability to achieve

identity through the Oedipal moment of recognition: in effect, he suggested, women are always already psychically scarred by the recognition of their own 'castration' (24).

Consequently, Freud's pervasive views made psychoanalysis one of the "patriarchal apparatuses" in the nineteenth century used to control the discourse of women who opposed patriarchal structures or failed to conform to standards of normalcy for women of the time, by pathologizing their condition (Devereux 25).

Until fairly recent times, trauma studies have been dominated by Cathy Caruth and others still heavily influenced by Freud in their theoretic formulations and assessments. But eventually a surge of postcolonial, feminist and cultural studies theorists who challenged the cozy theoretical notions of Caruth et. al, proposed new perspectives rooted in what their respective fields had to offer to trauma theory. These theorists, through the lens of postcolonial, feminist and cultural studies, explored the Caribbean as a collective historical phenomenon with implications across multiple generations shouldering the 'postmemory' and burden of colonial political oppression and its postcolonial hangover. In the context of the Caribbean studies, one of the first to question the theoretical notions Caruth, et al, was Evelyn O' Callaghan.

In *Women Writing the West Indies, 1804-1939: "A Hot Place, Belonging to Us,"* O'Callaghan challenges the applicability of theories traditionally used to read Western texts, arguing that although West Indian texts by women are products of both gender and empire, they reveal complexities and ambiguities that call into question "received notions of West Indian literature and identity" (179). That received notion includes the conceptualization of trauma as it has been understood in the West and transposed to the Caribbean context.

In “Psychoanalysis in Caribbean Literature,” an analysis of the work of various key feminist theorists in the field, Whitney Edwards Bly notes that O’Callaghan’s study of various key Caribbean fictional works containing a madwoman figure, proposes “the idea of the madwoman in the West Indian novel as social metaphor” (318), an approach representing a departure from the received European psychoanalytic textbook. Edwards further argues that

[t]hough these Caribbean psychoanalytic theorists and critics [including O’Callaghan] have drawn upon European psychoanalytic theory to varying degrees, either explicitly or implicitly, the current trajectory of psychoanalytic research is creating a foundation from which readings of Caribbean literature that engage indigenous Caribbean psychoanalysis can be undertaken. (318)

Although for the purposes of the narratives considered here European notions of psychoanalysis have a degree of usefulness, the unique characteristics of the Caribbean call for a psychoanalytic perspective that better and more accurately renders the internal plight of the women who populate the community in which the conflict takes place. As Edwards argues, the foundation for an indigenous psychoanalytic approach starts with an in-depth exploration of Caribbean women writers’ use of language as a key to the proper representation of gender issues and challenges.

In *The Trauma Question*, Roger Luckhurst traces a general history that starts off with the American Psychiatric Association’s 1980 definition of the term ‘trauma’ in the context of what was then a newly-coined condition known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Taking key phrases from the APA’s definition of PTSD, such as “extreme ‘stressor’ events [that] seem to produce certain somatic and psycho-somatic disturbances,” Luckhurst goes on to trace the linguistic origins of ‘trauma’ (derived from the Greek word for ‘wound’) and its usage in the

field of medicine in seventeenth-century England, right down to the term's modern and postmodern appropriations by the likes of Freud and Derrida, respectively. At one point in his review, Luckhurst observes that "Argument over the physical or psychical nature of trauma regularly refresh their grounds of argumentative authority, yet the structure of the dispute has not substantially changed for a hundred years" (3). A comparison of the APA's 1980 definition of trauma with the much more recent one of 2013 would tend to support Luckhurst's view, as both definitions seem to have not changed substantially. It appears to be in the *political* realm that the Caribbean differs from the West, as well as in their respective approaches to trauma's proper treatment. Just as any discussion of 'history' in the region must be prefaced by the question 'Whose history?', likewise the discussion of trauma and its proper diagnosis and treatment begs the question from which perspective is the topic to be understood: that of the oppressive colonial power, or the oppressed colonial 'subject.'

The violent imperial takeover experienced during this torturous period of conquest and colonization produced wounds that have yet to be fully attended. Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (1985) observes that "the fate of an entire civilization is suspended in order to allow the ambassadors of that civilization to stop and take account of the nature of the human body, the wound in that body, the pain in that wound" (10). Scarry's observation echoes the episode in Homer's poem *The Odyssey* involving Ulysses/Odysseus's encounter with the beautiful Nausicaä, whom he confuses with a goddess. He is also in a physical state in which he is battered, exhausted and devoid of any trace of identity. According to Eduard Glissant, a 'Poetics of Relation' is one in which a character's identity is formed through a relationship with 'the other' (quoted in McGarrity 83)." Thus, for healing to take place in a Caribbean framework, the traumatized colonial subject needs to build a new kind of relationship with his/her respective

‘other,’ including coming to terms with the former oppressors who have caused the wounds. Regarding the textual documentation of ‘the wound’ that has traumatized civilization, David Morris, in “How to Read the Body in Pain,” argues that

from a literary point of view, what appears most striking about recent developments in medicine is that pain has acquired an unprecedented textuality. Its complications and elusive silences, which defeat simplistic or reductive readings, give pain something of the texture we recognize in complex novels or poems, where the physician who seeks to treat Macbeth or Lear must unravel a knot that ties body to mind, medicine to politics, nature to culture. For some researchers and clinicians, pain is better understood not in its traditional role as a sensation but rather as a perception, implying that it cannot be fully grasped apart from the vagaries of human consciousness. (140)

Morris further observes that “[t]he wound thus is not simply a hole in the flesh but —as in war— a sign that represents and authenticates belief . . . Pain, . . . despite its sources in human physiology, remains open to the re-making process of culture and of belief” (153). Here the metaphorical pain, the “hole in the flesh,” becomes the paradoxical site for knowledge about cultural systems and systems of power, as well as healing—a theme that has been much discussed in Caribbean literature and poetics.

Since the late 1990s literary critics and psychotherapeutic practitioners have engaged in debates over the appropriateness of approaching and diagnosing painful subjects dealt with in Caribbean literature with the same hegemonic discourse and Eurocentric ‘prescriptive’ traditionally applied to Western literary works. ‘Hegemonic’ discourse in this case means the success of the dominant classes in presenting *their* definition of reality and view of the world, in

such a way that it is psychologically enforced upon oppressed classes under their control as ‘common sense.’ Thus, for many Caribbean poets and writers the prognosis is consistently the same: there is a need to ‘decolonize’ the aftereffects of the Eurocentric ‘treatment’ upon the collective psyche of their Caribbean colonial subjects.

The applicability of the Western ‘prescriptive’ raises critical issues and questions, such as its usefulness for postcolonial Caribbean readings of slavery, colonialism, racism, and gender-based violence (see Preface xiii, Craps). In his *Postcolonial Witnessing*, Stef Craps argues that “trauma theory needs to become more inclusive and culturally sensitive by acknowledging the sufferings of non-Western and minority groups for their own sake, and on their own terms” (38). For instance, as Kelly Baker Joseph argues in *Disturbers of the Peace* (2013), the discussion of the pathology of madness in a Caribbean context, illustrated in Edouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, “. . . Frantz Fanon’s brand of anti-colonial psychology, alongside [V. S.] Naipaul’s ‘sketches’ of Trinidadian life or [Jean] Rhys’ revision of *Jane Eyre*, . . . clarifies the Caribbean resistance to European pathologizing of colonial behavior” (10-11). Of the writers mentioned above Fanon’s contribution to reconceptualization of psychological ordeal of the colonized subject is of much relevance to trauma studies.

Midway through the twentieth century, Fanon offered an alternative treatment with his diagnosis of psychological effects of the colonial mindset resulting from oppressive political entities. Under colonialism, the ruling class not only controls the colonized in economic and political terms, but also dictates the narratives by which their behaviors are judged. Any non-dominant group presenting a dissident, or an alternate view is therefore marginalized. Following Michel Foucault’s studies on power relations and discourse, whoever controls the political power play has the upper hand in shaping the discourse that separates the powerful from the powerless,

to the detriment of the latter. Thus, due to the political and economic grip of the dominant class, Eurocentrism was imposed upon Caribbean colonials as the sole way for mediating the harsh realities of life in the region, including dealing with the devastating effects of their collective ‘trauma.’

In traditional Western psychotherapy, trauma is cushioned in language that would seem to suggest a masculine bias. Feminist psychotherapist Laura Brown, who has had issues with ‘the classic definitions of appropriate etiologies for psychic trauma,’ argues that

“[h]uman experience” as referred to in our diagnostic manual... often means ‘male human experience’ or, at the least, an experience common to both men and women.... The dominant, after all writes the diagnostic manuals and informs the public discourse, on which we have built our images of ‘real’ trauma. “Real” trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of the trauma (Caruth 101-2).

“Trauma” refers most often to “male trauma,” or “male and female trauma,” but not “female trauma” as a separate concern--an attitude that denotes a favoring of male conceptualizations of trauma (which tend to be more public) at the expense of neglecting the female experience of the same, which is often secretive or private. This Western psychotherapeutic bias that favors male concerns with the malady over female ones (as expressed in diagnostic manuals) poses a particular dilemma when applied to a post-colonial Caribbean context.

In the chapter “The Negro and Psychopathology” of his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Fanon explores the role of violence as a purgative force by which the colonial subjects deliver themselves from the trauma of self-hatred due to their colonial condition. This is what he describes as a “collective catharsis” whereby “forces accumulated in the form of aggression can

be released” (145). According to Fanon, this outlet for responding to oppression with violence exists “in every society, in every collectivity.” That said, some feminist critics have pointed out that Fanon’s theory is not inclusive of oppressed Caribbean women, who have endured violence of all kinds unleashed upon them, just as their oppressed male counterparts--but to which his “collective catharsis” does not apply, at least directly. More recently, this view has been contested by other feminist critics, such as Tracey Denean Sharpley-Whiting, in her book *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*, the purpose of which is described by Wairimu Muriithi:

Here [Sharpley-Whiting] challenges notable feminist works on Fanon, mainly from the academy, by positing them as misreadings, misinterpretations, oversimplifications and/or even uninformed. Sharpley-Whiting appreciates feminist scholar bell hooks’ engagement with Fanon, recognising it for its refusal to accept the binaries that have created a tendency to “dismiss his relevance to feminism and indict his thoughts as not simply ‘sexist’ nor masculinist or phallogocentric, a substantially more accurate assessment, but misogynist” (1998: 90). She is therefore not unwilling to concede that Fanon has shortcomings, or even to discuss them, but to show how relevant his work is to “post-movement feminist liberation theory and praxis.” (1998: 1)

Perhaps Wairimu Muriithi herself establishes something of a middle ground in the Fanon feminist debate, when she recognizes that there is an evident “negligible specificity on women’s liberation” in Fanon’s theoretical work, but that in the final analysis “his general rejection of colonisation and its after effects is *already* anti-misogynist and pro-woman because of the inherently patriarchal nature of colonialism” (<http://readingfanon.blogspot.com/2016/06/frantz-fanon-conflicts-and-feminism.html>).

Despite the problematics behind gender politics in Fanon's postcolonial theory, his view of "collective catharsis" has inspired in Caribbean writers a thematic fascination with creating 'ill-at-ease,' emotionally-battered characters who attempt to find a certain level of healing from the vicissitudes of race and history. Due to the long-lasting, damaging effects of slavery and oppression, it should come as no surprise that succeeding generations of the men and women who were enslaved and cruelly forced to leave their homeland nations or tribes under the whip of oppressive colonial circumstances, were prone to reclamations for their ancestors to have a voice--not just for setting the historical record straight--but also for illustrating via the power of literature their experience of personal and collective trauma. Among those whose voices were unacknowledged in official narratives of commerce and political discourse were legions of enslaved women whose backs and wombs became the painful site of exploitation, abuse, and rape.

In the discussion of trauma, Caribbean postcolonial literature may be visualized as a 'patient' dealing with the hangover of centuries of colonial oppression, discrimination, abuse, neglect, and ethnic hostility. The characters that populate much of the Caribbean literary canon are born within and/or challenged by a traumatizing colonial context. While aware of and in some cases trained within a Western linguistic and literary tradition, generations of Caribbean postcolonial writers have consistently opposed the imposition of a Western mindset from which the traumatized post-colonial subject is scrutinized and 'prescribed' a 'solution' to their historical nightmare by those who view their plight through 'Western eyes.'

Caribbean women of all ages, in particular, have been scrutinized for their traumatized behaviors in ways that are both condescending and discriminatory when these fail to conform to

the colonial mindset. As Laura Brown notes in “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”:

The dominant [i.e. ruling class], after all, writes the diagnostic manuals and informs the public discourse, on which we have built our images of ‘real’ trauma . . . the private, secret, insidious traumas to which a feminist analysis draws attention are more often than not those events in which the dominant culture and its forms and institutions are expressed and perpetuated. (102)

It follows that the trauma suffered by many Caribbean women is rarely given center stage in colonized social contexts, but rather is dismissed and pushed into the background of collective indifference and neglect.

The psychotherapeutic treatment for postcolonial trauma suffered by Caribbean women—as diagnosed through Western biomedical eyes—is often ‘event-based,’ or what Stef Craps calls the Caruthian trauma theory, and for which a ‘cure’ is prescribed following a rather linear cause-and-effect pattern, in the immediate here-and-now, that leaves little room for considering or including other factors that may contribute to the traumatic experience.

However, the Caruthian approach has been questioned by literary theorists in the region. For instance, Stef Craps, in his *Post-Colonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2015), disagrees with received ideas about trauma that are rooted in the Eurocentric tradition, and instead argues in favor of “‘decolonizing’ trauma theory” (xv). He identifies a correlation between trauma theory and postcolonial studies. Critiquing the event-based model of trauma that stems from a response, to an event outside the range of ordinary human experience, Craps favors “extending trauma beyond the singular catastrophic event to include ongoing, everyday suffering, violence, fear, humiliation that can have traumatic after-effects” (xv). In contrast to

biomedical and social, literary models such as Craps' offer alternatives to deal with trauma and attempt to comprehend its pervasive tendencies. Craps supports his sociological perspective with Frantz Fanon, who describes trauma as "a response to racism and colonial oppression," as well as with feminist psychotherapists such as Brown, who counters the event-based model of trauma. Craps instead favors a model that "recognizes the traumatic after-effects of ongoing violence such as racial and gender violence". As I intend to demonstrate, the Caribbean texts written by women writers analyzed here also move beyond an event-based model of trauma and focuses on key female characters who endure trauma as day-by-day experience resulting from painful memories hidden in the recesses of their family history.

Craps' and Brown's alternative proposals to Eurocentric treatments of trauma are applicable to explorations of the rehearsal of trauma in the afflicted women showcased in select Caribbean fiction. I explore the process of a healing kind of "rehearsal" in the lives of Afro-Caribbean women in select novels in response to the personal and social ramifications of trauma. In doing so, I will analyze a selection of anglophone Afro-Caribbean womens' writing from 1999 to the present. My discussion will focus on Dionne Brand's *At The Full and Change of The Moon* (2000), selected short short stories from Jacqueline Bishop's *The Gymnast and Other Positions* (2015), Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003), Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006). These novels and short fiction feature key characters and their ensuing negotiations with the legacy of an oppressive colonial past that presently continues to pose obstacles in their quest for personal fulfillment, communal identity, and corporeal/sexual liberation.

In face of the need for an in-depth exploration of trauma as a political and psychological postcolonial phenomenon, I argue that the more recent Afro-Caribbean women's fiction

challenges the typecasting of women as post-colonial ‘victims.’ It does so by exploring instead multiple ‘rehearsals’ that move them away from the trauma in their lives and toward their subsequent healing process, as experienced from their varied perspectives and stances.

Although a significant portion of the novels and short fiction explored often depict physically or emotionally battered women who seek support or guidance from other women, there are also instances where that support is the result of an emotional bonding or alliance with key men in their lives, be these paternal figures or conscientious men who in their own way challenge the patriarchal mindset and the abusive, oppressive machismo culture it fosters. The inclusion of such supportive male characters in the literature selected for my study puts in evidence that healing rehearsals may include not only experiences of emotional bonding or sexual liberation involving women with other women, but also of women with men whose solidarity provides a much-needed emotional support of men who recognize women as equals in a mutual quest for social, political, or sexual liberation.

The concern about women’s plight in oppressive environments has been particularly present in Caribbean literature since the end of the 20th century to the present: the exploration of individual trauma and the social/political factors that contribute to it are closely linked in historical time and place. The narratives depict characters who struggle with their respective past in a changing world that needs to be defined/redefined and coped with so that they can assert themselves. Each work posits issues of identity, religion, and community ties, as central to the character’s search for a place in the world. Each one also portrays a variety of choices available to emotionally distressed or wounded female individuals to explore or embrace, such as conformism, immigration, isolation, sexual liberation, and revolt.

Furthermore, the novels and stories under study use narrative strategies that alternate multiple points of views. As a case in point, the novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, set in Trinidad, opens the narrative with the insurgent Marie-Ursule plotting the enactment of a mass slave suicide, while struggling with doubts that her descendants can rebel and bring about change. Only her daughter Bola is spared the fatal plan, as Marie-Ursule sends her away with her father Kamena. As she grows motherless in Culebra Bay, Bola builds a deep communion with nature. She enjoys the freedom the sea offers, freedom that leads her to explore her sexuality to the point of birthing nine children with nine different men. Just as she does not settle with any one man, Bola sends each child off to the world, each threading a life story that traces back to Marie Ursule's ultimate resistance act. It is Bola's female descendants, Cordelia, Eula, and Maya, who through their individual crises, illustrate the multiple healing rehearsals in the novel. They all try to cope with their circumstances through exile and isolation, while still others aim for sexual liberation. With rural and urban Jamaica as setting, Jacqueline Bishop's short story from *The Gymnast and Other Positions* deal with a woman processing the trauma of losing her son.

The Salt Roads by Nalo Hopkinson proves to be yet another useful narrative in the analysis of healing rehearsals. Peppered with magical realism, Hopkinson presents the stories of three women whose lives never cross paths yet become intertwined in Lasiren'/Erzulie's consciousness and "embodiment." All three stories deal with women who try to survive in the oppressive context of slavery they were born into. The novel begins in the 18th century in Saint Domingue with the story of the enslaved Mer, Tipingee, and Georgine, all three struggling to break free from their slave bonds. Structurally, *The Salt Roads* does not follow a chronological, linear narrative, thus presenting a fragmented account which moves back and forth beyond the

restrictions of time and space. Set in France, the second story presents Jeanne Duval, a Haitian actress/dancer and mistress to the French poet Baudelaire during the 1840s, who finds herself a slave of the entertainment and prostitution system. The last female character that Lasiren often possesses is Thais, a young slave prostitute living in the 4th century in Egypt. I will probe into the quasi-surreal and spiritually-charged connectedness between the female characters in this work and argue how the impact of the trauma of slavery and the need for healing reaches across generations and relationship bonds at the crossroads of sexuality and healing.

Claire of the Sea Light is the story of Claire, her father Nozias, and the people of Ville Rose in Haiti. Claire's birth and every birthday since have been a rather sad day: provoking memories of the tragic death of a fisherman in the open sea, and Nozias' painful, and long-pondered decision to give the child away to the town's fabric vendor, convinced that Claire will have a chance at a better life. But just as she is ready to leave her father, Claire goes missing. While her father and villagers search for her, the individual stories of men and women in Ville Rose surface, revealing dreadful secrets and truths, as well as a web of tragedies that gradually connect to Claire and the town itself. Dandicat gives us a town with “terrible cosmic design engulfing everyone involved” (146). Thus, in analyzing this collection of tragic stories I will explore the role of healing rehearsals in ameliorating the hardships of being a parent and coping with personal loss in a small town where people embrace the intervention of the natural and spiritual world.

Another scenario for healing rehearsals is found in Marie-Elena John's novel *Unburnable* (2006), which presents an opportunity to explore the multiple rehearsals and healing processes in a cross-generational narrative covering the vividly connected lives of a daughter, her mother and grandmother, as they negotiate with and undergo various stages of personal, familial, and

communal hardships. The kind of Caribbean family drama described in *Unburnable* established it as a site the history of colonialism and slavery, the practice of Obeah and syncretic religion, African mythology and Creole folklore. It is also a novel in which the female protagonist attempts to retrace the origins of family wounds leading back to the slavery period. How that main character gains access to those painful memories is, of course, an essential component of the novel. In this process of uncovering the hidden memory of a family drama, the novel reveals issues of violence within the Caribbean structure of kinship.

Reading Caribbean fiction, I became intrigued by the healing experiences that women may manifest by means of sexual liberation as a dramatic break with the traumatic past or a history of traumatic relationships. Thus, the first chapter scrutinizes a major contemporary topic in the narratives, which is the role and/or performance of gender in healing rehearsals. Via the analysis of key texts, I demonstrate how women's sexual liberation rehearsal healings are intertwined with the nature of gender roles. While women writers in the texts chosen approach issues of identity, individuality, and gender definition, rather than dictate any definition for any of these identities, the works perform a variety of choices, alternatives, and possibilities.

Emphasis on the body as a performative space plays a vital role in the analysis. I address this interest in the body as the site of performance, especially in the way it dictates the course of healing rehearsals that look at sexual liberation and empowerment, challenging the sexual-normative roles assigned to women. The female characters in these narratives break away from the old indoctrination that sex is taboo, and that sex and the body are not pleasurable. After reviewing recent fiction exploring this new kind of sexually informed narrative, I perceive that Afro-Caribbean women writers are only beginning to scratch the surface of what I call a transformative rehearsal of sexual liberation. In my discussion along those lines, I shift my

attention to what I consider the salient narrative strategies of John, Hopkinson, Brand, Dandicat, and Bishop, in whose fictional works I identify the key characteristics of ‘subversive’ female sexuality.

In *Unburnable*, for example, for a substantial healing process to take place, a recognition of traumatic memories, plus a performance that uses the body as a site for physical expression is mandated. I examine how in the novel, bodily experience and ‘knowledge’ contribute to handling trauma and achieving healing. In John’s novel, the sexual, physical, psychological, and verbal abuse that Iris, Lillian’s mother, suffers, is an example of the silenced voice in the face of the crude realities many oppressed women experience in the Caribbean. Anger thus becomes a form of resistance for physically abused women who are rendered voiceless. For instance, overwhelmed by the crushing reality of her predicament, Iris is left to wonder how to voice out her anger and disappointment and achieve a sense of empowerment.

A half-Carib, Iris is believed to have inherited the insatiate sex drive stereotypically associated with Caribs. In this rehearsal, through the promiscuous nature of Iris’ casual sex encounters, she is portrayed as an eroticized and sexualized female performer who finds the possibility of regaining a sense of power, of being in control, and returning the violence to which she has been subjected. The transactional and performative aspects of rehearsal are intertwined as Iris uses her sexuality to bargain with men who believe that they have power over her. Iris’ daughter, Lillian, who gives into the “pleasures of the flesh.” The widowed, the impoverished, the economically dependent, the socially “marooned” female victims of earlier Caribbean narratives have been replaced in these selected readings by characters who improvise rehearsals of gender, such as challenging heteronormativity and giving into the erotic pleasure of “thieving sugar” derived from same-sex relationships. While Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley proposes that

said practice is not new in the Caribbean and the diaspora, having been traced back to the Middle Passage, I argue that the female characters in the texts studied here respond to trauma by engaging in non-normative relationships that seek healing through sexual liberation.

A similar kind of sexual healing rehearsal is anatomized in Brand's *Full Moon*, as is the case of Bola, who gives birth to nine children, all from different fathers, as well as of her daughter Cordelia, who after decades of being constrained to her performative roles of wife and mother, discovers and expresses a newfound enjoyment of her body when turning fifty. Everything that had held Cordelia back—her father had touched her and her mother saw her as an enemy—cannot be contained any longer, as she even explores her sexuality with an ice cream freezer man and a seamstress.

As it deals with an interplay of memory, nature, the spiritual world and sexuality, *The Salt Roads* represents the ultimate imbrication of healing rehearsals. Hopkinson depicts women rehearsing a myriad of options to heal and break free from their oppressive context in different forms of slavery. To attain substantial healing from that type of slavery requires a process that breaks with generational attitudes and communal practices. Thus, I argue that the healing rehearsals depicted in *The Salt Roads* are informed by a spiritual kind of bonding that results in the women's sexual wholeness.

I also look at the value of communal support and action amongst women whose lives have been traumatized by either de-sensitized men or other women at the individual level. The imaginary of the Caribbean literary landscape is the site for a rich tapestry of human relationships that includes supportive bonding not only between women surviving abusive men in heterosexual relationships but also between women in same-sex or non-heteronormative/transgender pairings. In the fiction discussed here at times a particular female character's

struggle is also the struggle against a patriarchal or male-dominated social and political system that either allows for abuse and violence towards women or is indifferent to it. It is in such a threatening environment that traumatized women will seek the communal help of other women (and perhaps the solidarity of a few good men) in terms of emotional and even spiritual support. The scope of available non-heteronormative kinds of relationships open possibilities for healing rehearsals that may lead to redefining sexual and gender identity as part of a traumatized woman's healing process.

In the second chapter, I probe 'memory rehearsals' as a site for healing. From the optics of Caribbean colonial history, trauma is often seen as linked to an ongoing painful recollection of ancestral memories that persist to the present day. The conquest and genocide of indigenous peoples in the islands during the exploration and Middle Passage periods was a chaotic experience that traumatized collectively many of its victims across the troubled archipelago. While I employ the term 'healing rehearsal' to describe a variety of options embraced by the female characters who populate the works in my study, Laura Murphy's concept of "the suffering of survival," also influences my conceptualization of the text as a healing and transformative tool. In her essay, "The Curse of Constant Remembrance," Murphy, argues that trauma involves "the suffering of survival" (55). The phrase describes the after-effects of trauma on two distressing levels: the affected person's actual process of enduring the pain of trauma as such, plus the effort to recuperate from its aftershocks. Carole Boyce Davies, in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), observes that "we were/are products of separations and dislocations and dismemberings, people of African descent in the Americas historically have sought reconnection" (17). Boyce also cites Paula Gunn Allen in her study of Native-American oral tradition, who argues that "remembering is what heals" (17). Following

this lead, the present study will explore how the process of memory and healing occur within the particular context of each major female character's life.

Trauma often pushes the "victim" away from home. Boyce revisits how "home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in autobiographical writing. The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women." (21) In their effort to free themselves from the shackles of trauma, Afro-Caribbean women often resort to relocating to other sites far away from the focal point of pain, which is mostly the homeland, community, and/or family. Along this thematic line, Maria Cristina Rodríguez's *What Women Lose. Exile and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Caribbean Writers* (2005), examines how "Caribbean women writers focus on marginalized female characters who have migrated to metropolitan centers and attempt to hold on to an acceptable reality by assuming the appropriate interpersonal, social, and cultural masks that allow them to find a sense of significance in their interior and domestic lives as well as in the at-large community. . . when and if this project fails, they choose isolation through death, madness, the obliteration of their past, or the re-creation of the location of that past" (xiv-xv). The female characters included in the novels under discussion also are marginalized, and most have migrated to distance themselves from a traumatic experience, and, upon failure, succumb under the weight of the factors examined by Rodríguez in her study. My own study will shed light on the additional perspective of ways in which the traumatized women challenge rather than give in to their worst fears in the more recent Caribbean literary production by women. Novels such as *At the Full and Change of The Moon*, *The Salt Roads*, and *Unburnable* fashion characters who have migrated, yet succumb to isolation and madness.

Murphy further states that while some psychoanalytic theorists propose that the traumatic event lasts only for the lifetime of the affected individual, others argue that the effects transcend the life of individuals to the point of branching out and affecting the collective psyche of subsequent generations. I also apply the concept of “rehearsal” to examine the means to achieve a healing process through fictional narratives that explore trauma both as social, intergenerational, and personal phenomenon.

My view of rehearsing with memories is also indebted to Mildred Mortimer’s *Writing from the Hearth: Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women’s Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean* (2007), which explores women’s transformation of restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures into a liberating “alternative” space—an “altered” space containing freedom of choice as well as a place of resistance to the status quo. Mortimer underlines how this alternative space is “open, flexible, and multipurpose,” and can function as “a refuge (for meditation, memory, or dream)” or as a “preparatory ante-chamber for future activity, a site of resistance, a place of performance—where writing, orality, and art in varied forms convey woman’s sense of self” (qtd. in Praud 238). Women’s sense of self, of understanding and coming to terms with trauma is equally important in the healing rehearsal through gathering and understanding fragmented memory such as the female characters in Marie-Elena John’s *Unburnable* who move beyond patriarchal constraints by including straight (but not macho) men in this process. Thus, the men become agents in the healing rehearsal of the female characters in the selected narratives. In the case of *Unburnable*, Lillian’s childhood trauma takes her to the diaspora where she “ [holds] herself in a kind of isolation,” and channels the burden of her past by helping women all over the world who “had found [themselves] in trouble when [they] had tried to stand up to the expectations of culture, government, or the

demands of the social order,” (13) yet she moves forward to a healing rehearsal in which confronting the ghosts of her past will require her to look for the assistance of a man. With Teddy, Lillian’s healing rehearsal shows how women’s transformation of restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures becomes more inclusive, with the male counterpart as a necessary instrument to improve women’s situation in the Caribbean context.

Bishop’s short stories also depict men participating in the female healing rehearsal. In “Oleander” the tattoo artist listens attentively to the stories of a girl whose fragmented memory of a life in Jamaica seems to come together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle of the Caribbean flower she wants branded on her body. “Effigy” narrates the trauma of a grieving mother who, in addition to communing with nature and the spiritual world (which will be discussed in chapter 2), also engages in a healing rehearsal that includes disclosing her trauma to her neighbor Howard. In the case of Kamena in *At the Full and Change of The Moon*, his participation as an agent of liberation in the female character’s healing rehearsal is questioned. While Kamena aids Marie-Ursule in keeping Bola safe, his own conflict, his failed attempts at returning to the Maroon settlement *Terre Bouillant*, has left him consumed by his own trauma, which he later bestows on Bola and her descendants.

The third chapter looks at alternate healing practices, such as grounding in nature, following the ecocritical insights of Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Isabel Hoving. First, the role of nature in Caribbean literature has gone through a transition of sorts from V. S. Naipaul’s earlier, more pastoral visions of nature to one in which nature seems to be at odds with the human species, due to exploitation, deforestation, and the destruction of fauna.

In describing this adversarial relationship between humans and the environment, Huggan and Tiffin assert that while much ecocriticism is done from the optics of “westerners, thereby running the risk of reifying earlier north-south binaries . . . some of it takes place [in a] southern setting [i.e. non-Western settings such as the Caribbean] . . . consciously [addressing] a variety of colonial and imperial themes” (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* 24). Along the same lines and combining postcolonial trauma theory, posthumanism, and ecocriticism, all staging as counter-discourses, Isabel Hoving explores the environment as a field ripe with symbolic or semiotic possibilities in the realm of Caribbean narratives. Hoving’s thorough discussion on trauma and healing includes reaching out to “earth” and “evoking nature” by covering a span of various subjects, from explorations of flora and fauna “which allow for different conceptualizations of race, gender [and] sexuality,” to “nature as a field . . . of interconnectedness” as well as an “extra-discursive space that [functions] to subvert existing discourses” (4-5).

In the introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, following Harris, focus on “the landscape (and seascape) as a participant in this historical process [of colonial conquest and oppression] rather than a bystander to human experience” (4). In this perspective, since the environment functions as a “nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is constitutive aspect of post-coloniality” (8). I propose that Afro-Caribbean women are the main conduits to a restoration of nature and its relationship to human beings. In the novels reviewed for this study, I have detected that their authors create a discursive field wherein female characters commune with flora and undergo modes of resistance and healing.

Following Hoving's idea of nature as a field . . . of interconnectedness" as well as an "extra-discursive space that [functions] to subvert existing discourses," my analysis places nature in *At The Full and Change of The Moon* both as a mode of resistance and as a vessel of healing via the evoking of memories and the pursuit of sexual liberation. In the beginning of the novel, Marie-Ursule uses her knowledge of nature to cook cornmeal along with the tar of woorara that would set them free in a final act of resistance. In addition to representing an instrument of freedom, nature also functions as a spiritual guide to warn, protect, accompany, and free the female characters in Brand's novel. Soon after Marie-Ursule's successful mass suicide, we see young Bola alone in the swamp, marveling at the sight and sounds of the purposeful presence of its flora and fauna. Furthermore, I examine the interplay of nature/spiritual world/sexuality in the healing rehearsal process that includes subverting what at an earlier period were once portrayed as negative spiritual world elements in Caribbean fiction.

As a case in point, in *The Salt Roads*, Hopkinson fragments folklore elements such as shapeshifting and possession of bodies to fight the trauma of enslavement in a new category of rehearsal: fierceness. Goddess/ Lwa Erzulie possesses the women in the intertwined stories across time and place to empower them, not as a healing process but as a new rehearsal in which women are in control of their lives.

The main argument of my dissertation is that healing can be conceived as a form of resistance not to be found in the trope of the madwoman in the attic, but rather in the shape of a deviant narrative that subverts the colonial discourse. Although I do not undertake the task of providing an instrumental, prescriptive methodology for healing, my project points to a variety of healing rehearsals, as I hold that instead of shying away from or ignoring the traumatic aspects of Caribbean history, women find resources sometimes within themselves, sometimes with the

assistance of men, or the natural environment to attain liberation, remake identity, and hopefully become agents for affirmative communal solidarity in their respective societies.

The Liberated Body beyond Heteronormativity

“My body is history, fossil, passé.”
 “I used to Like the
 Dallas Cowboys,” Dionne Brand, (*San Souci* 128)

Although atrocious life events can be treated, what has happened cannot be undone.

Nevertheless, what can be dealt with are the imprints of the trauma on the mind and the body.

Contemporary Afro-Caribbean women writers register these imprints of the trauma experienced by women in their narratives and illustrate how they either develop or maintain healing

rehearsals by recalling the folk wisdom, resilience, and survival strategies of their foremothers.

Even though a significant portion of the novels and short fiction explored here depict physically

or emotionally battered women who seek support or guidance from other women, there are also

instances where that support is the result of an emotional bonding or alliance with key men in

their lives, be these paternal figures or conscientious men who in their own way challenge the

patriarchal mindset and the abusive, oppressive machismo cultures it fosters. The inclusion of

such supportive male characters in these texts provides evidence that such healing rehearsals

may include not only experiences of emotional bonding or sexual liberation involving women

with other women, but also of women with men whose solidarity, emotional support, and

recognition of equality in a mutual quest for social, political, or sexual liberation.

The healing experiences of some of these women may manifest as sexual liberation in a

dramatic break with the traumatic past or a history of traumatic relationships. Women’s sexual

liberation rehearsals are intertwined with the nature of gender roles. Women writers perform a

variety of choices, alternatives, and possibilities related to issues of identity, individuality, and

gender definition. Emphasis on the body as a performative space plays a vital role in the

narrative. I address this interest in the body as the site of performance, especially in the way it dictates the course of healing rehearsals of sexual liberation and empowerment that challenge the sexual-normative roles assigned to women. The female characters in these narratives break away from the old indoctrination that sex is taboo and that sex and the body are not pleasurable. The emerging Caribbean fiction explores this kind of more explicitly sexually-informed narrative. In a way, Afro-Caribbean women writers are pursuing what I call a *transformative rehearsal* of sexual liberation.

Female sexuality has generally been considered as a site of shame, particularly in Afro-Caribbean women's writing. According to Anita Haya Patterson, women's sexual pleasure is seen as "shameful and unrespectable, largely as a consequence of the abuse of the (sexual) body under plantation slavery."⁶ Thus, this chapter takes up those instances of traumatic shameful sexuality which lead to the role and/or performance of gender in rehearsals of healing and subversion. It is important to stress that the purpose is not to determine what sexual shame is in the texts under discussion, but rather to explain the effects of that shame from the vantage point of sexual violence and damage and how the female characters turn this shame into a healing experience.

The texts in this chapter range from dealing with the link between sexuality and shame to an exercising liberatory female sexuality. Dionne Brand's novel *At The Full and Change of The Moon* and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* highlight physical and/or mental damage caused by sexual shame. Other narratives such as Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* link Caribbean female sexuality to a healing rehearsal in communion with nature, which is fully addressed in the third chapter. I want to point out, though, that these works are not the only texts that speak of female

⁶ Patterson, Anita Haya. "Contingencies of Pleasure and Shame" 269. Cited in Elina Valovirta's *Sexual Feelings*, 74.

sexuality. There are a considerable number of Caribbean fiction titles that illustrate the theme. However, my choice of texts is based on the commonality that each features instances of healing and subversive modes of coping with traumatic events.

The matrilineal genealogy accounted in Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* outlines the events that lead to the separation of Marie Ursule and her daughter, Bola—the enslavement of Marie Ursule, the planning and execution of a mass suicide, and Bola's escape. The narrative describes historical circumstances that many readers would identify as profoundly traumatizing. While the narrative begins with a description of the conditions of slavery, I am concerned with the reading of the trauma experienced by Marie Ursule's descendants, including Cordelia, who is two generations removed from slavery.

The beginning of the novel features characters whose bodies express a refusal to remain in chains. It addresses the potential for transmutation to healing rehearsals in sexuality. Thus, the female body transitions from the historical, stifled freedom of sexuality to a pleasurable exploration that brings healing. Early in the novel it is disclosed how Marie-Ursule has come to an understanding and self-hatred of her enslaved body and refuses to let it dictate her life in accordance with the master's impositions. She had learned to resist the oppression forced on her, both as a slave and a woman—she aborts the children that would be born in slavery and eventually plans and executes a mass suicide:

They knew that the body was a terrible thing that wanted to live no matter what.

It never gave up, it lived for the sake of itself. It was selfish and full of greed. The body could pitifully recover from lashes, from weight and stroke. Only in the head could you kill yourself, never in the body. (17)

However, as Marie-Ursule spares the life of her daughter Bola, she sets a different fate that would guide Bola's bodily self-indulgence.

In contrast to the dehumanized body of the slave represented in Marie-Ursule, Bola is gifted with a simple life, devoid of the shame brought by hegemonic forces upon the colonial Caribbean female subject. In Culebra Bay, where Bola enjoys her freedom, she has no knowledge of the trauma experienced by her ancestors. Bola symbolizes the hyper-sexuality often attributed to the black body—she has fourteen children with different men—managing to accomplish an important transgression by giving into the pleasure of enjoying a body that has historically been oppressed by both race and gender constructs of colonialism and patriarchy. Bola abandons herself to the lust of the flesh, with no shame as the following lines prove: “She loved these men for what they loved or what they didn't have. And then again it was more selfish than that. She had a great appetite for anything. // Like some endangered tree she bloomed, devoured, fell into all her senses” (294-5). As Bola acknowledges and gives in to her physical and sexual desires, she is placing herself as a subversive model in the female family line. Two generations later her descendant Cordelia would tap into that freedom of body so that she can overcome the shame that comes from her traumatic past.

“A Sudden and Big Lust”: Setting Free Unruly Sexualities

My discussion of trauma and healing rehearsals implies analyzes of Caribbean female identities in relation to assigned social constructs, and how these constructs are challenged in healing rehearsals. In doing so, a close reading of the performance of gender roles as well as the performance of shame and the healing process is in order. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler problematizes gender by suggesting that it is not only a social construct, which imposes certain roles on each sex, but that is also, to a certain extent, a performative act in which each

member of the community performs a role previously assigned with specific characteristics. The performer wears a certain outfit, inhabits a limited space, and acts in accordance with a prescribed role. In addition, to better understand performance in this context, I turn to Helen Gilbert and Joan Tompkins who point out in *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, and Politics* (1996), that it [performance] functions as an anti-imperial tool; that is “post-colonial drama resists imperialism and its effects” (1). Furthermore, they define post-colonial performance as “acts that respond to the experience of imperialism, acts performed for the continuation/regeneration of the colonized, and acts that interrogate the hegemony that underlies imperial representation” (11). Thus, adhering to Butler’s contention that gender is performance and Gilbert and Tompkins’ “acts performed for the continuation/regeneration of the colonized,” (11) I analyze the characters in these texts to examine the shame that comes from traumatic experiences and how these performances shift to a search for a more healing, even subversive performative role. This constant drive to subvert the colonial discourse is a recurrent theme in Caribbean literature. It raises questions about the plurality of identities that configure the Caribbean archipelago. Narratives that depict characters in need of healing, such as Brand’s must be studied in the context of the postcolonial reality of subjects in their acceptance of the hybridity that characterizes them: a performative act that dramatizes a quest for identity.

In her historical study, in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (1990), Barbara Bush deconstructs—despite admitted scarcity of documentation—Eurocentric mythologies of black women's stereotyping as promiscuous, submissive, slave breeders, and accomplices in the white male plantation master’s oppression of enslaved Africans. As she notes, “The history of the black woman in slave society in the West Indies is submerged beneath a layer of damaging stereotypes” (12). Bush’s work challenges the construction of the black subject in a plantocracy,’

as seen through Eurocentric eyes that cast black male slaves as useful to sustain the economic well-being of the plantation, while slave women serve “sexual and economic duties” (11). Bush argues that historical evidence, while limited in terms of documentation, points to black women’s resistance to slavery and its oppressive practices. In Bush’s words: “the individual slave woman herself was refusing to conform to the image white society had created for her” (22).

Brand’s novel constitutes an exemplary illustration of postcolonial narratives, in which social relationships reveal an individual entrapped in the middle of binary oppositions. The novel showcases a complex drama where many issues of identity—both individual and communal—are staged, and where the narrative is heavily populated by characters that rehearse trauma and healing practices. While the initial, literal condition of the characters is one of suffering and pain in the performance of gender and identity, I soon find myself looking at performances of figurative masking, i.e. characters who choose to play out a role in attempts to define an identity or create an effective strategy of healing, be it via survival mode, resistance, or subversion. The kind of sexual healing rehearsal anatomized in Brand’s *Full Moon* derives from the matriarch figure of Bola, who gives birth to nine children, all from different fathers, and extends to her granddaughter Cordelia, who after a healing process, achieves the ownership and full enjoyment of her body. Trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in control, and the challenge of recovering from it, whether it is a conscious decision or not, is to reestablish ownership of your body and your mind.

I chose Cordelia to show how she performs shifting roles beginning with disguised submissiveness to her prescribed gender role to outright subversion of that role. Subversion generates the agency she needs to reown her body and sexuality. That ownership of her body and

mind realized in her newly discovered power of her sexuality. In *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*, Carole Boyce discusses the represented black female body as a historically “marked” or “inscribed” site, as “read text,” which is re-defined and recovered in various ways throughout the narratives (138). Cordelia’s “marked” body stands for a text that is inextricably linked to her mind, and it plays a fundamental role in the healing process through which she confronts her trauma and the struggle between past and present experiences. It would be almost impossible to attempt to separate the analysis of healing rehearsals at this point, since traumatic memories serve as a springboard for the inevitable transitions during which characters exercise agency, such as using their bodies as a blank canvas.

But what exactly brings Cordelia to such an unraveling realization of the imposed mask she has been wearing? To answer this question, one must go back to Cordelia’s early experiences with sex, which outlines a critical aspect of the adaptive response that helps her cope with trauma and that is basic to her survival. Her shame stems from the time she turned 13. Her mother, Gloria, constantly accuses her of being “a puta” and bringing men to the small room in the back of her parents’ store. Gloria resents her own daughter and considers her a threat to her marriage, claiming that “she didn’t want two women in the same house” (118). Rendered powerless and unsafe in the room, Cordelia fears that someone will come for her. To her surprise, it is her own father who attempts to molest her. She soon discovers an unwanted pregnancy by a boy she would have been starting a life with a boy who got tired of waiting and left her for another. In her misery, she vows not to come back to her parents’ house and severs all ties with them. At an early age, these unfortunate events leave Cordelia with the bitterness she often carries through adulthood: “Her father had terrified it, her mother had found it an enemy. The boy from up the river way had put a baby in it and dressed it in a kind of passion that had felt hurtful, burning and

unfinished. The woman in Socorro had loosened the baby from it” (121). As a result of her father’s attempted rape, Cordelia is unable to take an active role by running away from him or confronting him. Instead, she becomes stuck, suppressing her inner chaos and shame, while its impossible for her to express her sexual consciousness. At fifty, she wants to reclaim her sexuality, refusing her husband total control of her body, a clear indication of her resistance to that oppressive condition she had been subjected to.

Her performance of daughter, wife and mother has pushed her into a state that she describes as “a never-ending bitterness,” not knowing “the meaning of it beyond these uses it had been given, the uses that she herself had put her body to” (122). Thus, she sees herself as a woman constrained by imposed performative roles that do not allow her to even experience the simple joys of her own body.

Cordelia later becomes skillful in reclaiming her body and discovering the pleasures of her sexuality. Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” lends credence to Brand’s own exploration of unruly sexual identities in the novel. Lorde remarks:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (Lorde 53)⁷

Cordelia’s shame forces her to suppress her erotic being and is, thus, rendered powerless. She simply cannot experience the power of the erotic because of her childhood experiences.

⁷ Cited in Thorington Springer, Jennifer. “Reconfigurations of Caribbean History: Michelle Cliff’s Rebel Women.”

Nevertheless, she learns about her body and how to claim it through sensual touch: “What she had not had was the enjoyment of her body clear and free” (121). In her reading of Brand’s *Sans Souci and Other Stories*, Katie Mullins writes that the writer ensures that “the body is always present in her narratives,” and that

Brand’s characters are repeatedly, and often violently, engaged in a passionate relationship with the body. By making the bodies of black women sites of inscription for past, present, and possible future events, these bodies ultimately assume an overwhelming presence and power in Brand’s writing, a power that is liberatory for black women who re-claim their past.⁸

This description of Brand’s characters is illustrated in Cordelia. As she becomes familiar with her body, she transforms from the traumatized victim to an assertive woman in control of her wants and needs; her body is no longer simply a sexualized object to be exploited by others, but a site of pleasure liberation:

The Sundays when Cordelia was not in her trance, she showed [Emanuel] where she wanted him to touch and lick and how slowly she wanted him to put himself into her. And these Sundays he tried to please her and hold on to himself as he slipped away into Cordelia and tried not to annoy her by jerking fast up and down. Cordelia liked circles and not thrusts and he felt small lying on top of her and he felt smothered when Cordelia took over and lay on top of him and he felt harmless then too. (106-107)

⁸ See Mullins, Katie L. “My Body is History”: Embodying the Past, Present, and Future in Dionne Brand’s *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 42 no. 2, 20.

In this way, her body, once subjected to abuse has now become rightfully hers and has empowered her to resist oppression.⁹ It is this resistance that leads Cordelia to explore her sexuality. Everything that had held Cordelia back cannot be contained any longer, as she explores her sexuality in bisexual relationships. First with a male ice cream freezer man and second with a female seamstress.

After decades of being constrained to her performative gender roles, as daughter, wife, and mother, Cordelia discovers and expresses a newfound enjoyment of her body when turning fifty. First, she can be identified in a binary opposition between the identity she has to assume and the truth of her social and family situation. At first, she insists on the “mask” because she must conform to the constraints of society and fulfill her duties as devoted wife and mother. She is very much aware of the fact that she is playing a role that has been forced upon her, but she soon grows tired of the masquerade. There, in her home, Cordelia acts out the emotional and psychological aspects of this conflict while she struggles and doubts, along with the moments of self-affirmation and healing that she needs: “She said to him in the same way she had told him of their marriage, “I am finished with this now. I am a woman who just want to live her own life. I give you a home, I give you children. I am finish now” (121). Cordelia finally breaks away from the imposed female gender shackles of marriage and mothering, but soon discovers she has no script in which to insert herself. At this point, she needs to undergo a process of healing and self-discovery. At the same time, it can be argued that her healing rehearsal provides the opening of a

⁹ Valentina Cavallin’s dissertation echoes my argument when she points out that “Brand breaks the traditional mask of the caring woman who is expected to take care of her children and husband, and presents new female characters whose pursuit of pleasure and freedom from the gendered and sexualized codes of behavior contributes to free next generations of women from the sexual subjugation. It is a political act and a reaction to sexism aimed at resisting those practices that contribute to the racial and sexual subjugation of black women. Female sexuality is used to carve out a cultural and social space of freedom and empowerment, to break free from the confines of the domestic sphere and to subvert the traditional reproductive roles.”

discussion of communal identity, as the main character clearly stands for the colonial wounded female subject.

However, Cordelia soon realizes also that her sexuality once unleashed, cannot be contained. The body takes over the mind. At first, she thinks of it as a secret with boundaries, but then, she sees Kumar Pillai, the ice-cream freezer man, who was more than willing to give in to Cordelia's eroticized midmorning fantasies: "She wanted the man who fixed ice-cream freezers to set his tools down and cool her. She wanted the seamstress to take her around her waist. And so, she contrived to have them both. Since her lust was a secret, its boundaries were as wide as a secret's. Everything in it was forbidden, just like a secret" (122).

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to discuss the manner in which cinematic narrative language provides sensual pleasure, particularly, "scopophilia," or the love of looking. She adds that cinematic language is symptomatic of a male-dominated conception of society, one in which the female subject serves as the object of pleasure of the male gaze. Given the newly discovered sexuality of Cordelia in the narrative, Mulvey's approach to cinematic conventions is particularly suitable. According to her, in film, the role of the woman as a source of erotic pleasure works at two levels, "as an object for the characters of the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (4). In the case of Cordelia, this is yet one more instance in which she subverts the concept of erotic pleasure associated with the male gaze by Mulvey. Through her window, acting as the spectator, Cordelia lays eyes on Kumar Pillai's "thick belly, and his slicked-back Indian hair . . .", who then turns into the erotic object of Cordelia's pleasure. Her insatiable gaze moves from the ice cream man to Yvonne, the seamstress, who takes up the assigned role of source of erotic enjoyment: "Cordelia moved her curtain to see Yvonne's approach, noticing the flood of small

sweat on Yvonne's neck and breasts and the mark of wetness under the arm of her no sleeved dress” (124). Only this time, the scopophilia serves Cordelia in her exploration of *thieving sugar*.

Brand’s use of the metaphoric phrase “thieving sugar” in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here* helps us in this reading to analyze the desire between Afro-Caribbean women. In her book *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010), Omise’ eke Natasha Tinsley posits that the texts she analyzes “thief sugar” in that they stand for the Afro-Caribbean women that reclaim a space in which they can move in creative ways. She adds that [the sugar] also signifies the Caribbean women’s sexuality, “the sweetness of eroticism” (3). Although the context she proposes “calls up for the contested space of the cane field: a site of sexual violence,” the thieving sugar that takes place in Brand’s novel continues to be explored in the character of Cordelia a descendant of an enslaved woman who resisted slavery. Unlike Verlia in *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), Cordelia’s oppression does not take place in the contested space of the cane field, or in diaspora locations, but at the hands of her parents during her childhood, and later by her husband. The “sugar” Cordelia is so desperately seeking to thief comes with her newfound “unruly sexuality.” Cordelia ventures beyond aberrations of normative heterosexuality in the extra-marital encounter with the ice-cream freezer man, to same-sex desire for Yvonne the seamstress:

Then Cordelia asked if it was more accurate to measure naked and the seamstress agreed and they began all over again as to where each measurement would reach. Cordelia parted her legs and the seamstress fell into them among the brocade and satin and Sea Island cotton. And on the afternoons when Cordelia was not slipping over Kumar Pillai she was sweat wrapped in bolts of cloth with the seamstress. (127)

While Tinsley proposes that the practice of erotic pleasure of “thieving sugar” derived from same-sex relationships is not new in the Caribbean and the diaspora, having been traced back to the Middle Passage, I argue that the female characters in the texts studied here respond to trauma by engaging in non-normative relationships that seek wholeness through sexual liberation.

In words that resonate with Tinsley’s “sweetness of eroticism,” as Myriam Chancy quotes Audre Lorde’s definition of the Greek word *eros*,¹⁰ she comes to an understanding that “through the assertion of female sexuality—meaning woman-centered, meaning lesbian—Lorde sees a possibility for transformation. Recovering sexual autonomy as a black woman and as a lesbian, Lorde’s concept of the erotic as power centers on self-affirmation and the denial of “male models of power” (124). Thus, by realizing that she has been wounded and in having the courage to explore her sexuality beyond the heteronormativity, Cordelia rehearses Bola’s transgressive legacy in a new scenario. Her bi-sexual rendezvous, though frowned upon by her family and community, add a new plenitude to her life to achieve a healing of her own. Cordelia develops self-empowerment and overcomes the burden of the oppression she has been subjected to through the transformative, healing potential of her body. It goes without saying that Cordelia is asserting a woman-centered consciousness.

Healing Rehearsals through “Hard Core Sex”

A comparable scene that conventionally could be considered as sexually shameful takes place in Marie-Elena John’s novel *Unburnable*. In this novel, the bodily experience and

¹⁰ Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the erotic: the erotics as power” cited in Myriam Chancy’s *Searching for Safe Places*, the very word “erotic” comes from the Greek work *eros*, the personification of love in all aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. 124

'knowledge' contribute to handling trauma and achieving healing. Because the body navigates both physical and mental space, it is important to underline the important role of the body in dealing with complicated or even traumatic psychological experiences. Thus, following this notion on the body as a departure point, the female characters' bodies in *Unburnable* play a major role in the "working through" of their traumas. The sexual, physical, psychological, and verbal abuse that Iris, Lillian's mother, suffers, is an example of the shamed, silenced voice in the face of the crude realities many oppressed women experience in the Caribbean. Anger thus becomes a form of resistance for physically abused women who are rendered voiceless. For instance, overwhelmed by the crushing reality of her predicament, Iris is left to wonder how to voice out her anger and disappointment and achieve a sense of empowerment. A bi-racial child of African and Carib genes, both groups carrying the wounds of historical trauma of slavery, genocide, and marginalization in colonial Dominica, Iris is believed to have inherited the insatiate sex drive stereotypically associated with Africans and Caribs. In this rehearsal, through the promiscuous nature of Iris' casual sex encounters, she is portrayed as an eroticized and sexualized female performer who finds the possibility of regaining a sense of power, of being in control, and returning the violence to which she has been subjected. The transactional and performative aspects of rehearsal are intertwined as Iris uses her sexuality to bargain with men who believe that they have power over her. The widowed, the impoverished, the economically dependent, the socially "marooned" female victims of earlier Caribbean narratives have been replaced in these selected readings by characters who improvise rehearsals of gender, such as challenging heteronormativity. *Unburnable* invites us to rethink traditional, received ideas regarding Afro-Caribbean women's sexuality.

Tanya Shields in her book *Bodies and Bones: Feminist Rehearsal and Imagining Caribbean Belonging* cites Saidiya Hartman, who explains how black female personhood was legally bound to and by violence:

The law constituted the subject as a muted, pained body to be punished; this agonized embodiment of subjectivity certainly intensified the dreadful objectification of chattel status. Paradoxically, this designation of subjectivity utterly negated the possibility of a non-punitive, inviolate or pleasurable embodiment, and instead the black captive vanished in the chasm between object, pained body and mortified flesh. (5)

In John's novel, the sexual, physical, psychological, and verbal abuse that Iris, Lillian's mother, suffers, is an example of the silenced voice in the face of the crude realities many oppressed women experience in the Caribbean. However, John's novel challenges the black female's subjectivity of not taking pleasure of her body. Anger becomes a form of resistance for physically abused women who are rendered voiceless. For instance, overwhelmed by the crushing reality of her predicament, Iris is left to wonder how to voice out her anger and disappointment and achieve a sense of empowerment.

Iris' family tree dates back to Maroons settled on a hard-to reach flat in the mountain, a place mistakenly called 'Noah.' "Up There," as the locals also called it, is home to Maroons that lived the African culture heritage practiced during slavery times. A tall, black healer practitioner, Matilda, is capable of curing the ill, and the people of Rouseau often speak of her "magical" abilities. That is how Simon, 'the Carib,' comes to know of her fame, and being a healer himself, he decides to meet her and offer his knowledge. After pondering whether she should partner up with Simon, Matilda accepts his offer and together "they healed and cured and mended" (32).

Also, this partnership results in the birth of Iris, a “bright-colored and glowing baby with soft hair” (33). Because Simon and Matilda are too busy documenting, practicing, and testing, they hand over the baby to the local African derived communal child-care system, inserting Iris into a community of women who take care of her devotedly in spite of the demands of their own children, because of her charm and beauty.

At fourteen, the Maroon Council decides that Iris needs education, so they send her to Roseau, where the nuns place her in a Lebanese house in exchange for housekeeping and child care. Despite the nuns’ efforts to save Iris from getting pregnant and ruining her life, Iris falls in love with John Baptiste, a wealthy Creole, who immediately pounces on the half-Carib easy prey he considered was offering herself to him. Eventually, John finds Iris a one-bedroom house where they can easily love each other without the restrictions of a formal union, as he warns her that he is to marry soon. However polygamous accepting the Maroon community where Iris grew up is, she does not react well to John’s marriage and the birth of his twins. Instead, local people claim she had turned mentally ill, confirmed with proof when she got into a fight with John’s wife, Cecile Richard Baptiste.

The carnival allows for a brief time when the locals give themselves over to the raw side of their natures, exhibiting violent behavior behind costumes and masks. During this Carnival Monday, Lillian certainly sees the opportunity to release her anger:

She had gyrated up to her, she had shown Cecile what she did with her husband, demonstrated to her the act of fornication. She had writhed up to her, pelvis rocking back and forth, in and out, first one leg up, then the other, and with both her hands pulled off Cecile’s mask and then easily ripped off the man’s pajama suit Cecile was wearing. Tore the top off, brassiere and all, and then pulled off the

bottoms by the elastic, panties and all... (115-116)

To avenge her daughter's humiliation, Mrs. Richard, in the company of her two assistants beat Lillian and rape her with a broken coca cola bottle. The privileged omniscient narrator feeds the reader with a detailed account of the crude violation: "And then it stopped being graceful as Mrs. Richard planted the jagged end of the bottle as far up into Iris as her hand would go. And then again, and then again. Until finally her hand came out empty, covered with blood midway to her elbow" (121).¹¹

Unburnable explores anger--often perceived by observers in terms of "madness"--as a form of resistance for a physically abused woman who is rendered voiceless. Despite the comfort of the familiar Maroon community and her mother's physical "mending" of her broken body, Iris decides to return to Roseau. The memories of a failed chance at love, the humiliation, the beating, and the ultimate torture at the hands of Mrs. Richard undermine Iris, making her feel like a lesser woman, and pushes her into an abyss of "madness" and prostitution. In her own understanding, Iris suffers oppression caused by color, class, or poverty, marginalizing her to the point of seclusion with the community of washerwomen in the outer bank of the narrow Roseau River.

Iris' tragic existence brings to mind Mildred Mortimer's *Writing from the Hearth: Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women's Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean*, which explores women's transformation of restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures into a liberating "alternative" space--an "altered" space containing freedom of choice as well as a place of resistance to the status quo. Mortimer ably demonstrates how this alternative space is "open,

¹¹ Though perpetrated by a man, Michelle Cliff's novel *No Telephone to Heaven* describes a similar scene. A man breaks into the master's house violating the entire family with a broken glass bottle: "... with the rum bottle and its jagged edge. Finally, the mistress—left with a present wet with her daughter and her husband. he jammed it into her (*NTH*, 49).

flexible, and multipurpose,” functioning as “a refuge (for meditation, *memory*, or dream)” or as a “preparatory antechamber for future activity, a site of resistance, a place of performance—where writing, orality, and art in varied forms convey woman’s sense of self” (qtd. in Praud 238. Emphasis added). In the light of Mortimer’s view, one can argue that the “alternative spaces” that Iris resorts to prepare her for the ultimate transformation in resistance to the dominant, domineering male figure in her life. In the case of Iris, instead of resorting to writing or art, it is the space between her legs that which becomes the combative site to counterattack the devastating effects of her brutal oppression.

The transactional and performative aspects of rehearsal are intertwined as Iris uses her sexuality to bargain with men who believe that they have power over her. But what they do not realize is that her *jouissance* gradually becomes inextricably linked to a domineering sadism. In other words, her empowerment is gained through sex. In the opening chapter “Up There, Noah,” John describes the conflicted, contradictory nature of Iris’ sexual hunger:

Men, though, would laugh at that and say it was the quality of sex Iris offered that was the thing . . . the men—men of all classes, town men and country men—were astounded by the passion of their encounters with Iris. Several of the fainthearted were too cowardly to face it a second time, but for the most part this was what kept her steady of visitors coming. None understood that the intensity that left them shaken was actually the aggression of an otherwise powerless, disappointed, and very angry woman, who was, in fact, molesting them with her body as she threw them onto their backs and attacked them brutally. (1-2)

This rehearsal of Afro-Caribbean women’s sexuality suggests a subverting of the typical masculine dominance that oppressed women have experienced in male hegemonic discourse and

narratives as well as in sexual politics. Thus, Iris represents a break from the passive posture of the oft 'subalterned' gender.

According to Elina Valovirta, "As the performance of shame entails an interlink with various other emotions, shame needs to be read through a variety of associated emotions such as guilt, honor, responsibility, terror, and pain."¹² Lillian rehearses Iris' sexual shame in how she experiences emotions of guilt, terror, and pain through her violent sexuality as it has been transmitted and shifted to her: Lillian inherits Iris's sexual cravings and sense of resistance, most clearly through reclaiming her own sexuality and body. The daughter achieves this liberation by rehearsing and evoking memories that reach back to her own mother's carnal appetites. Lillian recalls a memory dating from when she was two and a half years, when she would have a glimpse into the one-bedroom house where she lived with Iris¹³. At that early age Lillian "remembered the baths... after the men had clambered on top of the woman... / ... after there had been the tumbling and the men's shouts of pain, because there the woman had hit the men, and bite them, and claw them" (250). These dormant memories contribute to triggering Lillian's approach to sex as an adult:

Standing against the flimsy rail, they allowed themselves love of the most physical kind—the only kind of love which Lillian was capable—with indelicate noises: grunting and loud panting; sucking kisses that turned into bites, slaps that left marks all over each other's bodies. (211)

¹² Valovirta, Elina. *Sexual Feelings: Reading Anglophone Caribbean Women's Writing through Affect*, 103.

¹³ Lillian, not knowing she was drawing on the memories of the first two and a half years of her life, could picture the woman naked in an outdoor concrete bath... // this she knew because she had often seen it with her two-year-old eyes, when tired of sitting outside in the rain or the sun, she would climb the few stone steps at the front of the one-room house quietly sitting in the doorway waiting for the infliction of pain to be over, watching, and learning (250-1).

Like her mother, Lillian's rehearsal of sexuality distances her from oppressive male-privileged position in sexual politics. While acknowledging that Lillian's stance could be interpreted along the lines of Fanon's contention that the colonized often are engaged in unsuccessful acts of mimicry of the colonizers, I hold that Lillian's sexuality indeed mirrors an attempt to break away from the traditional hegemonic order of sexual dynamics by giving in to the pleasures of the flesh.

In his reading of *Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (2010), Ogagaoghene Emerotowho Ifowodo explains how "the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle." He continues

The course of such events, Freud explains, is activated by an unpleasure-pleasure tension, with the mind seeking to cause its resolution in favour of pleasure, or to ensure that the —final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension ... an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure. But this primary mode of the mental apparatus comes in conflict with the outside world which seeks to regulate human conduct through the imposition of moral strictures, the function of the super-ego. Thus, driven by the ego 's instinct for self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle which compels the —postponement of satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure.¹⁴

To heal and alleviate her suffering, Lillian gives into the "pleasures of the flesh." However, she cannot fill the void of loss she carries within, and she is incapable of experiencing *jouissance*. On

¹⁴ See Emerotowho Ifowodo, Ogagaoghene. *Re-Constructing Identities: History, Trauma and Healing in the Post-Colonial Narrative* (dissertation) 2010, 100.

the other hand, she is entrapped in ambiguity, as she feels all the pain she holds could be erased if she could only possess Teddy:

Lillian walked up to Teddy and he thought she might hit him, but instead she went past him. She sat on the railing and took off her shirt, and in the same place where they had made love the first night, Teddy let Lillian punish him . . . Teddy just remembered it as the fuck of his life. (257)

Although she creates for herself a space that is comparatively more privileged than that of her mother's or grandmother's, Lillian fails to attain real personal satisfaction. Her way of coping with trauma is to transfer all her emotions into a non-verbal outlet to not face her family past, or as Teddy later interprets as "hard-core sex." To survive emotionally and psychologically, Lillian resorts to this strategy of sexual energy transference. Both Iris' and Lillian's sexual rehearsals disrupt gender binaries and hierarchies by showing women's active participation in a typically male-controlled hegemonic ownership of sexual dominance. Rehearsing sexuality here presupposes disrupting male-sanctioned gender discourses to exhibit divergences in narratives of power and modes of domination.

Playing Madivinez¹⁵: "Women-loving Women"

Another novel that showcases female characters in pursuit of self-assertion is Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Road*, which traces three storylines connected through the sensual goddess Ezili. In her works—*The Chaos* (2012), "A Habit of Waste" (2001), *Brown Girl in the Ring*, *Midnight Robber*, *The New Moon's Arms*), Hopkinson experiments different venues, from

¹⁵ *Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley* explains the different names of same-sex relationship in the Caribbean: "Like Trinidad's *jamettes*, Jamaica's *man royals*, Haiti's *madivines*, and Barbados *wicca*, many involved in same-sex relationships here have done so openly in the context of working-class Afro-Caribbean traditions called *mati* in Suriname, *zanmi* in Grenada, and *kambrada* in Curacao" (*Thieving Sugar*, 7).

Afrofuturism¹⁶ to speculative fiction, to give a voice to marginalized women in a patriarchal context. Yet in an interview with Luan Gaines about *The Salt Roads*, Hopkinson warns against stereotyping her characters: “I can’t make any useful generalizations about all women, all women of colour, or even all black women... // Ezili is a very sensual deity, so I created characters that would play out some of that.” The way in which *The Salt Roads* challenge resistance to systemic oppression and erasure and transform the tropes and diverse characters help to examine the sexual rehearsals that these female characters undergo.

Hopkinson’s imaginative Afrofuturistic scope in the novel travels across time and space, from colonial Saint Domingue to nineteenth-century Paris, and fourth-century Alexandria, placing three marginalized women—plantation slave and healer Mer, Baudelaire’s ‘mulatto’ mistress Jeanne Duval, and Nubian prostitute Thaïs—in a position where they author their own stories and claim their sexualities. As Amandine H. Faucheux puts it:

The Salt Roads’ non-linear time frame and Ezili’s power to go through time and space represent a queer Afrofuturist tale that situates black queer subjects across history, denying a white heteronormative narrative that places the emergence of modern sexuality in nineteenth-century Europe. (570)

All three main female characters in *The Salt Roads* strive to survive and achieve modicums of security and freedom beyond their oppressive situations, and all serve as conduit to manifest the Iwa¹⁷ Ezili. Hopkinson explains that

¹⁶ Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses AfricanAmerican concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (“Black to the Future” (1993), 180).

¹⁷ The third chapter will examine the way the narratives explore the connection between the Iwas and nature and spirituality.

Like many of the Haitian lwas, Ezili has many forms. Three of them are Ezili Frèda, Ezili Danto and Ezili Je-Wouj (Red-eyed Ezili). Each form has different aspects. The three women each reflect those various aspects. It was a lovely coincidence that I had long wanted to write about Jeanne Duval and about Gypsy Mary, and that they so closely fit the attributes of two of the Ezilis. I invented the character of Mer to fit the third (Gaines).

Jilliana Enteen argues that Hopkinson's use of gender "interrupts or dismantles the cultural mythologies that place women as secondary, or subordinate, or altogether silent" (271). I argue that despite Ezili's possessions of these women, their bodies emerge as sites of contestation, addressing the history of violence that they undergo as subjects of colonizing and patriarchal powers and imagining the ways in which their bodies can become agency and self-assertive.

Because queerness is essentially "imperceptible," it requires the performance of visible actions such as nonnormative gender performance and identity and observable same-sex relationships. Plantation slaves in colonial Saint Domingue, Mer and Tipingee exemplify what Faucheux describes as "Hopkinson's reinscription of the black queer body throughout time and space, // function[ing] as a counter-narrative to the whitewashing of queer theory, and simultaneously the heterosexualization of African-American history" (571). The women participate in a long-term relationship, though Tipi is happily married to Patrice; they were "shipmates; sisters before Tipingee's blood came; wives to each other after, even when they had had husbands" (*TSR*, Kindle location 229). Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley explains the origin of the word *mati* as "shipmate", "she who survived the Middle Passage with me" (7). According to Tinsley, "On these crossings captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, resisting the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by

feeling and feeling for their co-occupants on these ships” (7). Certainly, Mer and Tipi’s relationship coincide with Tinsley’s description of the historical account of shipmates surviving the Middle Passage and continued relationships with mati.

The entire plantation is aware of the women’s relationship and understands Mer and Tipi as “z’anmies”:

So if she and Tipingee wanted to play madivinez with each other like some young girls did while they were waiting for marriage, well plenty of the Ginen felt life was too brief to fret about that. So long as Tipingee was doing her duty by her husband, most people swallowed their bile and left them be. Tipingee esteemed her Patrice for that, how he had never tried to take the joy of Mer from her.

Another man would have beat her. Patrice had gotten to know that her love was bigger for having so many to love: him, her child Marie-Claire; Mer (*TSR*, Kindle location 237).

I find Tinsley’s argument that “women’s reclaiming of eroticism as a wellspring of resistance to colonial symbolic and economic orders” is useful to understand Mer and Tipi’s relationship. (20). Like Verlia in Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here*, Hopkinson also gives us characters enduring the trauma of the contested space of the plantation by thieving sugar. In chapter three, I further examine the trauma of the gut-wrenching punishments that Mer witnesses and how she rehearses healing through a motherly, spiritual connection with Ezili.

Another queer character in the novel is Jeanne Duval, also known as Lemer and by her dancer/escort name Prosper. Although her story takes place in 19th century Paris, like Mer she lives a type of slavery, and is too concerned with practicality and her will to survive. Hopkinson follows the actual biography of Baudelaire, but portrays him as a pathetic and incompetent lover

who easily dismisses Jeanne's well-being.¹⁸ In Baudelaire's actual poems about Duval, he consistently exoticizes her by comparing her to savage elements and nature as well as to various evil characters such as the devil (Amandine H. Faucheux 572). Hopkinson illustrates his descriptions of Jeanne after a rather violent sexual encounter: "His face was slack with awe now. 'You were like a very serpent, Jeanne. Twisting and turning . . . ' He touched her shoulder, reverently, as though she were a statue from antiquity. 'Such grace. Like a snake. So sinuous.'" (*TSR*, Kindle Locations, 1825-1827). Though Baudelaire's behavior exemplifies the male hegemonic discourse, Hopkinson, very much like Marie-Elena John, bets on oppressed female characters to subvert the typical masculine dominance in sexual politics. Like Iris and Lillian in *Unburnable*, Jeanne breaks away from the subject position of the oft 'subalterned' gender. In an intimate encounter, she teaches Baudelaire a lesson on what it feels like to be a woman through the lens of an all-male privileged position. She reverses the roles in the sexual practice by violating not just his body, but by refusing to cease inflicting pain. Details of Jeanne's transgressive sexuality suggests a snapshot of women as activists subverting the subject position:

And with my index finger, I pressed hard against the tight opening of his rear. It opened just a little to me, then he stiffened. "Ai! Jeanne, it hurts!" // "How tight? How unwilling?" "What . . . what do you wish from me?" // "Has a woman ever felt like this when you've entered her?" "Ah, um, yes. But . . ." "Yes what?" I pushed slowly past the first knuckle. Oh, but the noises he made were exquisite!

¹⁸ In the preface to Baudelaire's *Intimate Journals* (1938), Christopher Isherwood describes Baudelaire and Jeanne's relationship as follows:
Shy men of extreme sensibility are the born victims of the prostitute. Baudelaire's mulatto mistress, Jeanne Duval, was a beautiful, indolent animal. She squandered his money and slept with his friends. The biographers usually condemn her; most unjustly. Few of us would really enjoy a love-affair with a genius. Jeanne had to endure Baudelaire's moods and listen to his poems; she understood neither. But, in some mysterious manner, these two human beings needed each other. They stayed together, on and off, for twenty years. Baudelaire always loved and pitied her, and tried to help her. Hideous, diseased, she limps out of his history on crutches and disappears (cited in Volschenk, 194).

“God, God; what must I do?” “You really want to know?” “Yes! Anything! Only cease!” I jerked my finger out of him, causing him to cry out high and sharp.

“Poor dear,” I said. I laid my hands on his rump again (*TSR*, Kindle Locations 2100-2107, 2116, 2124).

By molesting Beaudelaire, Jeanne not only disrupts the male-sanctioned sexual discourses to exhibit divergences in narratives of power and modes of domination, but she also disarticulates the male-sanctioned gendered dynamics, as she encourages him to explore homosexual encounters when she teases “I will show you how to prepare a woman—nay, even a man, should you come to that (*TSR*, Kindle Locations 2100-2107, 2116, 2124).

Despite their complicated relationship, Jeanne’s true love is Lisette. Jeanne’s enjoyment of sex and the erotic appears to be deeper and more heartfelt when she is with Lisette than with Charles: “Oh, so warm, so fair, her skin! She said nothing, just reached a hand to me. I felt a tug along my scalp. She was stroking the length of my hair, spread out so all along her legs.

“Beautiful,” she breathed. “My beautiful Jeanne.” “Mm” (*TSR*, Kindle location 269, 275).

Although both women live in a different setting from Mer and Tipi in Saint Domingue, they are also placed in a position of enslavement through prostitution. However, by engaging in their erotic and sexual practices, they probe a site of resistance that runs through taking back sexuality as a powerful commodity that women keep to themselves (Tinsley 20).

Earlier I stated that regardless of Ezili’s possessions, the women who serve as a vessel for the goddess present resistance to the inequalities of oppressive regimes such as slavery and patriarchy. However, I want to turn now to the emancipatory potential that comes with the Iwas hypersexual nature. Ezili is considered a divinity in obeah, which is “a set of religious practices designed to help persons in distress deal with foreboding circumstances, respond to tragedy, or

fight for their survival and freedom” (Murell 229). And that is precisely what Hopkinson’s fictional account presents: born from the pain of three slave women burying a stillborn child, Ezili responds to the women’s suffering. Her embodiment in these disempowered women lends them a sexual agency to envision and react to their entrapment in alternative ways, in this case a sexual healing rehearsal.

Precisely because of the non-linear storyline, the strength of the novel relies on its unconventional treatment of time and space. The fragmented narrative structure, loosely connected by the omniscient narrator Ezili, showcases her assertive language typeset in bold. Each time Ezili traverses through time and space, she slips in and out of different bodies.¹⁹ But it is Jeanne Duval’s body the one that Ezili sexually rides with the most pleasure:

And suddenly I am finally master of her body. Oh, what a wondrous thing, to be dressed in flesh! I revel in the feel of it. I run my hands over our face, smear away the powder and paint and wipe them on the expensive silks of our dress. I pull in air with our lungs, sense the trail of blood through our veins. I have Jeanne get to her feet. She never once protests. Her floating mind, caught by the rhythm, isn’t aware that it is being swept away. (*TSR*, Kindle Locations 1723-1726,1727).

Despite the different experiences of oppression and exploitation—enslavement in colonial Saint Domingue and prostitution in Paris—the voices of these marginalized women at times possessed by Ezili begin to author their hitherto brutalized bodies through sexual healing rehearsals.

Hopkinson presents several depictions of queerness—same-sex scenes, nontraditional relationships, and even “hard-core” sex—with the purpose of representing in a very organic way the various sexualities and desires of the often-marginalized female characters.

¹⁹ Ezili constantly changes her fictional and historical embodiments: she possesses Mer, Jeanne, the Alexandrian prostitute Thais, the wife of a plantation owner, the maroon Patrice, Rosa Parks and the Stonewall rioters.

These novels deal without a doubt with traumatized female subjects in search of healing. They depict characters that struggle with a changing world that needs to be defined and coped with. Brand, John, and Hopkinson confront us with an array of shaming sexual scenes that lead to exploring the question of how Afro-Caribbean women can heal from a shamed sexuality if not by subverting its male-dominated concept and/or by finding erotic pleasure in their bodies.

Finding an Alternative Space: Memory as a Healing Rehearsal

“a wound, / some open passage that has cleft the brain, /some deep, amnesiac blow.”

“Laventille,” Derek Walcott

“It is not so much history, but memory. History is something official. Memory is in the mind of the people. It is something that may be very minute, very unimportant, but it can change a whole life. Memory may be something very trivial, very banal.

But not to the person who lives that life.”

Maryse Condé

Everything depends on memory (Brand, *At The Change and Full of the Moon* 115)

The fact that everything in the world has that point beyond which it can bear no more weight is perhaps what drives individuals to a state of trauma difficult to recover from. In the case of women in the Caribbean colonial history, trauma is often seen as linked to an ongoing painful recollection of ancestral memories that persist to the present day. The conquest and genocide of indigenous peoples in the islands during the exploration and Middle Passage periods was a chaotic experience that traumatized collectively many of its victims across the troubled archipelago. While I employ the term ‘healing rehearsal’ to describe a variety of options embraced by the female characters who populate the works in my study, Laura Murphy’s concept of “the suffering of survival,” also influences my conceptualization of the text as a transformative tool. In her essay, “The Curse of Constant Remembrance,” Murphy, argues that trauma involves “the suffering of survival” (55). The phrase describes the after-effects of trauma on two distressing levels: the affected person’s actual process of enduring the pain of trauma as

such, plus the effort to recuperate from its aftershocks. Murphy further states that while some psychoanalytic theorists propose that the traumatic event lasts only for the lifetime of the affected individual, others argue that the effects transcend the life of individuals to the point of branching out and affecting the collective psyche of subsequent generations. To that effect I apply the concept of “rehearsal” as a transformative process in fictional narratives that explore trauma as social, intergenerational, or personal phenomena. Much of the ‘official’ documentation dating from that tumultuous period of conquest, colonization and slavery was marred by two serious limitations. First, the documentation presented a view of the Caribbean that reflected and served the economic and political interests of the invading empire, and secondly, its record of the treatment of aboriginals, slaves and laborers contained a certain bias, invisibility and silence about the experience of invasion and colonization as experienced by those who were victimized by it. The memory of their experience was more inscribed in their collective psyche, oral traditions, and cultural practices (such as songs, dances, festivals) rather than printed on official documents. Thus, the collective experience of trauma in the Caribbean was devoid of testimonial narratives from the viewpoint of the oppressed that would enable to call out and denounce the experience by its name, so it could be purged and healed. The passage of historical time has not brought with it a sense of closure to the colonial oppression by those who experienced it firsthand, or who were their descendants and inherited the painful memory of its leftover scars.

But collective trauma has the characteristic of having a long, painful memory that runs deep across generations. Thus the whole Caribbean archipelago, populated by what Walcott describes as a “confederacy of slaves” in his essay “The Muse of History,” consisted mostly of geographically separated island-nations (inland neighbors Haiti/Dominican Republic and St. Maarten/St. Martin as notable exceptions), each containing its own narrative(s) of collective

pain, each one ‘rehearsing’ their own responses to their version of that trauma, with perhaps each one not fully aware of a similar process occurring with the peoples on other islands across the region. In the perspective of Benítez-Rojo, this rehearsal phenomenon does not consist of isolated island-nations, but constitute what he describes as one island of ‘paradoxes’ occurring everywhere at once, continuously oscillating between order and disorder, with the whole Caribbean archipelago rehearses its response to the suffering brought to the region by the Spanish conquistador on one island, the Dutch merchant on another, the English slave trader or the French plantation owner on others, and so on (Benítez-Rojo 1-5).

Moreover, Carole Boyce Davies, in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), observes that “we were/are products of separations and dislocations and dismemberings, people of African descent in the Americas historically have sought reconnection” (17). Boyce also cites Paula Gunn Allen in her study of Native-American oral tradition, who argues that “remembering is what heals” (17). Following this lead, I here explore how the process of memory and healing occur within the particular context of each major female characters’ lives in Caribbean fiction that fashion characters who succumb to isolation and madness, such as Marie-Elena John’s *Unburnable*, Dionne Brands’ *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, and Jacqueline Bishop’s short story “Oleander”. The female characters’ multiple healing ‘rehearsals’ in these narratives entail a variety of options such as: negotiating with traumatic memories. Moreover, they depict characters who struggle with their respective past in a changing world that needs to be defined/redefined and coped with so that they can assert themselves. Each work posits issues of identity, religion, and community ties, as central to the character’s search for a place in the world. Each one also portrays a variety of choices available to emotionally

distressed or wounded female individuals to explore or embrace, such as conformism and liberation.

Coming Home and Rehearsing Memory

Memory can be altered; it can even be ‘deceived.’ How to reconstruct then, the broken memory of such a period as Caribbean history? It is indeed that ‘lost’ memory that Caribbean writers wish to bring to life, by “inventing” that failed memory, as French theorist and novelist Monique Wittig urges in the excerpt below, advocating for rescuing the sounds silenced by mainstream history:

There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember . . . You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent. (89, Emphasis added)

It would seem from Wittig’s directive that recalling “history” from memory is a subjective process wherein what is ‘put in’ is as important as what is ‘left out.’

In the case of *Unburnable*, what has been left out is the painful ancestral memory of an oppressed family, and rehearsing it is important to restore Lillian’s memories and well-being. The article “Memory: concepts and theory” published by the Research for History Institute of the University of Leiden notes that “in the process of remembering humans rely on summaries or ‘schemes’ of the past – when a person ‘recollects’ what happened, he or she will reconstruct a memory from these schemes, often adding or changing details.” This very concept of rehearsal allows the character to examine memory, and explore history, and in doing so, obtain a better understanding, contextually speaking, of her subsequent healing. Along these same lines, Susan

Willis's essay "Histories, Communities and Sometimes Utopia" argues that the use of historical materials in black women's writing—which often rely heavily on vivid memory—is accomplished by "reconstructing the development of the character's individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race, the struggles of her community and the relationships that have developed within the family" (815). John's novel does exactly that: it reflects upon the historical forces that have shaped the Caribbean female psyche and, most importantly, that of kinship relationships, enabling the understanding of liberatory experiences of the traumatized female characters through the rehearsal of memory. The main female character in this narrative is portrayed as a marginalized subject who carries the burden of her family's painful past. The rehearsal happens not just as an individual experience for Lillian, but as a broader collective rehearsal of memory with which she negotiates and internalizes her discoveries.

Structurally, *Unburnable* does not follow a chronological, linear narrative, thus presenting a distorted memory which moves back and forth between modern times and the past. Because of this narrative structuring, the reader must rely on the gradual unveiling of the mystery surrounding Lillian's past. David Shields observes that "Memories have a quasi-narrative structure, constituting a story [. . .] but not strong enough to ensure that the ordering of the events is the ordering that originally took place" (32). As if expanding on Shield's description of memory's narrative process, Gayle Greene's essay "The Uses of Memory" argues that "Memory revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies: it includes, it omits, embellishes or represses, decorates or drops, according to imperatives of its own. Far from being a trustworthy transcriber of "reality," it is a shaper and shape shifter that takes liberties with the past as artful and lying as any taken by the creative writer" (294). Along the lines of Greene's argument, I contend that

Unburnable's main character struggles to piece together the missing elements in her family past, that is, by retrieving traumatic memories and afflictions necessary to heal. In a fictional laboratory, such as this novel, recuperating and appropriating ancestral memory becomes an essential rehearsal exercise that helps Lillian discover a painful truth rooted in a haunting family secret. The explicit fictional restructuring of memory provides the reader with access to something that began as someone else's disordered perception of accounts through a nonlinear narrative that includes shifts in time and place. When interviewed about the novel's genesis, John claims that "writing something commercial, [. . .] involving a group of friends who vacationed together every year" turned into finding her voice by trying "to give the Caribbean character a family background" (297). This background is marked by a family drama involving a dark mystery surrounding the tragic hanging of the Maroon matriarchal figure, a traumatic family event that the protagonist, Lillian Baptiste, escapes from at the age of fourteen, and that cuts her off from any communication or relationship with her family and almost everyone familiar to them on the island of Dominica. Matilda, Lillian's grandmother, represents the most important figure in her community—a chief, an obeah woman, a healer—and it is precisely this sense of community that Lillian seeks in her healing process.

If, as Nina Auerbach observes, "The family is the first community we know . . ." (35), then Lillian's family structure has now been reduced to memories. Lillian, like mainstream history, has also tried to silence all the voices from her past, a past that was hidden from her as if to protect her from a foretold tragic fate. Now 37 and living in Washington, she wishes to reconstruct the family history that has tortured her mind since she found out the truth about her true biological mother, Iris. Reconstructing those memories might prove tricky and to some extent a catharsis for Lillian who has led a very reserved life as a result of the trauma suffered

upon the sudden discovery of her matrilineal line with roots back to the slavery period. To help her face the ghosts of her family past, Lillian decides to go back to her native Dominica.

As Bessel van de Kolk and Onno van der Hart note in their essay “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma”: “Almost all memories are malleable by constant reworking and recategorization” (172). For Lillian, her trip back to Dominica involves the search for family roots and history through malleable memories that belong not only to her, but also witnesses such as her stepmother Icilma, her godmother Nen Allie, and the collective memory of the people of Rousseau. I argue that in *Unburnable*, John uses memory as a way to reconstruct the past and reconnect to family roots, while stressing the subjectivity of oral history, but also highlighting its therapeutic value.

Trauma often pushes the “victim” away from home. Boyce also revisits how “home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in autobiographical writing. The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women” (21). In their effort to free themselves from the shackles of trauma, Afro-Caribbean women often resort to relocating to other sites far away from the focal point of pain, which is mostly the homeland, community, and/or family. Along this thematic line, Maria Cristina Rodríguez’s *What Women Lose. Exile and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Caribbean Writers*, examines how

Caribbean women writers focus on marginalized female characters who have migrated to metropolitan centers and attempt to hold on to an acceptable reality by assuming the appropriate interpersonal, social, and cultural masks that allow them to find a sense of significance in their interior and domestic lives as well as in the at-large community. . . when and if this project fails, they choose isolation

through death, madness, the obliteration of their past, or the re-creation of the location of that past” (xiv-xv).

According to the above geographic literature, memory, like trauma, is both temporally and spatially dynamic. As a result, multiple temporalities and spatialities are present and possible within sites, or places of memory. The female characters included in the novels under discussion also are marginalized, and most have migrated to distance themselves from a traumatic experience, and, upon failure, succumb under the weight of the factors examined by Rodríguez in her study. My study sheds light on the additional perspective of ways in which the traumatized women challenge rather than succumb to their worst fears in the more recent Caribbean literary production by women.

Myriam J. A. Chancy notes in *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (1997) that

[f]or Afro-Caribbean emigrant women who may not have the support of an established community within their adopted countries, such forced denial often produces a sense of acute alienation. ... Home, then, paradoxically becomes both that site of self-recovery and the point of no return (xi).²⁰

For Lillian that site of self-recovery and the point of no return is Dominica. She needs to go back, be close to the potential witnesses, interview them, gather historical data from the town’s archives, but sometimes all it takes is the place where something happened to recall a given

²⁰ Chancy’s examination of different texts by Afro-Caribbean women include a process many Caribbean women are forced to confront within their exile. She posits: “This process has four distinguishing features: alienation, self-definition, recuperation, and return.” She goes on to say that “depending on how the characters presented in the literature fare with recuperation and self-definition, the authors explore what it might mean to return homeward. For some characters that return is an actual return to the Caribbean; for others, their return is symbolically or metaphorically achieved through the affirmation of an alternative history to dip today presented by various colonial powers at work in the Caribbean”(xxi-xxii).

experience. As Lillian visits Up There, the hidden place of the Maroon community where her grandmother Matilda lived, she recalls a memory: “And the voices in the air stopped calling to her, and the noise in her head began again, but not before Lillian found a memory, one she didn’t even realize she had been looking for” (248). In this process of uncovering hidden memories of family drama, the novel unravels issues of violence within the Caribbean family. The site of hidden or repressed memories is also the site where they can be confronted, exorcised, and re-opened for healing rehearsal. The narrative John employs allows the novel’s omniscient narrator the freedom to revisit significant moments and even take certain liberties with historical data, shape-shifting events that have often been distorted by the individual and collective memory through the chanté mas songs that perpetuated Lillian’s matrilineal history. This (re)visiting constitutes a rehearsal, and subsequently a healing one, because it leads to a deeper understanding of the past in relation to the possibilities of the future.

In the Introduction of *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (1996), Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes write

As current battles over the definitions of home indicate, there is no one concept of home, nor is home a static “safe place” that can exist unchanged by shifts in time or space. The concept of home, much like the concept of identity, is a fertile site of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction. Home is not always a comfortable place to be, and despite Bernice Johnson Reagon’s distinction between home and “coalition,” we contend that home is always a form of coalition: between the individual and family or community, between belonging and exile, between home as utopian longing and home as memory, between home

as safe haven and home as imprisonment or site of violence, and finally, between home as place as home as metaphor. (xv)

Wiley and Barne's argument helps understand Lillian's battle between her exile and longing for answers that will help her make peace with her past as "[s]he said to her mother and her godmother, "I came home to face it" (199).

Unburnable evidences how popular folk music can perpetuate memories and events that would otherwise be lost in the collective psyche of a community. Chanté mas, an important component of carnival music of Dominica, features lyrics traditionally based on gossipy subject matter that often targets the scandalous behavior or personal defects of known members of the community. Local people would take advantage of personal tragedies and perpetuate the "tragic" incident in the chanté mas for future generations, who often sang the lyrics without deciphering its true meanings. Such was the case of the songs, "Matilda Swinging" and "Bottle of Coke." In the chapter titled "Singing History," Lillian learns the truth behind the songs her stepmother Icilma had so strictly prohibited. As a group of school girls sang by the river, Lillian inquires: "Who is Matilda?" "Who is she to me?" Myrtle, the oldest girl replies: "She is your murdering Obeahwoman grandmother" (229). Suddenly, it all makes sense, and Lillian wonders "why she had never put it together before, why she had never connected the song to what she had seen—the woman, swinging indeed, from a rope" (228). This event triggers the trauma that makes Lillian think she carries the stigma of her family. After her godmother, Nen Allie, a former Texan nun, confirms that indeed Matilda is her grandmother, Lillian attempts suicide on the site of her mother Iris' grave. This prompts Icilma to send her off to her aunt in the United States, where she cuts all connection with her relatives and her birth island. The cultural rehearsal of chanté mas songs have haunted Lillian as an adult, forcing her to embark on a journey to

recuperate memories about who were the women who inspired such lyrics. Thus, the communal folk songs tap into the repository of memories that otherwise would be stranded in the collective unconscious.

As I mentioned previously, there is a deceptive element to memory that some may put to ill use. For instance, in *Unburnable*, Mary-Alice, is a former nun who functions as an unreliable purveyor of family memory, due in part to her incomprehension of the Maroon community's ancestral acceptance of polygamy. That said, the novel gives ample evidence of the importance that the recall of painful memories has to breaking the emotional barriers to the realities of a traumatic past in the lives of women who need its liberating process of recovery and discovery.

But whose memory will survive in conflicted narrative contexts, such as that of *Unburnable*? Rumors spread about like wildfire are confirmed or denied validity as John's novel progresses. The rumors, which at first originate as unwritten, oral testimonials, are based on stories told by 'witnesses' of the "I-was-there" variety, whose versions are often at odds with one another. Despite these apparent narrative contradictions, the stories from memory told in *Unburnable* collectively represent the fight against oblivion of those whose memory otherwise would have never made it to books containing the 'official' history, making the rehearsal of recuperating memory a healing alternative and an awakening from the nightmare of hidden family history. By rehearsing memory even through gossip or song, this text proves the ability of women to generate richer understandings of their problematic pasts.

From Trauma to Healing: Rehearsals in Madness

In addition to the pressing desire of recalling memories by coming back home, another type of rehearsal evident in *Unburnable* is madness as a means to negotiate with the harsh realities of unbearable trauma. Kelly Baker Joseph, in *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations*

of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature discusses trauma in the context of madness. Rather than define madness, Baker Joseph's book focuses on the ways madness "defines" community, gender, and for some characters, reality itself (8-9). It also provides an analysis of John's *Unburnable* in terms of the trauma experienced by key characters as a by-product of madness: "The matrix of race, geography, and memory, . . . Manifests itself most clearly in the charges of madness and criminality levied against the three women" (155). Although her approach deals primarily with insanity, Baker Joseph's probing of the subject is useful for exploring the effectiveness or failure of the healing process from the predicament of madness. That said, while Baker argues in favor of madness as a form of resistance in literary texts, I question the success of madness as a way to challenge patriarchal discourses of power, given that in the case of *Unburnable*, the alleged madness suffered by all three female characters furthers women's marginalization.

Caribbean women writers have treated these issues before. In 1966 Jean Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel that overtly explored the plights of white creole women under the oppression of the patriarchal society. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the main character's mental state is questioned. The roots to Antoinette's alleged lunacy are traced back to her difficult childhood, which proves to be crucial in establishing relationships throughout her life. Her relationship with her mother is completely obliterated in the novel. While Antoinette longs for a closer connection with her mom, the reader feels for the white Creole girl whose mother constantly pushes her away: "...and [she] flung me from her. I fell against the partition and hurt myself" (29). This rejection did not come only from her "infamous" mother. Being a Creole girl and daughter of a former slave owner come to misery, Antoinette—like her mother—experiences that rejection from white people: "Real white people...They didn't look at us, nobody see them come near us"

(14). Her attempts at establishing relationships in Coulibri Estate did not prove successful either, as members of that black community often showed their dislike: “They called us white cockroaches” (13). The isolation she experiences, along with the common beliefs of the Obeah spiritual practice, might explain Antoinette’s own question of her mental state: “There was full moon that night—and I watched it for a long time. . . [Christophine] said that it was very bad to sleep in the moonlight when the moon is full” (49). A string of tragic events, such as the solitude she lived in, the fire set in their house by the black community that resented their presence, the loss of her brother Pierre, the neglect of her arranged playmate Tia and the rejection by her deranged alcoholic mother all build up Antoinette’s unstable emotional state. Despite her initial resistance in word and deed, the hope of overcoming the alienation she suffers, the disappointment of her failed marriage aggravates her already weakened mental condition, leaving her adrift in a wide sea of madness. These tragic events—compounded with issues of identity as a white ‘creole’ woman—open wounds Antoinette cannot recover from, a trauma that only worsen when she is removed from her home in the Caribbean.

In “Interior Schisms Dramatised: The Treatment of the “Mad” Woman in the Work of Some Female Caribbean Novelists, Evelyn O’Callaghan notes that “in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the women are virtually all victims: . . . even the redoubtable Christophine, who knows that a woman must “have spunks” to survive, admits that she too is a fool in dealings with men and is, in the end, frustrated by Antoinette’s husband from helping her” (97). Thus, both Antoinette and Christophine endure a similar oppression and victimization, regardless of their respective social or economic standing, which is further complicated by their gender and ethnicity in a male-dominated world.

Wide Sargasso Sea is but one salient early example²¹ of the repetitiveness of this motif of trauma, myriad instances where female characters act out roles intended to heal the wounds and scars that derive from race, class, and gender discrimination, while dealing with the problematics of defining and asserting their personal identities and ties as communities. While the madwoman symbolized by Antoinette is iconic, and repeated in representations as well as critical studies, at this juncture it is necessary to look for textual strategies of survival. Undoubtedly the history of women in the Caribbean has been one characterized by trauma, and situated at the juncture of literary, gender, and cultural studies, my work provides a necessary and incisive analysis of trauma and healing rehearsals in Caribbean feminist thought.

As my analysis of *Unburnable* shows, in the postcolonial Caribbean context even madness may become a refuge for some who embrace and negotiate insanity's emotionally painful and even physical aspects, whereby the 'insanity of reality' is replaced with the 'reality of insanity.' Before the mentally-conflicted person crosses the line between 'normal' behaviors and the realm of madness, a deep sense of 'dislocation' can often be a contributing factor. Madness, then, becomes an emotional shelter of sorts that protects the person--in his or her view, however distorted--from further psychological damage. Baker argues that the "juxtaposition" of the texts included in her book "frames such figuration of madness as a necessary belief linked to the particular mode of existence that is postcolonial Caribbean--with its histories of displacement

²¹ Guadeloupean writer Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* provides another account of a madwoman. Betty Wilson writes in the introduction to *Juletane*: "It is the story of a Western woman of colour, in this case a French West Indian, who meets and marries an African in Europe and then finds she cannot fit in to his traditional African family, especially as she has to share her husband with two co-wives. It is a story about alienation, madness, shattered dreams: the disillusioned West Indian outsider's disenchantment with Africa—all familiar themes in Caribbean fiction" (ix). Both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Juletane* mark the opening of the discussion of the oppressive conditions of Caribbean women in a postcolonial context.

and imported cultures, forced and free migrations, and the psychic landscapes that these histories fashion” (5).

Baker Josephs sets the period between 1959 and 1980 as “politically turbulent years” in which madness also flourished as a salient theme in postcolonial literature and would seem to reflect the anxiety suffered by some in that difficult time of pre- to post-decolonization. She also envisions the literature of madness produced in those years not as an anomaly, but as reflective of the times. Even in such celebratory events as the “bacchanal of carnival,” one can find literary pieces such as Paul Keans-Douglas’ brief poem “Jus’ Like Dat,” (in which the word “mad” is mentioned fifteen times), and whereby the poet “repeatedly plays with the performative aspects of ‘losing one’s mind,’ using the slippage between insanity, anger, and excessive gaiety to recreate the mental and physical experience of the carnival” (1). It would appear that such letting loose of the mental reins is rooted in the emotionally-charged, political dislocation that characterized the period.

In line with Baker Joseph’s argument, Iris may be perceived as the abused by-product of a politically oppressive environment that prompts her in a frantic search of inner and physical healing. Despite the comfort of the familiar Maroon community and her mother’s physical “mending” of her broken body, Iris decides to return home in Roseau. The memories of a failed chance at love, the humiliation, the beating and the ultimate torture at the hands of Mrs. Richard undermine Iris’s sanity and push her into an abyss of “madness” and prostitution. I contend that in political terms Iris suffers the oppression caused by “color, class, or poverty,” that marginalizes her to the point of seclusion within the community of washerwomen in the outer bank of the narrow Roseau River.

Iris's tragic existence brings to mind Mildred Mortimer's *Writing from the Hearth: Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women's Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean*, which explores women's transformation of restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures into a liberating "alternative" space--an "altered" space containing freedom of choice as well as a place of resistance to the status quo. Mortimer underlines how this alternative space is "open, flexible, and multipurpose," and can function as "a refuge (for meditation, memory, or dream)" or as a "preparatory ante-chamber for future activity, a site of resistance, a place of performance—where writing, orality, and art in varied forms convey woman's sense of self" (qtd. in Praud 238). In the light of Mortimer's perspective, one can argue that the "alternative spaces" that Iris resorts to prepare her for the ultimate transformation in resistance to the dominant, domineering male figure in her life. However, it is the space between her legs, not the 'rehearsal in madness,' which becomes the combative site (i.e. healing) with which to counterattack the devastating effects of her maddening, brutal oppression.

Lillian's childhood trauma takes her to the diaspora where she " [holds] herself in a kind of isolation," and channels the burden of her past by helping women all over the world who "had found [themselves] in trouble when [they] had tried to stand up to the expectations of culture, government, or the demands of the social order," (13) yet she seeks restoration by confronting the ghosts of her past will require her to look for the assistance of her family and a man she meets in the diaspora. With Teddy, Lillian's rehearsal process shows how women's transformation of restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures becomes more inclusive, with the male counterpart as a necessary instrument to improve women's situation in the Caribbean context. Lillian, on the other hand, while struggling to find ultimate healing in sexual encounters with Teddy as discussed in Chapter 1, finally succumbs into madness and acceptance of her

family history when she gives into the idea of joining her grandmother and mother in death and thus claim a *chanté mas* song for herself: "...she would go back to the voices that had called her, to the place in the mountains where she discovered that the most of the people of the Noir, the Marroons, had jumped to their heaven as people were wont to do when enslavement was not an option" (291). In doing thus she aspires to become an Afro-Caribbean trope--a *soucyant*--for everyone to immortalize her name in the matrilineal history.

Even without realizing it, Lillian, like Iris before her with the washerwomen, had found a support network in her family consisting of her adoptive mother and nun godmother. The two women now sitting in the kitchen, an image often repeated in Caribbean women's fiction, seek consolation and perhaps absolution for their failed attempts at medical treatment to help the girl:

You don't have to feel bad," Icilma was saying. "The psychiatrist done explaining everything to us." She opened the spiral-bound report in front of her, the leaves of each page fat from years of damp Dominica air. She moved her reading glasses from her chest her nose, licking her middle finger and turning pages. "Here. Lillian's refusal to have any contact with you is only one element of the many behavioral strategies she has adopted to cope. We refer to this as an avoidance symptom, and it includes severing her ties to you in her effort to evade activities, places or people that are reminders of the trauma (194).

However, the relentless efforts of her family to help her overcome the impending fall into the abyss of madness passed down to her from her mother, are futile: "Isilma and Mary-Alice would be even more convinced that she, like her mother, was once again losing her mind—because, they believed, it was inherited madness that had sent her to dig up Iris's grave that night, and madness that made her caught her wrist open" (254-255). The women concur that there is no

hope for Lillian and understand that her trauma surpasses any possible healing, leaving her to fall prey to madness²².

The female support in the kitchen is dismissive of Teddy, as “they accorded him no status, nor had they any expectation of him: the points of intersection between their world and his were too few. Right then, their orbit was taking them deep into purely female territory, and the two old women ignored Teddy with condescension (194). Yet, Teddy would still be a key character in Iris’ healing rehearsal through sex. Regardless of Lillian’s failed attempt at healing in returning to Dominica, Teddy, unaware of his role Lillian’s sexual healing rehearsal, becomes a loyal ally, constantly helping and caring for Lillian. He accompanies her in her journey, tries to understand her past, and helps her put together the missing pieces of the puzzle in her family history. Thus, his assistance to her healing rehearsal proves to break the fixed conception of the repressive patriarchal structures that excludes the male counterpart as a necessary agent to improve Afro-Caribbean women’s plights.

Forget Me Not: Rehearsing Memory in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*

In *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home* (2005), Vijay Agnew states that memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history). The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call ‘our homes’ (3).

²² As part of Mary Alice and Icilma’s dialogue in the kitchen, we learn that “Lillian had never been treated and he could now see the extent to which it had affected her. She was not well. “The night in the grave? That was the trauma? // “The grave,” Lillian said, “and everything else.” “By the time she went to the grave that was already the first stage after the trauma.” // “Her whole life was the trauma” (198). To overcome a trauma, it is indispensable to express and to share feelings and memories related to the traumatic event, and Lillian had failed, to some degree, to voice all her pain.

She adds that this interconnection often leads to the question “Where do you come from?” and the interpellated usually respond “in innumerable well-rehearsed ways” (3). For Afro-Caribbean women in the diaspora, this supposes a far more complex answer as it taps into their identities, genealogies, and history of the oppressive colonial context. But it is even more challenging to answer such question, with everything it bears, for a Caribbean woman who is coping with a traumatic past, be it collective or individual.

Along these lines, Anh Hua writes that “memory analysis can also unfold the working processes of various traumas including transatlantic slavery” (*Diaspora, Memory, and Identity*, 200). Derek Walcott too made a similar claim when he wrote in “The Sea is History” (1979) that “tribal memory” has been “locked up” by the sea (25). Fast-forwarding to 1999, Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* explores how the main character Bola turns to the sea to cope with the unfolding process of collective history and individual memory. An important voice in contemporary postcolonial Caribbean literature, Brand is fully invested in exploring issues of oppression, abuse, and marginalization of black women, and of exclusion of non-heterosexual behavior from socially acceptable practices. In addition to these issues, Brand, as her work shows, consistently acknowledges the gaps within the past and their lingering traumatic phantoms. By delving into these gaps, she treats memory as Charlotte Sturgess explains “the effort of the ‘not forgetting,’ the necessity of a confrontation between past and present” (202). This need to “unforget” the ancestral pain is illustrated in the novel when the narrator reveals:

In another century without knowing of her, because centuries are forgetful places, Marie Ursule’s great-great-grandchildren would face the world too. But even that forgetfulness Marie Ursule had accounted for. Forgetfulness is true speech if anyone listens. This is the plain arrangement of the world, they would think, even

if they knew different, even if they could have remembered Marie Ursule. They would say: This is the plain arrangement of the world, this I have suffered, this I have eaten, this I have loved (18).

According to the narrator, Marie Ursule was ensuring that her suffering, her people's suffering was coming to an end, and she counted on that by sending her daughter away. She had foreseen her great-grandchildren and "had taken account of forgetfulness and remembrances" (19).

While the generations following the white man would forget, or forgive, or would not have learned about De Lambert's past deeds, Marie Ursule's descendants will continue to carry the memory of their ancestor's pain, even in the diaspora:

History opens and closes, Mama. I was reading a book the other day about the nineteenth century and it seemed like reading about now. I think we forget who we were. Nothing is changing, it is just that we are forgetting. All the centuries past may be one long sleep. We are either put to sleep or we choose to sleep. Nothing is changing, we are just forgetting . . ." (234-35).

In an interview with Nuzhat Abbas²³, Brand stressed that "You find yourself in a world of forgetting. And your project—well, mine at any rate—is remembering" (19). This project calls for a recovery of the faded memory, even fragmented that she writes in the novel. Although Brand's *Full Moon* spotlights Bola as a principal character in the tribal memory of accounts, the novel showcases the genealogical record of Marie Ursule, an enslaved woman in nineteenth-century Trinidad, and her descendants, who bear the consequences of the traumatic experiences of both physical and sexual enslavement of the African Caribbean woman's body. Echoing

²³ Abbas, Nuzhat. "Dionne's Brand of Writing." *Horizons* 13.3 (Fall 1999): 18-22. Quoted in Laramee, Michael. "Maps of Memory and the Sea in Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2, Article 3. 2008.

Boyce's statement that "we were/are products of separations and dislocations and dismemberings," (17) Brand's concern with the issues of identity-making for people who have fractured and disoriented connections to their family history provides a fertile ground to explore the multiple healing processes with memory, successful or not.

Due to the conditions of slavery that Marie Ursule was subject to, a reading on trans-generational trauma will help outline the haunting intergenerational consequences of the loss, abuse, and exile that key characters in the novel will carry in their lives. Like Lillian in *Unburnable*, these characters attempt to transcend their individual present despair by questioning their ancestry in their search of healing. The traumatic memories of Marie Ursule do pervade her present and interrupt the lives of her descendants many generations later: "And what was memory when she felt it loop and repeat, when what she was about to do she had imagined done already, like a memory" (9). This memory and other explicit references to intergenerational memory and trauma illustrate the multiple ways in which descendants rehearse memory as a vehicle to cope with trauma.

In an act of love and defiance, Marie-Ursule designs a fashion of departure that is, nonetheless, an act of ultimate resistance against slavery and her womb. The idea crept in her mind: she would spare her daughter Bola the suffering of enslavement. In other words, Marie-Ursule gifted her child a sense of power and agency, so much that "suffering would skip her generation" (69). Because the four-year-old Bola is smuggled away, she is left with little memories of her mother. She does not have to battle the demons of the violent past Marie Ursule had to endure: enslavement, torture, mass suicide. At the beginning of the novel, after realizing she had seen the sea and the future²⁴ in Bola's eyes, Marie Ursule commands her four-year old

²⁴ In her article "Bridging the Past and the Future: Rethinking the Temporal Assumptions of Trauma Theory in Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*," Julia Grandison provides an insight to the relationship

daughter to not call her name as if willing her daughter to erase the memory of her: “Behave yourself, you hear. Don’t call me so much” (45). Later in the narrative, the reader learns that Bola is left with only a memory of this sea her mother had witnessed as in a premonition, and perhaps a few images of longing and loss of Marie Ursule:

She remembered that she wanted nothing just to see Marie Ursule, just to see her and to tell her something that she'd forgotten or did not know how to say when Marie Ursule arrived. She loved Marie Ursule’s face, the comfort of its steady shape, since she felt her own face moving and unsteady and when she felt her small face falling apart seeing Marie Ursule put it right, when she felt her fingers in her toes melting in her eyes welling she needed Marie Ursule to stop the water and to see her so that she would know again (46).

Though arguably, Marie Ursule’s plan to limit the suffering of future generations may have skipped Bola, the question as to how the little girl would deal with the few memories warrants further analysis.

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Afro-Caribbean women opt to move away from the focal point of a traumatic event, often relocating to distant places. This displacement—being removed from her mother and her familiar surroundings— was not her choice. As a little girl, it constitutes a trauma itself. Thus, for a healing process to take place going back home was also out of the equation. Unlike Lillian in *Unburnable*, revisiting the place of the trauma was an impossible feat. By her mother’s choice, Bola is secluded to live a static life in Culebra Bay in communion with the sea, enjoying the company of multiple partners, and being haunted by the ghosts of nuns. This is the only place she knows and how she copes with her loss—her attitude

between past and future. She argues that “Brand’s novel regarding their characters seem to be seized by the past, they also, often very subtly, evoke the future” (1).

towards life, her multiple sexual partners, and even her mothering behavior of keeping or sending away her children with surrogate parents on a whim—can “arguably” be rendered by many readers as sociopathic and disruptive.²⁵ Even in her old days, Bola’s lasting memories evidence her need to go back to the point in her life when everything stood still, when she lost her mother and gained the independence by the sea. She had captured the physical remnants of her childhood memory in a drawing of “the rock, the ocean, the far shore and man-o’-war birds in the air” (254). Her daughter, known in the novel as Dear Mama had treasured this memory, the only record documenting her ancestry, and years later, her daughter Eulalie questions its meaning: “There is no one in the drawing but the rock, the ocean, the far shore and man-o’-war birds in the air. She had so many children, so many lovers, so much life, I wondered why this is all she drew” (254). Bola’s attempt to secure her memories leave out everyone else with whom she had crossed paths, including those she birthed. Eluding the violence of enslavement and all the trauma that stemmed from it, living in her present by the sea and without realizing it, Bola prepared the inheritance of her children.

So far, I have focused on the individual character of Bola, thus tending to highlight the personal dimension of her own diaspora²⁶ in Culebra Bay. Earlier I also argued that Marie Ursule’s actions were a direct point of origin of historical trauma; now I must tackle the fraught question of the historical [fictional] factor as it bears directly on the relation between Marie Ursule’s actions and consequent collective psyche and capacity for self-determination of her

²⁵ I underline the use of the word “arguably” in the sentence as the narrator discloses at the end of the novel that “[sh]e loved them, these children strung out across the beach” (295).

²⁶ Her diaspora does not take place in a metropolitan destination as suggested by Maria Cristina Rodriguez’s *What Women Lose. Exile and the Construction of Imaginary Homelands in Novels by Caribbean Writers*. “Among the defining characteristics of a diaspora are the forced dispersal of people and a collective memory of a lost homeland to which they are committed and to which they feel they should return” (Safran 1991). Quoted in *Diaspora, Memory, and Identity*. “Ghosts and Shadows: Memory and Resilience among the Erythrean Diaspora by Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson.

descendants. Following the claim that Bola's descendants have inherited the traumas of the family history as chronicled in the novel, then *At the Full and Change of the Moon* provides a model of trans-generational traumatic experience that suggests these rehearsals in memories. In the chapter "Blue Airmail Letter," Eulalie addresses this lineage:

I would like one single line of ancestry, Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace ... One line like the one in your palm with all the places where something happened and is remembered. I would like one line full of people who have no reason to forget anything, or forgetting would not help them or matter because the line would be constant, unchangeable (246-4).

Eula feels displaced and longs for a place of belonging where memory is not altered. As she undergoes the conscientious venture of navigating memory—hers, Dear Mama's, and Bola's—, she embarks in a journey of self-understanding. In the act of remembering, or "unforgetting," Eula exemplifies the need to answer the missing pieces of her ancestral line, which inevitably will consume succeeding generations.

This sense of loss experienced by Eula is passed down to her daughter, young Bola. Like Bola, her great-granddaughter, young Bola, experiences the loss of her mother and lives as if suspended in a limbo state. The emotionally taxing process of mourning Dear Mama leaves Young Bola in a state of oblivion that allows her to commune with her grandmother's ghost. This binary opposition of the spiritual and the material prove quite complex in the narrative, especially when factoring in the trauma associated with memory. Following Laura Murphy's concept of "the suffering of survival," we see how young Bola's healing process is unattainable.

Young Bola is unable to let go of her mother's memory and chooses to see her sitting on her grave and hear her, even though she "rarely ... speak[s] out loud" (267). She is mentally

rooted to the images of the past and is soon depicted as having gone “mad”: “One of them said she’s mad. I wash my hands of her,” (275). The alleged madness she suffers responds to her inability to mourn and heal from her loss. To this effect Michelle Cliff remarks:

The women's madness was ascribed to several causes: childlessness, celibacy, ‘change’” (19). These are women who apparently did not compose their identities through their associations with men. Hence, they were deemed abnormal if not subnormal, their madness confirmed by their attention to their surroundings, talking to one another, alone, to lizards, sitting in the river (18). Labeled madwomen, they fell out of the loop of mainstream acknowledgement and survived only at its margins (quoted in Chancy, 141).

For Bola, the cause of her madness is the change she experiences through the loss of her mother. That is, instead of embracing and negotiating the painstaking endeavor of accepting her mother’s death, she seeks refuge in the realm of madness. As was the case in *Unburnable*, this rehearsal in madness proves rather unsuccessful, as it pushes the character further into a marginalized position. It can be argued that Bola and young Bola fail in their unique ways of rehearsing a healing process, something that María Cristina Rodríguez explained when she stated that as a result of failure, “female characters may resort to isolation through death, madness, the obliteration of their past, or the re-creation of the location of that past” (xiv-xv).

Marie Ursule’s ultimate act of resistance prompts her descendants into a dichotomy of slavery and freedom.²⁷ Of the many compelling stories of often solitary individuals in the diaspora, genealogically related to Marie Ursule, in *The Full Moon*, we find the character of

²⁷ Brand states, “I think that Marie Ursule’s act released the imagination or the way one could imagine the future ... both horrific and freeing in some kind of way. It releases the other characters into their own imagination” (qtd. in “Maps of Memory Sanders and Walcott in “At the Full and Change of CanLit: An Interview with Dionne Brand,” 22).

Cordelia, a devoted wife and doting mother, trapped in a binary opposition between the identity she wants to assume and her performative role of housewife, or else her own dichotomy of slavery and freedom. Despite all the years of caring for her family, she feels a deep isolation, a searing ache that she hoped would be quenched by rejecting the memories outright. After admitting her life was a construct, a lie preferred to the truth that she had not lived a full life, all the memories she thought she had suppressed came rushing back in a mid-life crisis:

And then on her fiftieth year, Cordelia burst from her own seams. She had gone to her window with a sudden remembrance of pink shells and Culebra Bay. She had not meant to remember. All her years had been taken up with ordering her thoughts. The vigour she had used all these years to contain her memory, to clean her house and maintain her children, had turned on her. She was greedy for everything she had not had” (121).

Not only is the ancestral pain lurking in the shadows of her tribal memory; it’s the feeling of longing and loss passed down from Marie Ursule to Bola and to her and Cordelia’s own painful childhood memories: her father molesting her, her mother’s rejection, and an unwanted pregnancy, had shattered her. She had thought that if she nestled herself to the bosom of her family, her pain would abate. Instead, remembering was injury anew, her heart shattered anew.

In Cordelia’s life, revisiting her childhood memories alone would not bring the healing she needed. Her memory signifies that some things simply cannot be remembered to reach an understanding and find peace with it; for Cordelia, it meant that some things should be utterly forgotten. There was still a feeling of being pulled towards another place that would help her find the healing she needed: exploring her body.²⁸ After struggling and doubting, she weighs down

²⁸ In the chapter “A Sudden, Big Lust,” Cordelia remembers how she began to despise her own body: “Her father had terrified it, her mother had found in it an enemy. The boy from up the river way had put a baby in it and

the emotional and psychological aspects of her trauma, and she chooses to finally break free in an act of self-affirmation. Cordelia protests: “I am finished with this now. I am a woman who just want to live her own life. I give you a home. I give you children. I am finished now” (121).

While this work is focused on examining women’s healing rehearsals, the active participation of men assisting their processes cannot be easily dismissed. As noted earlier in *Unburnable*, there are instances when a man has voluntarily helped—or at least tried—the female characters overcome the restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures. In the case of Kamena in *At the Full and Change of The Moon*, his participation as an agent of liberation in the female character’s restorative process is questioned. While Kamena aids Marie-Ursule in keeping Bola safe, his own conflict, his failed attempts at returning to the Maroon settlement *Terre Bouillant*, has left him consumed by his own trauma, which he later bestows on Bola and her descendants. His story unfolds in the narrative as an escaped slave who has reached the Maroon settlement. However, as Bola’s father, Kamena is compelled to come back to execute Marie Ursule’s last wish: to give her daughter a chance to survive in freedom. Even after he “bided his time until she grew up so that he would finally have no more obligations to Marie Ursule,” (55) now that he has complied with his fatherly duty, still driven by his desire to rejoin the Maroons, he is unable to find his destination. By helping Marie Ursule, he gives up on his objective and falls into what Erica Johnson calls a dynamic of haunting (“Unforgetting Trauma: Dionne Brand’s Haunted Histories”)²⁹. Whereas at first, he served as a tool in the restorative process, he now has lost his way. His obsession to find the Maroons chips away pieces of his memory, and now turns to Bola to keep them together as he asks her to remember geographical

dressed it in a kind of passion that had felt hurtful, burning and unfinished.” The use of memory in this case will help awaken in Cordelia another type of healing rehearsal finding pleasure in her own body. (See chapter 1).

²⁹ Quoted in the unpublished dissertation “In the middle of becoming”: Diasporic Identities in Dionne Brand’s Novels” by Valentina Cavallin (50).

points of reference that will take him to the elusive path of *Terre Bouillante*: “Hold this for me” (59). The repetitiveness of his request only serves to perpetuate his own trauma.

Jacqueline Bishop’s short stories also depict men participating in female healing rehearsals. In “Oleander,” the tattoo artist listens attentively to the stories of a girl whose fragmented memory of a life in Jamaica seems to come together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle of the Caribbean flower she wants branded on her body. The girl’s request was a tattoo of a flower the man in the tattoo shop had never seen. Once they had agreed on the details of the process, he started a conversation small talk about her nationality as she looked foreign. As he gained her trust, she opened up to him not only by trusting him with subsequent work on the flower tattoo, but disclosing parts of her past. The tattooist role in her healing process involved listening to the roots of her trauma. As he crafted the oleander to the girl’s body, he learned that back in Jamaica her mother, had handed her eight-year old girl over to a couple in exchange of a “thick wad of American dollars.” She was not to complain, but to do what these people told her to do (19). The during the last tattoo session, he listens to the horrific doings of the couple:

...she told how one, then the other, and sometimes both together, the cobble enjoyed her; not only enjoyed her but made of her a cardboard character, filming and photographing her; sharing her with friends who eagerly came over. Calling her this horrible name—
Lolita (21).

The memories were too painful to bear, but perhaps the pain inflected by the perforations on her skin might alleviate somehow, or take her mind away to the place where the oleander bloomed, where she was once a happy girl: “How she sighed each time she felt the piercings, almost as if it were a release to have something enter her body painfully. Although the tattoo would eventually fade, the tattooist assured “no one could ever totally remove it from her body”

(19). The very object of trauma becomes the girl's body. It is as if she wants the Oleander to consume her body to completely abandon herself into oblivion. Additionally, in Bishop's short story "Oleander," memory resorts to nature elements to engage in a healing rehearsal. The flower represents the void of her absent and neglectfully indifferent mother who gives her away to strangers. While Oleander flowers signify beauty, they also pose as painful reminders of her childhood memories of abandonment by her mother.

In Bishop's *The Gymnast and Other Positions*, yet another short story exemplifies how the relationship between a man and a woman helps them overcome their individual traumas. "Effigy" narrates the trauma of a grieving mother who, in addition to communing with nature and the spiritual world (which will be discussed in chapter 3), also engages in a rehearsal that includes disclosing her trauma to her neighbor Howard. Sinclair moves to the neighborhood in the hills with the hope of honoring her dead son with a rememory. Like many of the female characters in the texts examined, Sinclair removes herself from the place of trauma. Her son Eric had been killed by the police for no apparent reason, although she corrects herself: "Well, that is not true, // they will kill him just because of where he was living, which is in West Kingston, and not in these hills" (47).

There she meets Howard, a young man, who is also suffering a loss, the death of the girl he loved. Motivated by a growing curiosity, Howard is soon drawn to his new neighbor and is eager to learn about her rituals. Sinclair reveals that the shrine as instructed by Effigy serves to honor her dead son: "Effigy is the one who tell me... raise yourself up... build a shrine to your dead son... keep up his rememory. A rememory is important. No rememory and you go crazy (49). While Howard listens sympathetically to the woman's painful account, he builds for himself a shrine of his own to honor the rememory of his lost love. The way they both opt to

cope with their pain might seem to many as an act of madness. Rather than depicting the post-traumatic present as disruptive encounter with the past that obliterates an individual's agency, Bishop's stories present us with characters, such as "Lolita" and Sinclair, who engage in a healing process involving the participation of a man to improve their current condition.

Healing Rehearsals Communing with Nature and the Spiritual World

*The sea greets me, but I feel too the pain,
let me turn my back, instead of a face
to the sea of the Caribbean.
And the sea echoed
and swelled as she read.
It pounded
and exploded,
and as her eyes clouded
a poem trembled my skin
to know the black pearl eyes
deep and calm and agitated at the sea
drowned with this woman
who swallowed the ocean.
And when the time comes,
she appears with
black pearl eyes,
seaweed locks,
and a balm of deep-sea-poetry
for the kin, scattered like
shells on the beaches of the Caribbean.*

Ann-Margaret Lim, “Mamba Muntu Reads Poetry in the Caribbean” (68)

There’s healing, and mothering, and age.
Nalo Hopkinson, *The Salt Roads*

Health practitioners and researchers have long discovered that something special—and clinically therapeutic—results when people spend time in nature. The studies conducted on nature’s many measurable benefits in the body and mind have not been merely limited to science; literary theorists and fiction writers have also explored the healing properties of nature. In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (1999), Malidoma Patrice Somé writes:

Our relationship to the natural world and its natural laws determines whether or not we are healed. Nature, therefore, is the foundation of healing... We are talking about a way of dealing with an energetic world and energetic issues that barrels from what already exists, not what has been invented, manufactured, or created by humans to satisfy some material purpose. In other words, every tree, plant, hill, mountain, rock, and each thing that was here before us emanates or vibrates at a subtle energy that has healing power whether we know it or not. So, if something in us must change, spending time in nature provides a good beginning. This means that within nature, within the natural world, are all of the materials and tenets needed for healing human beings. Nature is the textbook for those who care to study it and the storehouse of remedies for human ills (38).

As a text of study, nature provides then an alternative site of healing for all kinds of maladies. In literature, writers use nature not only to provide the setting and to praise the beauty—or horrors—of a given narrative context, but also to represent the troubled psyche of the characters. Both creative writers and literary critics have practiced ecocriticism as a means of interpreting the relationships between the environment, history, the human social world, an individual's development, struggles of the inner-life, and change. In the interpretation of Caribbean fiction particularly because the region has been radically metamorphosed in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and (re-) settlement, the complexity of the situation calls for literary studies to carry out a more nuanced and close examination of narratives from an ecocritical perspective.³⁰

³⁰ As DeLoughrey and Handley explain, "there is probably no other region in the world that has been more radically altered in terms of human and botanic migration, transplantation, and settlement than the Caribbean." (*Postcolonial Ecologies*, 2)

This chapter examines how female characters in the narratives I explore engage with the local natural environments/landscapes as pathways in their healing journeys. Afro-Caribbean women characters often are primary agents in a restoration of nature and a mediation of its relationship to human beings, and as such, engage in alternative healing practices, such as emotional and spiritual “grounding” in nature. The role of nature in Caribbean literature has gone through a transition of sorts from V. S. Naipaul’s earlier, more pastoral visions of nature, landscape, and colonial expeditions, to one in which nature seems to be at odds with the human species, due to exploitation, deforestation, industrial degradation of the land, and the destruction of fauna. In describing this adversarial relationship between humans and the environment, ecocritical theorists Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin assert that while much ecocriticism is done from the optics of “westerners, thereby running the risk of reifying earlier north-south binaries . . . some of it takes place [in a] southern setting [i.e. non-Western settings such as the Caribbean] . . . consciously [addressing] a variety of colonial and imperial themes” (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* 24).

Along the same lines and combined with postcolonial trauma theory, posthumanism, and ecocriticism, all staging as counter-discourses, Isabel Hoving explores the environment as a field ripe with symbolic or semiotic possibilities in the realm of Caribbean narratives. Hoving’s thorough discussion on trauma and healing covers a span of various subjects, from explorations of flora and fauna “which allow for different conceptualizations of race, gender [and] sexuality,” to “nature as a field . . . of interconnectedness” as well as an “extra-discursive space that [functions] to subvert existing discourses” (4-5). Each of these modes of understanding the connections between nature, identity formation, the social fabric, and acts of historical redress and subversion is instructive to my own project. Their ideas about the staging of counter-

discourses in extra-discursive spaces, such as those in the natural setting, are consonant with mine about the various “rehearsals” that women perform as they try to move towards a more liberated subjectivity and subject position. In the introduction of *Postcolonial Ecologies*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley focus on “the landscape and seascape as a participant in this historical process [of colonial conquest and oppression] rather than a bystander to human experience” (4). In this perspective, since the environment functions as a “nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is constitutive aspect of post-coloniality” (8). The land and sea provide spaces of alterity and healing rehearsals, in light of (post)colonial trauma, for Caribbean fictional women characters.

The authors of postcolonial narratives such as *The Full Moon*, *The Salt Roads*, *Unburnable*, and *Claire of the Sea Light* create a discursive field wherein fierce female characters commune with elements of nature and spirituality and adopt or undergo modes of resistance, and mothering and healing.

The Sea and The Spiritual World

In the chapter epigraph, Jamaican poet Ann-Margaret Lim’s poem “Mamba Muntu Reads Poetry in the Caribbean” not only offers a glimpse into the deep connection between the sea and the Caribbean female figure; it also evokes a traumatic and elusive ancestral past, as well as illustrates the difficulty of envisaging a future for Caribbean people. Lim employs here metaphors of pain to describe how the water spirit, *Mami Wata*, comes to the surface to offer her Caribbean offspring a “balm” of poetry. The poem suggests the ambiguity, the sense of psychological pain, and impotence with which a sensitive individual such as the poet must face forgotten atrocities and largely undocumented ‘conquistador’ genocidal, traumatic episodes in the history of “the sea of the Caribbean.” On an emotional level, Lim’s poem echoes the

sentiments of another Caribbean poet, the late Derek Walcott. Walcott states in “The Sea is History” (1979) that “tribal memory” has been “locked up” by the sea (25). Many Caribbean writers follow in Walcott’s proposition by exploring themes of diaspora and return to the motherland, resistance, endurance, alienation, and survival, not only by examining the omnipresence of the sea, but also studying the multiple ways in which nature becomes a powerful literary agent of healing proportions. For instance, Jamaica Kincaid, in *My Garden Book* (1999), describes the garden as “an exercise in memory . . . a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) (8). Kincaid's garden is a symbolic record in which the places become inscribed by people. Thus, to examine nature as a means of healing rehearsal, I also take on the task when relevant, to continue to note references to the rehearsals of ancestral memory, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

Such reflection on Caribbean literature and nature reveals the long-standing engagement with the sea. It is perhaps the most common theme in literary production, be it rendered in relation to character, setting, plot device, metaphor, theme, tone, aesthetic objects, or symbolism. This engagement is not surprising considering the hardships of enslaved men and women in the historical crossings of the Middle Passage of transatlantic slavery and the Kali Pani traversed by South Asian indentured servants. The Caribbean Sea also provides an escape route for overwhelmed characters who desire a release from pain, a dissolution of the body, and contact with spiritual beings. Thus, the sea is written, not just as a literal space, but also as a turbulent site of rupture and trauma. Seascapes are locations where histories and individual lifeways are questioned and Caribbean identities are (re)defined. But it is the sea, too, which women characters turn to for healing.

The image of the sea holding painful ancestral memories resonates with Edouard Glissant's own image of "Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard who 'sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence'" (10). In *Caribbean Discourse* (1999), Glissant uses Kamau Brathwaite's phrase 'the unity is submarine' (4) as the basis for his own model of 'rhizomatic' identity. He replaces Brathwaite 'unity' with plural "[s]ubmarine roots', which are 'floating free [. . .] extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches'" (cited in Evans, 1). Equally noteworthy, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, adds to the discussion that the culture of the Caribbean is 'not terrestrial aquatic', since the Caribbean is the 'realm of marine currents, of waves, and of double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity'. In this sense, both Benitez-Rojo and Glissant point out to the notion of fluidity to design a model of Caribbean identity which accounts for the Caribbean's complex history of migration. (Evans 1). However, Glissant expands the concept of rootedness to one articulated within an aesthetic of movement and interconnection, one in which the sea and its elusive history becomes the basis for communal identifications: "This experience of the abyss", he suggests, "can now be said to be the best element of exchange" (cited in Evans 2). Glissant's use of the sea to articulate the traumatic conditions of the Caribbean cultural heritage serves as a powerful metaphor through which to attempt healing in a Caribbean context, as exemplified in Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*, Brand's *At The Full and Change of the Moon*, and Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*.

In reading these novels, one can establish such connections at the center of an intertextual dialogue with earlier generations of Caribbean writing, literary and theoretical, in which the aquatic imagery pervades the narratives as a site of ambivalence. As such, the figurative function of the sea, like the ocean itself, proves to be unstable and ever shifting, while presenting at times a source of healing and challenging the collective identity. I argue that the pertinence of these

texts of liquid imagery imbued with the association of water with deprivation and suffering is the sea's simultaneous potential for healing.

Although nature, and the sea, in particular, is often seen as a destructive force, in Caribbean literature it is also characterized by its purifying as well as protective essence, and it is viewed by many as connected with the cosmic powers of the spiritual world. Following Hoving's idea of nature as a field . . . of interconnectedness as well as an "extra-discursive space that [functions] to subvert existing discourses," my analysis explores the nexus between nature and the spiritual world, both as a mode of resistance and as a means to restoration via the evoking of memories.

On writing about the role of historical memory, Jacolien Volschenk, in his doctoral dissertation *Haunting Temporalities: Creolisation and Black Women's Subjectivities in the Diasporic Science Fiction of Nalo Hopkinson*, notes "that the use of tropes of haunting and ghosts are symptomatic of the "spectrality of the repressed collective past" (citing José Colmeiro, 23). The statement that the "suppressed past appears to return in spectral form to haunt the present" seems relevant to the discussion of nature and the spiritual world in *The Salt Roads* (31). Thus, I examine the interplay of nature/spiritual world in the healing rehearsal process that includes subverting what at an earlier period were once portrayed as negative spiritual world elements in Caribbean fiction.

In reviewing how spirituality plays a crucial role in the writing of diasporic women writers, Volschenk quotes Marie-Elena John who underscores its significance as follows: "[M]uch of our writing has a spirit-centered component and a sense of trying to uncover our past through this exploration, which sometimes involves looking to what's left of African spirituality in Caribbean culture" (citing Reynolds 52). As a case in point, in *The Salt Roads*, Hopkinson

uses fragments of folklore elements such as shapeshifting and possession of bodies to fight the trauma of enslavement in a new category of rehearsal that I call fierceness³¹. Elizabeth Nunez exposes that Caribbean women writers are “experimenting with new literary forms and structures, rewriting stories from the Western canon to set the record straight about the lives of Caribbean characters, uncovering past histories of class, race, ethnic, color, gender and sexual exploitation, and offering hope in the possibilities for women” (cited in Reynolds 26). Adding to the discussion, Hopkinson writes about her interest in: “Afro-Caribbean spirituality as a device to look at the lives of women from the past, linking them in order to explore issues of ownership, identity, spirituality, and sexuality for women of African descent” (“Afrofuturism” 104). Thus, in consonance with John, Nunez, and Hopkinson, one could argue that the role of Black women’s writing in particular in elucidating the myriad crossings of diaspora may become a subversive, fierce, and emancipatory act.

Returning to my argument that the sea serves as a conduit of the spiritual world, Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads* features Ezili, an Afro-Caribbean spiritual being brought to life by three enslaved women and the spirit of a stillborn child in Saint Domingue. At odds with the colonial power in their new environment, Ezili anchors the women, providing them with a point of reference outside of this colonial power by which to define themselves. Throughout this anchoring, Ezili mounts or possesses the three women at different moments in their lives, acquiring through her memories of each experience a new consciousness that propels her toward a self-awareness of the plight of her Ginen³². In her analysis of the role of Ezili in Hopkinson’s

³¹ According to *Dictionary.com*, fierce is defined as “menacingly wild, savage, or hostile; violent in force, intensity; furiously eager or intense.” The origin of the word was first recorded in 1300–1350; Middle English *fiers, fers*, from Old French *fiers, fers*, from Latin *ferus* “wild, fierce.”

³² “Ginen” is the name Ezili uses to refer to her followers and also the name the slaves in Saint Domingue in Mer’s

work, Lesley Feracho observes that every time the Iwa possesses one of the female characters, she internalizes the pleasure and pain she and her female hosts feel as they negotiate gender, race, class, and sexuality in different historical periods that are nonetheless connected by the struggles of African descendants against social hierarchies and hegemonies (37). She asserts that these movements “facilitated by the Afro-descended spiritual beliefs are also tools for recreations of the self, creating what Vanessa K. Valdés has described as “more full images of womanhood” that counter and at times subvert limiting notions of Western patriarchal discourse” (165). I find Feracho’s and Valdés’ analysis to be in alignment with my argument that the use of spiritual beings in these narratives provide a somewhat fierce assistance in the healing process by contesting discourses of oppression.

McCarthy Brown describes Lasyrenn as a loa/lwa who has “roots that connect, like nerves, to the deepest and most painful parts of the loss of homeland and the trauma of slavery...she reconnects people to Africa and its wisdom” (224). The birth of Georgine’s stillborn boy gives birth to the multifaceted goddess Ezili, which can be read as a metaphor for a certain kind of appropriation or a loving act of bonding. Brown recognizes a predictable pattern in the Lasyrenn stories that helps explain Mer’s own possession by Ezili:

These stories have a common pattern. A person, usually a woman, disappears for a time -three days, three months, three years. When she returns, she is a changed person. Her skin has become fairer, her hair longer and straighter. Most important, she has gained sacred knowledge. Immediately after her return, she is disoriented, does not talk, and does not remember what happened to her. But gradually a story

time use to refer to themselves. Ginen refers to Guinea in West Africa, referencing their lost home, and it is also the word used to denote the spiritual world (under the waters) of Vodoun where the lwas dwell (Dayan, “Voice of the Gods” 17).

emerges, a story of living for a time ‘below the water,’ where the spirits instructed her in the arts of diagnosis and healing. (224)

As Tipingee digs the grave, Mer is praying to Lasirènn³³ (a version of Ezili) to spare them from slavery. But as the burial takes place, the spirit of Ezili “rides” her and she experiences: "And then something took me. A big, empty knowledge swallowed me, bigger than the sea, and in more turmoil. My own self shrank to nothing inside it and for a while, I didn't know myself, didn't know, couldn't understand. Then I was back. My body mine again (*TSR* 36-37)".

The three women's pain is a cry, out of love, for freedom, for release from the hardship of sucking salt. It is then that this supernatural being, power of all the waters, comes to existence:

I'm born from song and prayer. A small life, never begun, lends me its unused vitality. I'm born from mourning and sorrow and three women's tearful voices.

I'm born from countless journeys chained tight in the bellies of ships. Born from hope vibrant and hope destroyed. Born of bitter experience. Born of wishing for better. I'm born. (*TSR*, 40)

To return to my epigraph, the image of the water goddess becomes the spiritual backbone of Hopkinson's interconnected stories in *The Salt Roads*. The water goddess Ezili possesses the women—the spirit of Ezili occupies the bodies and lives of Mer, Jeanne Duvall, mistress of

³³ There are many manifestations and names for Ezili, but the four main ones that apply in the works of Hopkinson and Danticat are Ezili-Fréda, Lasyrènn/Lasirènn, Ezili-Dantor, and Ezilige-rouge. Karen McCarthy-Brown explains that these different, yet related Ezili are each conflated with particular manifestations of the Virgin Mary: Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre, Mater Salvatoris, and Maria Dolorosa. But unlike the Mary of mainstream Catholicism, who offers an impossible ideal of perfectly submissive (and virginal) motherhood for emulation, the Ezili are much closer to the human drama. (221) (see Laura Edmund's doctoral dissertation *Containers for Creation: Ifá, The Fantastic, and Women in Literature of The African Diaspora*, 19)

In Haiti, Lasirènn is a Vodou loa who represents Mami Wata. She is described as a strong-willed, sensual siren who possesses the ability to drown those enticed by her (Tinsley, Omise'eke N. *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, 2018). Similar to many other depictions of Mami Wata, Lasirènn is often shown gazing at herself in a mirror, a symbolic representation of her beauty. She is often associated with queer relationships among Black women.[34]

Charles Baulelaire in nineteenth century Paris, and Thais, a hetaera from Northern Africa in the year 345 CE—in the intertwined stories as a foundation for black women’s alliances across time and place. This possession serves to empower them, to render them fierce, not simply as a therapeutic process, but as a new kind of rehearsal in which women are in control of their lives.

The use of the lwa Ezili to journey through time and memory unveils the trauma of displacement and loss, while negotiating historical, sexual, and political discourses that accompany the healing process of the characters it embodies. Spirituality in Hopkinson’s work is understood in the light of “recover[ing] ancestral consciousness” and “travers[ing] the borders of time, space, culture, and the body (through possession)” (Engman, cited in Volschenk, 53). In examining the role of Yoruba cosmology in the Ifá corpus and its practice in Nigeria and throughout the Yoruba diaspora, Laura E. Edmunds, explains that in both Africa and the Diaspora, particularly in America, the doubled body, the astral and the terrestrial, comes to represent flight. Later, Edmunds cites Theresa Washington, who argues that “physical flight reminded Africans of liberation’s many paths...” (148). Following Edmund’s and Washington’s statements, I propose that in *The Salt Roads* it is Erzili’s “physical flight,” through Mer who looks after the well-being and liberation of her fellow enslaved brethren and sistren.

Joan Dayan in “Voice of the Gods” posits that Ezili navigates the salt roads, the waterways in the Ginen ’s minds, to travel through time to her people: “When lwa come to visit their ‘children,’ whether in a formal, public ceremony or in private times of dream or individual communion, they come by way of the chemin de l’eau, or water road” (17). And that is how Ezili comes to entrust Mer with the responsibility of restoring pathways of memory and survival, represented by the symbol of the salt roads.

Despite being cut off from her past in West Africa and losing her child to the cruelty of the plantation life in Sacré Coeur, Mer must negotiate these losses in a completely new reality. Adding to her trauma, there she bears witness to even more violence. One such act happens when Milo, an enslaved man, boasts about the success of Makandal's plot to poison the white people on the island. When the backra Simenon (the plantation owner) learns about the plan, he flays him alive in front of a captive audience to make an example of him.

That afternoon, he made us all to gather round and watch. Milo he made to be tied to stakes in the ground to scream out his life while Master Simenon peeled the skin from his twitching body with a knife. Peeled away all the skin, leaving the white fat glistening, quivering. "You want to be white?" the master shouted over Milo's howling as he cut his ears off. I had heard about this blanching of black people before. Mama, please you make me dead before I ever see it again. Three hours it took Milo's spirit to flee his body, back to Guinée. (*TSR* 62)

To cope with the brutality of Milo's death, Mer decides to head to the beach thinking "[the] Sea water would wash [her] clean, and gods willing, [she] would catch some fish for [her] supper" (*TSR* 64).

This event draws attention to the violence enacted by slavery and colonialism, and its impact on the Ginen alternative future identities. According to Glissant, root identity is founded in a vision which harkens back to a creation myth from the distant past, and it "is sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from this founding episode," a violence which enforces a claim to legitimacy of ownership of a land (*Poetics* 143-144, quoted in Volschenk). Thus, Mer's existential crisis. Her only consolation is her belief in Lasirèn and that Milo will be able to return to their ancestral home in spiritual form. Though Mer draws on her

African Caribbean cultural and spiritual reserves to make her way in the plantation, she complains to the gods and begs them for mercy for the Ginen people, as well as for herself. After she dismisses the idea of ending her life by drowning³⁴, a rather unexpected encounter with Lasirèn takes place. She marvels at the sight of the Iwa: “The bush of her hair tumbled about her round, brown, beautiful face in plaits and dreadknots, tied with twists of seaweed. Her two breasts swung full and heavy like breadfruit swaying on the branch. The fish tail waving lazy behind her instead of legs...” (*TSR*, 66). And then, Mer learns she has a purpose to fulfill. In their conversation, Erzili presents Mer with the responsibility of preserving the metaphorical sea roads of the Ginen: “The sea in the minds of my Ginen. The sea roads, the salt roads. And the sweet ones, too; the rivers. Can’t follow them to their sources any more. I land up in the same foul, stagnant swamp every time. You must fix it, Mer” (69). Mer is left with two pressing questions: “...all I could think is, what sea? And how was I one woman going to help a great African Power?” (71).

Even the title *The Salt Roads* reflects the ways in which the novel is grounded in an engagement with the complexities of the painful Caribbean history and seascape. The title reminds us of the Caribbean expression, ‘sucking salt³⁵,’ which means to endure hardship, and which is counterposed to the sweetness of the sugar cane fields on the plantation. “Sucking salt,” writes Meredith Gadsby in *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*, “carries a simultaneously doubled linguistic sign of adversity and survival. It carries with it the will to overcome hardship, take stock of the situation, and rebuild. It is a survival skill passed on

³⁴ Just as she considers ending her pain, her mind immediately halts: “No, couldn’t think on that, else I would just let my head sink below this water and never rise again. Then who would treat the people when they sicken. (65).

³⁵ The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage provides the following definition for sucking salt, which has Dominican, Guyanese, Tobagonian, and Trinidadian origins: “To suffer much hardship; to have a rough time of it, as in ‘You’re right boy, we have good luck or we would have been sucking salt by now, like this bunch of paupers.’ (Allsopp, Richard. Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage, cited in *Sucking Salt*, 2)

from generation to generation of Caribbean women” (3). In the novel, Hopkinson illustrates how both the sea and the salt are present in the lives of the oppressed female characters seeking to survive. Salt was a way to humble yourself to the gods, which is why it was important for Mer to find out why the god’s salt roads were blocked.

In discussing creolization and the efficacy of religion, festivities, and the phenomenon of play as elements of cultural resistance/ opposition, Richard D.E. Burton suggests in *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* that women are the most fruitful avenue of sustained resistance. While Burton does not address entirely the issue of gender relations, he writes:

If the growing cultural and educational strength of women can be translated into concrete social, economic, and political power . . . it would strike at the very core of the structures and values inherited from slavery and colonialism that still bind the Caribbean . . . and prevent the society . . . from attaining full human maturity” (267).

His conclusion can be considered to explain why Mer is the one to execute the goddess’ plan to save the Ginen people.

After Ezili charges Mer with the task, Makandal complains to Mer that no matter what he does to please the gods, they never appear to him. He pleads: “‘Why they don’t speak to me! I pray, I fast, I feed them, feed them; so many goats I feed them.’ He glared all around him, spread his arms, pleading: ‘Why this old woman and not me!’” (75). At that moment, Mer realizes that Makandal is a proud man, taking matters into his own hands without humbling himself to the gods. She then recalls the Ginen stories about a beautiful fairmaid swimming in the river: “. . .

she'll ask you, playful, You eat salt, or you eat fresh? And if you say salt, she will let you go back home, but if you say fresh . . . ” (76) Mer remembers the story added that

[i]f you only eat unsalted food, fresh food, we believe you make Lasirèn vexed, for salt is the creatures of the sea, and good for the Ginen to eat, but fresh—fresh is the flesh of Lasirèn, and if you eat that, it's pride. You're trying to make yourself as one of the lwas. Makandal never eats salt. He, a living man, giving himself powers like a lwa. That's why he couldn't hear the voice of the lwas. (76)

While I do not wish to assert that the male counterpart is not sensible to nature and that Caribbean men do not suck salt, Mer's intuitive explanation echoes Burt's proposition that Caribbean women can indeed “shake” the “core of the structures and values inherited from slavery and colonialism that still bind the Caribbean . . . and prevent the society . . . from attaining full human maturity.” And as I mentioned earlier “eating” salt is the element that renders Mer humble and open to the connection with the goddess Ezili, thus proving that the female characters in *The Salt Roads* function as channels of restoration between nature and spirituality. After all, it is the salt of the three women's tears that bind Ezili to humanity and to the earth. It is this grounding that prompts Ezili's consistent and unmistakable fierce position as the dynamic linkage between the past, present, and future. The grounding facilitates remembering, empowerment, and balance, thus making her a trope of liberation. What Hopkinson does in *The Salt Roads* is simply relocate the goddess' flight to the transformative power of ocean—and the salt—by way of these female characters.

Hopkinson summons Ezili and her multiple manifestations to become a model for a layered articulation of power and identity in building strong identities for her female characters. And in doing so, Ezili also fashions herself as a surrogate mother. The goddess is the spiritual

‘mother’ to all of the Ginen and even has a connection to those enslaved even before the Middle Passage. This connection between Ezili and the female characters may be best seen as a source of strength and survival. Joanne Braxton states that a crucial part of spirituality in black women’s writing is a maternal ancestral figure who lends a “benevolent, instructive and protective presence” and who “passes on her feminine wisdom for the good of the ‘tribe,’ and the survival of all Black people, especially those in the African diaspora created by the Atlantic slave trade” (quoted in Voschenk, 53). In *The Salt Roads*, the representation of motherhood is multidimensional; Ezili takes the form of that maternal ancestral figure. She ponders:

As my mother whale³⁶ self, I swim in real seas that surround Saint Domingue. I swim down a cove, where I appear to a sad Mer fishing from a rock and tell her, ‘The sea roads. They’re drying up.’ I tell her that she must find a way to fix it. Years later, she will think she has failed me, but I act in the world through such as her. Her every act of love, of healing, strikes a blow to the evil we fight. (*TSR*, location 4009)

Ezili along with Mer, Jeanne, and Thais facilitate a sense of belonging, enabled in most cases by alternative systems of knowledge: “‘They are me, these women. They are the ones who taught me to see; I taught me to see. They, we, are the ones healing the Ginen story, fighting to destroy that cancerous trade in shiploads of African bodies that ever demands to be fed more sugar, more rum, more Nubian gold’” (305). Though the sea itself provides no antidote to their suffering, the birth of the water spirit, along with the knowledge of their sucking salt condition, help these women take on the task of protectors: for instance, although Mer’s child is long dead, she ‘mothers’ her fellow enslaved community and helps raise Ti-Bois, a young, enslaved boy; in

³⁶ Lasirèn is often depicted as a half-fish, half-human being, but is occasionally portrayed as a whale

another story stream, Jeanne adopts her ex-lover Jeanette's daughter; and Ezili is mother to all of the Ginen.

The sea that Ezili traverses is the place for her fierce fight against the exploitation and suffering of African women and their descendants. But her fight is also an act of unforgetting the memories that are drying up the sea roads. In sum, Ezili's role is that of a motherly caretaker and protector of Caribbean descendants. I will return to the motherly traits of Ezili/Lasirèn in the last section of this chapter when I discuss Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*.

In *At The Full and Change of the Moon*, Brand uses the trope of the sea as a way to explore the relationship between the female characters and their memories in an interplay of water/ocean/sea. Both collective history and individual memory are figured in the novel. Earlier I had anticipated that to study nature as a source for healing, I would have to look for the interconnectedness of the sea and ancestral memory. In Brand's novel, following Walcott, the protagonist Bola locks up the sea, only physically at first in her eyes, but later in her memory as she foresees the lives of her descendants: "Marie Ursule had seen in her child's eyes [Bola's], the sea, and a journey to be made that melts the body" (44). These descendants too savor the salty trauma of their ancestors. Meredith Gadsby explains this intergenerational pain as related to the Diaspora's myriad associations of "sucking salt" (153). She writes, "In my conception, 'sucking salt' becomes more than the act of overcoming hardship. It is as well a strategy for preparing oneself for impending hardship, often in an environment marked by constant upheaval, transition, and economic adversity" (Gadsby 153). Following that logic, then, not just Bola, but her descendants either deal with hardships or prepare for impending ones. Unlike in *The Salt Roads*, sucking salt in Brand's novel, does not place the female characters in a privileged

communion with mother spirits, but rather in a position to experience nostalgia for the lost mother and longing for the sea.

So I licked the sand because maybe this was my mother's way of taking me to the sea. I licked the sand and I smelled the sea in it. It was salty and I saw our mother walking on the beach where, she said, her father, the boy, was born. I didn't eat all the sand, I saved some for our mother and my sisters who never went to the sea either. (*At the Full* 284)

After losing her mother, Young Bola occupies her mind with recollections of a shared pain by sucking salt. As a liberatory agent, the sea then aids Bola's descendants in their quest for selfhood.

Linking the spiritual world with nature opens up new avenues to an understanding of survival and recovery from individual and collective trauma. In *The Salt Roads* and *At The Full and Change of the Moon*, slaves and their descendants attempt to heal the cultural and personal fracture of the Middle Passage through, amongst other things, a spirituality that stresses the interconnectedness between nature and the spiritual world.

Obeah Women and Nature

Although obeah is traced back to a more religious aspect, my intention here is to examine the connection between the spiritual and material practice and nature as a strong element in Afro-Caribbean women's healing rehearsal. DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley remind us of Wilson Harris' relevant words about the Caribbean [being] "a landscape saturated by traumas of conquest" (2). They also quote Beverly Ormerod: The land is the past's "only true guardian... history waits, latent, in Caribbean nature, which is filled with sorrowful reminders of slavery and repression" (2). Following Harris' and Ormerod's, DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley state that

while the brutality of the plantation system produced a particular relationship to the natural world it is important to consider those sites that served as vital repositories of indigenous and African beliefs and assertions of rebellion against plantation capitalism this is most evident in the history of indigenous and slave resistance in which mountain ranges mangrove swamps provision grounds and other sites of environmental opposition to the plantocracy provided vital alternative communities. (2)

Their statement about environmental sites as being significant to cultural resources and resistance, memory, and spiritual or healing practices are particularly useful in the literary analysis of Hopkinson's and Brand's novels.

In *At The Full and Change of The Moon*, Brand's story recalls the trauma of the Middle Passage and the hardships of the sugar plantation. The narrative opens in 1824 with a mass suicide on a plantation in Trinidad, is orchestrated by the rebel enslaved woman Marie Ursule. The novel presents a genealogical chart of the lives of her descendants through almost two centuries providing a touchstone for characters who desire an escape from pain and dissolution of the body. Such is the case of Marie-Ursule, who struggles with the consequences of her enslavement and her punishments for previous failed uprisings: she had to endure seeing the heads of the rebels hung on sticks, and she had received a ten-pound ring to wear, in addition to thirty-nine lashes. Her suffering renders her physically impotent until she realizes that her ultimate space of empowerment comes from leaving the place she occupies: her body. She then plans and executes a mass suicide, that will end with Marie Ursule's torture and death. The novel traces her spirit of resistance down through the generations, asking which of her descendants,

dispersed widely geographically, will be overtaken by despair or the tragedies of past and present and which, like their ancestor, will adamantly chart their own course.

Earlier I stated in contrasting the presence of the sea in Hopkinson's and Brand's novels, that the sea of Trinidad in *The Moon* did not serve as a source for spiritual possessions. Yet the name Marie Ursule in *The Moon* closely resembles that of the goddess Erzulie. According to Melanie Otto this mythical lwa fought in the Haitian slave rebellion in the late eighteenth century. Erzulie in her dantor aspect is represented in syncretic Roman Catholic iconography as the African Madonna. Depending on the aspect in which she manifests, she may be seen as the long enduring mother, the courtesan, or as a dangerous force. Thus, perhaps Erzulie could be understood as a precursor for the character of Marie Ursule in organizing the collective mass suicide. Otto describes Erzulie as 'an independent childbearing woman, who offers the possibility of having a child without a man', and in doing so 'also offers an alternative family structure' which 'reflects the all-female households characteristic of many Caribbean society (cited in Evans, 7). As the story line progresses, we learn that Marie Ursule's life resembles that of Erzulie: she has a daughter³⁷, Bola, and is the leader of the slave community where she lives. Again, although the spiritual world is not explicitly the theme in Brand's novel, the possible allusion to the lwa is notable.

Nature plays an important role in the execution of Ursule's act of rebellion. Marie-Ursule uses her knowledge of nature to cook cornmeal along with the tar of *woorara* poison that would set them free in a final act of resistance:

³⁷ Brand implies that Kamena may be Bola's father, but is placed to the side of Marie Ursule and Bola with no connecting lines, cut off from the family tree in a way which reflects his description of Maroon. He had successfully escaped the plantation and was able to live in Terre Bouillante, the Maroon settlement, but lost his way back after helping Marie Ursule spare the life of Bola. He fostered the girl, but never gave up on finding the settlement.

She lit the fire, put the small copper at the bottom and over it the pan of cornmeal to hide the darkening mixture of curare³⁸. // She would add vine of the soul and god's breath leaves to the cornmeal, just to make their going easier. These plants would give them visions, dreams and sightings, pleasure at the coming life. They would see where they were going more clearly when they took the knife of woorara to their veins (14).³⁹

The plant-induced visions and dreams provide spiritual guidance in the crossing over to the ancestral world.

This type of knowledge of the works of nature is also seen in *Unburnable* in the character of Matilda. Unlike Marie-Ursule, Matilda, Lillian's grandmother, enjoyed living in the freedom of an isolated place at the top of Dominica's highest mountains, on a plateau where she exercised her "power to heal at will" (10). Matilda mastered the practice of herbal medicine to treat both physical and psychological afflictions with "potions of a scientific base: aphrodisiacs, sedatives, stimulants, and narcotics: double and triple compounds of the extracts of plants . . ." (11). Her Obeah-like powers allowed her to:

. . . [draw] teas from the various inflammation bushes, these being effective against the symptoms of gonorrhoea, particularly the blockage of urine. She boiled roots that helped women to conceive, and brew teas to wash away a fetus. She successfully treated high and low blood pressure, sugar, and hearts that beat too fast or too slow. (3)

³⁸ Curare: a bitter, resinous substance obtained from the bark and stems of some South American plants. It paralyzes the motor nerves and is traditionally used by some Indian peoples to poison their arrows and blowpipe darts. Origin: late 18th century: from a Carib word, partly via Spanish and Portuguese.

³⁹ According to Diana Paton in "Witchcraft, Poison and Law, and Atlantic Slavery," the prominence of poisoning as a form of resistance undertaken by enslaved people in the Caribbean has its origins in the legend of Makandal's the Poisoner [Makandal's conspiracy from 1757–58] (2).

In contrast to Marie-Ursule's use of plants for her ultimate revenge, Matilda's Obeah⁴⁰ powers had mostly been known for their healing purposes: She knew she could develop any kind of poison that slipped into the food or drink...would cause instant or prolonged death, blindness, barrenness, intestinal dysfunction for life—the possibilities were practically limitless (11). However, she had no desire to hold such power. Her principles even force Matilda to send away her Carib husband Simon when she learns he had secretly used potions that had endangered the lives and well-being of members of their community: “The day it was over between them was the day he violated her sacrosanct policy on the protocol for handling aphrodisiac requests” (35). Regardless of these principles, Matilda is tried, convicted, and hanged after being accused of practicing human sacrifice in her maroon community in “Noah.”

The mountains in Caribbean islands hold both mythic stories and historically documented accounts of the Maroon life, with women at the center of the narrative. Such an example of the first is Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*. Cliff writes:

Nanny, who could catch a bullet between her buttocks and render the bullet harmless, was from the empire of the Ashanti, and carried the secrets of her magic into slavery. She prepared amulets and oaths for her armies. Her Nanny Town, hidden in the crevices of the Blue Mountains, was the headquarters of the Windward Maroons—who held out against the forces of the white men longer than any rebel troops. They waged war from 1655-1740. Nanny was the magician

⁴⁰ Diana Paton explains: “Long translated in scholarly and popular accounts as “witchcraft,” obeah has more recently been construed as a form of resistance, a religious practice, a source of authority within communities of enslaved people, and a cosmological term for spiritual power. It was all of these things, and in addition, as Kenneth M. Bilby and Jerome S. Handler have argued, it was a term used by white colonists and the colonial state for African practices of spiritual healing, harming, protection, and divination that had developed in the Caribbean.” (4).

of this revolution—she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles. (*Abeng*, 14, quoted in Chancy’s *Searching for Safe Spaces*, 144)

On a factual note, Hollander Layte, in “Women Leaders: Nanny of the Maroons,” states: “In time, Nanny became known as the wise woman of her town, passing down African legends, customs music and songs to her followers, and instilling in them confidence and pride in their cultural heritage (9, quoted in Chancy, 145). These representations of life in the plantation and of the trope of the Maroonage not only function as a point of connection between characters in both novels, but also showcase female characters in pursuit of self-definition and self-empowerment in the extra-discursive space of nature.

Another text that illustrates how Caribbean narratives use the transformative power of nature and spirituality, and even fierceness in the healing process of female characters is Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*. In this next section, I offer an analysis of how Danticat’s text rejects the therapeutic trends of Western trauma theory, compelling us to further reflect on the process of decolonizing trauma theory.

Distancing from the mystified and romanticized⁴¹ view of Caribbean landscape and seascape, that to a certain point attempted to minimize the brutality of colonization, now more than ever scholars and writers are turning their attention to the relationship between nature and the colonial subject. Drawing on Glissant’s vision of Caribbean literature as fundamental to re-establish a dialectic between landscape and history and between culture and the natural world, DeLoughrey urges for a reading that “... reflects a dialectic between the land and its residents” (265). Because this work looks at Afro-Caribbean women’s healing rehearsals, I align myself

⁴¹ For example, the majority of anglophone Caribbean poetry produced before the 1960s was influenced by the British Romantic tradition of nature writing, writes Elizabeth DeLoughrey. (*Ecocriticism: The Politics of Place*, 268-9).

with branches of ecocriticism and ecofeminism that “analyze[] the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature” (Bressler 236).

Before turning to Rob Nixon’s conclusion that the best ecocritical and postcolonial scholarship is interdisciplinary, transnational, and comparative (80), Cilano and DeLoughrey chart the several contributions made to this important forum, drawing parallels between the interests of ecocriticism and postcolonialism. They compare the work of Patrick D. Murphy, who holds that ecocriticism’s concern for nonhuman nature mirrors postcolonial, feminist and multicultural studies, as they focus on extending equitable moral considerability and social justice to excluded, exploited, and oppressed people. Cilano and DeLoughrey warn us about Murphy’s position since “too heavy reliance upon constructing parallels between postcolonialism and ecocriticism can lead to a non-problematized division between people (on the postcolonial side), and nature (on the ecocritical one), raising questions of agency and representation. (75). Karla Armbruster precisely reflects on the problem of attempting to speak for nonhuman nature, relying on the Western cultural assumption that nature cannot speak for itself: “it has seemed unnecessary to examine how we speak for [nature]” (cited in Cilano and DeLoughrey, 76).

In the editorial preface to *West Indian Literature*, special edition on *Caribbean Ecocriticism*, Elaine Savory, like Nixon, says that ecocriticism is

multi stranded for it permits a wide variety of tools and approaches // with the common goal of educating and raising consciousness about environmental issues through the medium of literary texts, and can also provide particular kinds of discourse within the field of environmental humanities. (7)

Savory highlights the importance of literary texts that are expressed in “powerfully effective language and form // but even become primary vehicles of meaning and language ... the vehicle

and the arena for change before it becomes thoughtful action” (7). The collection of stories contained in Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*—a work that explores a group of modern Haitian women’s individual issues of personal loss and search for identity in a small town where nature and people seem to embrace the intervention of the spiritual world—respond to this call of thriving ecocritical practices. Interestingly, these very same issues affecting the lives of the women individually are what bring them together to make connections, sometimes sharing their dreams, other times pursuing justice. Here I look at this collection of stories as one that deals with a group of women whose painful and tragic lives, though inwardly divided and fragmented, intersect with an equally fragmented nature and the spiritual world.

The short story cycle is the story of a “luminous child,” Claire, and the people of Ville Rose in Haiti. The narrative begins the day of Claire's seventh birthday, and, as has been the "tradition" since her birth, it is a rather sad day: the tragic death of a fisherman in the open sea, and Nozias' painful, and long-pondered decision to give the child away to the town's fabric vendor, convinced that Claire will have a chance at a better life. But just as she is ready to leave her father, Claire goes missing. As the father and villagers search for her, the individual stories of men and women in Ville Rose surface, revealing dreadful secrets and truths, as well as a web of tragedies that gradually connect to Claire and the town itself. An incisive storyteller, Danticat gives us a town with “terrible cosmic design engulfing everyone involved” (146).

A commonplace in Danticat’s work, the fictional town of Ville Rose is at the threshold of impending disaster, too, as the characters face painful personal losses in their love lives and in the separation of their families. The powerful prose in *Claire of the Sea Light* unveils a series of tragedies—that of Claire’s mother, as well as Madame Gaële’s daughter and husband, and the

fisherman Caleb—which all seem to have a connection with nature’s own mystical anticipation of disaster.

And thus, probing Armbruster’s raised concern that nature cannot speak for itself, I read Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light* to examine the multiple ways in which nature loudly voices its presence in response to the violence and corruption of Ville Rose, “a small and unlucky town” (14). The best example of how nature responds to the violent acts perpetrated against it is illustrated in the chapter titled “The Frogs.” Six-months pregnant Gaëlle Cadet Lavaud, Ville Rose’s wealthy fabric vendor, lives with her husband Laurent Lavaud in the middle of a notorious floodplain. That summer, she recalls that dozens of frogs exploded due to the unprecedented heat, which Laurent could only explain with “The heat and all this trouble with the frogs is surely a sign that something more terrible is going to happen,” (44) as if foreshadowing the impending tragedy of his death and years later that of their daughter. Laurent had bought the land and sketched the plans for their house too close to the river without realizing that they would witness neighbor houses be “dragged downstream year after year in flash floods. Many with entire families inside” (52). Laurent had warned the peasants that the floods were the result of “the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil” (52). This overexploitation of the land was necessary, in their eyes, to obtain the charcoal they needed to survive. Laurent tried to persuade them to stop cutting down the trees by pleading: “It’s like killing a child,” which the peasants dismissed with “If I have to kill a tree child to save my child, I’ll do it” (52). In her analysis of the representations of grief in *Claire of the Sea Light*, Silvia Martínez-Falquina writes: “This overexploitation of the land and the excessive cutting of trees—which poor peasants cannot really afford to abandon, for economic forces beyond them do not allow them to find another way to make a living—devastating floods are more and more

common, destroying houses and displacing people” (852). In this regard, Eric Prieto underscores the urgency of discussing this subject “in light of the advent of what many are calling the anthropocene age defined as the geological epoch marked by the preponderance of mankind's impact on our planet surface and environment” (47). He adds that in the Caribbean context this anthropocenic encounter with the harsh conditions of the environment is already taking place in places like Haiti, “which has experienced catastrophic levels of deforestation and soil an erosion due to human policies going back to the colonial period” (47). This brings to mind Malidoma Patrice Somé when he acknowledges that “Shedding our own tears of grief for the violence done to nature and for the alienation and losses we have experienced in our lives will open the doors to healing faster than will searching for little people who live in another dimension” (55). He then adds:

. . . Nature, the dwelling place of the ancestral spirits, is a vast field of grief. . . I say this because every harmful thing done to the earth is registered in nature. Nature is the place where the real work of healing takes place slowly and gradually. This is because nature cannot ignore the wounds that humans inflict on one another and on her. (54)

In consonance with Prieto and Patrice Somé, Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light*, with its setting in Haiti, becomes a powerful vehicle to heal the self and to contest and challenge the anthropocenic condition of Ville Rose and its inhabitants.

All throughout the telling of their stories, the narratives emphasize female characters' bonds with the natural world. For instance, the section titled “Starfish” is structured around this animal's symbolic death and regeneration, a piece of the “self” breaking and then becoming something new. This symbolic bond between the self and the natural world is represented in the

character of Louise George. Plagued by a rare condition marked by the coughing up of blood during her periods that has afflicted her since she was thirteen⁴², Louise, a Faculté d'Education graduate, shies away from social life in Ville Rose. As is the case with many unexplained phenomena in Haiti, her condition has been attributed to the spiritual world, so to avoid that accusatory stigma she has remained in solitude, excepting occasional intimate encounters with Maxime Ardin Senior, a school principal of the town. Navigating from private to public spaces through multiple activities such as writing, hosting a radio show, and teaching children and parents at the school, Louise finds meaning to her solitary life.

Every month, when Louise secludes into her home and cares for her menstrual condition, she works on a book, compiling the stories she collected over the years on her radio show. Behind the microphone and in the hopes of “teaching,” the hostess of the radio program *Di Mwen* (Tell Me) gives the people of Ville Rose the opportunity to not only voice out their personal afflictions, but also create a forum to seek justice.

Louise’s multi-layered existence brings to mind Mildred Mortimer’s *Writing from the Hearth: Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women’s Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean*. In this work Mortimer examines women’s transformation of constraining, silencing, imprisoning, and confining patriarchal structures into a liberating “alternative” space, one that both “embodies the sense of change—an ‘altered’ space—and expresses choice—resistance to the status quo.” As Mortimer deftly demonstrates, the alternative space is “open, flexible, and multipurpose”; it “can function as a refuge (for meditation, memory, or dream)” or it can be “a preparatory ante-chamber for future activity, a site of resistance, a place of performance—where writing, orality, and art in varied forms convey woman’s sense of self”

⁴² Louise’s ailment is yet another example of trauma in relation to the female body.

(qtd. in Praud 238). In the light of Mortimer's view, I argue that the "alternative spaces" that Louise resorts to prepare her for the ultimate transformation in resistance to the dominant, domineering male figure in her life.

Despite the satisfaction she derives from her various projects, Louise's movement between those alternative spaces is fraught with conflictive situations. At school, Louise enjoys reading to the children, and in Max Senior's words "she could have been a great teacher. . . [but] the [radio]show had kept her from it" (143). Notwithstanding, Louise's promising pedagogical talent, an unfortunate event triggers the abrupt termination of her teaching career, while at the same time beginning her brief liaison with one of her guests on *Di Mwen*. At school an insufferably misbehaved student, Masora Henri, constantly interrupts her class in a rude and defiant attitude, testing Louise's patience. After losing her control over the situation, she slaps the unruly student. The school's 'no-hitting' policy has been violated, prompting Max Senior, in the comfort zone of Louise's bed, to ask her to respond to the student's mother, Odile Desir, a restaurant server. Inwardly, Louise justifies herself: "It wasn't meant to be a slap, just a flutter of her hand . . ." (132). Although Louise anticipates the futility of the meeting, she nevertheless reluctantly accepts Max's request, due to his domineering way of resolving conflictive situations while also taking advantage to teach someone a 'lesson'; only this time she would be the one reprimanded.

The ensuing confrontation between the women results in a humiliating slap in the face that Louise feels as if it had come from Max Senior himself, rather than from Odile, since after all, it was Max who had convened to arrange the meeting, but who did nothing to stop the enraged mother. It was clear to Louise that this was his way of teaching her a 'lesson.' Louise George had always protected herself from humiliation by confining herself every month when

her rare condition afflicted her, but now she feels weak and defenseless. To Max, Louise's humiliating slapping episode was a self-less, liberating gift ("Now you can have more time for your show, . . . You can also keep writing your book," (143). He even compares her to a starfish, in that "she constantly needed to have a piece of her break off and walk away in order for her to become something new" (143).

Little does Max know that his "convoluted act of kindness" would eventually join two broken 'starfishes' who in their consciousness-awareness will seek revenge and self-affirmation by questioning and subverting the traditional power relationships between men and women. Danticat also explores the idea of female empowerment as a result of an alliance in the character of Flore Voltaire, a former in-maid in Max Senior's house, who becomes a quite unusual guest on Louise's radio show as she narrates her crude story. On the radio we learn that, like Louise, Flore had been humiliated by an Ardin man. On a rainy night, Maxime Ardin Jr., Max Senior's son, struggling with sexual identity issues, slips into Flore's room and rapes her in an attempt to demonstrate his masculinity. The night of the rape nature forecasts the violence Flore had to endure: "There was a hailstorm" (166), recalls Flore as she begins narrating the rape.

After a long day of cleaning, an exhausted Flore notices how the storm grows stronger, but finds comfort knowing that Max Senior's house was sturdy to withstand the rain and winds. However, as the rape takes place, all the notions of safety disappear: "The lightning and thunder did not seem to trouble him, and he moved his face toward hers until her body was pinned beneath his on the bed" (168). "The house rocked as his entire body covered hers, but the house had shaken before during other storms. What was new was the water coming up so fast, with fire ants, which meant that it was coming down from deep inside of mountains and the hills and not to sea (169). The weather conditions contribute to characterize home as an uncertain and unsafe

place, rendering Flore unprotected: the ceiling does not provide isolation from the rain; the door does not provide protection from her rapist.

Despair and confusion make Flore go back to her mother's house. Trying to understand and even escape from the crude reality forced upon her, Flore resorts to the one space that provides her protection, her mother's house. However, the space that Flore once shared with her mother is no longer available to her due to economic conditions. There she finds bittersweet comfort as her mother, tracing "her fingers over Flore's cheek" warns her that: "If you're home for good, ... I don't know how we'll get by." The realization that she was the only economical support her mother has forces her back to the Ardin's house: "I could not lose my job." (174). Louise is surprised that Flore's mother did not stand by her daughter and provide the family support often expected in the Caribbean domestic space: "I'm sure your mother understood that you were in a bad situation and would have liked for you to get out" (175). It could be argued that their impoverished situation along with class issues force these characters into a submissive acceptance that disrupts the peace often found in the private space, thus preventing them from aspiring to an act of empowerment.

Once Flore finds out she is pregnant, Max Senior, advocating for his son's *droit du seigneur* questions her: "He said he couldn't know that this was his son's child. Then he gave me two thousand dollars American... to go away" (176). Subverting her role of a subordinate woman brought to shame by a wealthy, powerful man, Flore names her child after his father, only adding the Creole prefix "Pa," which could either mean "his" or "not his"; thus, the child's name, Pamaxime, represents a symbol of resistance against the male assurance or certainty.

The ultimate act of empowerment for both Louise and Flore comes from that unplanned-for alliance in the radio show. Louise experiences a pleasant feeling when the stories on her

show end on a positive note; but this becomes a double-win situation as she is given the opportunity to seek vengeance against Max Senior for the humiliation he put her through; this is her chance to return Max Senior's slap to him: "No, she was not a turn-the-other-cheek kind of gal, and in that moment in his office, Max Senior had forced her to be. She believed in an eye for an eye, and though she had never used the show for revenge in the past, she was not above doing it" (178). To cover up for her real motive to conduct the interview, "to show that these people had sought her out and not the other way around" (179), Louise finally asks Flore the purpose of airing her hardships over the radio. For Flore, her coming out in the public space means protecting her son: ". . . they could take my son away from me . . ." (179). Making it public meant a way to find the community's support, especially with reference to those female radio listeners tuning into the injustice done against Flore, who surely represents all the women who have been in a similar position of oppression.

In the face of such obstacles, the domestic and public spaces play an important role in the alliance between Flore and Louise. Within a context of male dominated society such as Haiti's, women and the communal bonds they establish will be rendered as invisible. Subverting male notions of community and nature will in turn legitimize women as visible and claiming a space that is independent of male-oriented agendas. These two women share an oppositional relationship to a domineering male figure due to their mutual experience of pain. Therefore, liberating themselves from male oppression gives them the opportunity of achieving self-affirmation on their own terms. Together these two women will defy the idea of the solitary, weak woman oppressed by male domination and willpower. Both Flore's revealing denunciation and Louise's corporal response to traumatic experiences can be related to the way in which

nature responds to its own violation, also resisting being a passive recipient of external definition and control.

Danticat's stories are not whole without the image of the sea as the ultimate protagonist. Its *tidalectic* (Brathwaite) and cyclical ambivalence can be illustrated in Haitian [and Caribbean] storytelling:

People like to say of the sea that lanmè pas kenbe kras, the sea does not hide dirt. It does not keep secrets. The sea was both hostile and docile, the ultimate trickster. It was as large as it was small, as long as you could claim a portion of it for yourself. You could scatter both ashes and flowers in it. You could take as much as you wanted from it. But it too could take back. (199)

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the sea can be viewed as a destructive force, and here, Danticat presents its dual inscription in the lives of Ville Rose and Cité Pendu's inhabitants. In a time when fishermen could no longer make a living off *lapèche*, the sea can simply make people disappear. For example, Caleb dies before his friends' eyes as a wave—ten to twelve feet high—claims his body: “. . . the wave cracked. Its barrel collapsed, pummeling a cutter called Fifine, sinking it and Caleb, the sole fisherman on board” (3). The sea is not giving enough to fishermen like Nozias, Claire's father, either, burying them deeper and deeper in their poverty or claiming their lives.

True, the sea brings death, but it can also bring new life. This is illustrated the night a pregnant Claire and Nozias go out to the sea for night fishing. While enjoying the moonlit swim, both marvel at the sight of [the] “patch of the sea [was] being lit from below” (33), birthing the idea for the baby's name: “If it's a girl . . . Claire like me. Then Limye Lanme. Claire of the Sea Light” (35). The sea's ambivalence of life and death is especially obvious in the case of little

Claire. To her, the sea is a way to imagine being in her mother's body for the short time that he knew her, before she was born:

Sometimes when she was lying on her back in the sea, her toes pointed, her hands facing down, her ears half submerged, while she was listening to both the world above and beneath the water, she yearned for this warm salty water to be her mother's body, the waves her mother's heartbeat, the sunlight the tunnel that guided her out the day her mother died. (215)

The deadly threat of the sea also scares her when she imagines that the sea would disappear. She knows she would miss it too much. She sings a sad fisherman's song about loss as a ritual to prevent bad things from happening: "if the sea disappeared, she would miss its ever-changing sounds: how it sometimes sounded like one long breath. And sometimes like a cry" (220). In the dialectic between trauma and healing—the two opposite reactions of grief and joy—the tidal and cyclical symbolism of the sea incorporates the two but does not allow for a clear resolution. Thus, nature and its ambivalent characteristics symbolize the latent forces of the characters—both male and female—in Danticat's narrative. Like nature, Flore and Louise cannot be silenced; they are like the sea, untamable (Martínez-Falquina 853).

Martínez-Falquina adds that a strategic representation of grief in Danticat's work is supported by a series of traditional elements which are articulated in the narrative, such as instances of Haitian wisdom, myth and lore related to the natural and the supernatural realms, kept alive through stories. There is one story to explain drizzle, or ghost rain, which is also a story of violence and pain: "The devil was beating his wife and marrying his daughter. [. . .] The drizzle was both the wife's and daughter's tears" (58).

Like Hopkinson and Brand, Danticat also incorporates the mythical figure of Lasirèn, the long-haired, long-bodied brown goddess of the sea:

With an angelic face like a bronzed Lady of Charity, Lasirèn was, it was believed, the last thing most fishermen saw before they died at sea, her arms the first thing they slipped into, even before their bodies hit the water. Like most fishermen he knew, Nozias, in his boat, next to his trap, net, hook, line, and tin can full of bait, kept a burlap sack in which he had a mirror, a comb, and conch shell, an amulet to attract Lasirèn's protection. (34)

In addition to these amulets, fishermen also praised Lasirèn with a song:

Lasire, Labalein
 Chapo m tonbe nan lanme
 Lasirèn, The Whale
 My hat fell into the sea. (219)

This was the same song that Claire associated with the presence of her mother, thinking “it was as if someone else were there with her” (219). Maxine L. Montgomery explains that “much of Danticat’s re-inscription of the expressive culture surrounding Mami Wata entails a focus on the conflicted mother-daughter dyad.” She adds that “in disregard the author employs the figure of the adopted/orphaned/abandoned child as a significant persona whose anxieties of belonging call into question issues of nationhood and genealogical beginnings” (321). This is a common ground for Hopkinson’s and Brand’s use of the Lasirèn trope as a motherly figure that takes care of her “abandoned” children.

The Salt Roads, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, and *Claire of the Sea Light* offer a realistic and somewhat difficult view of the struggles of women against male domination and

oppression. They face issues in the development of a long-lasting sisterhood and their relation to nature and the spiritual world. While the alliances formed by the women in these stories are uneasy and fragile, they also seem to contain a glimmer of hope for future generations. The politics of the contact zones in these narratives are represented through female characterization and natural symbolism. The fictional work of writers like Hopkinson, Brand and Danticat become more relevant in discussing the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women and their descendants when trauma theory, the concepts of “rehearsals,” and an ecocritical ecofeminist framework for interpretation construct the methodology.

relating to the conquistador real and victimized bod[ies],”⁴³ and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s characterization of the Caribbean as a repeating island. As I read Brand’s, Bishop’s, Danticat’s, and Hopkinson’s representations of the Caribbean woman, I was struck not just by the repetition of themes, but by the emergence of rehearsals’ restorative power. Now, repetition alone can lead to a failed attempt to heal from trauma; however, it is the writer’s emphasis on revision and attention to the multiple rehearsals that which helps women move beyond the patriarchal frames inherited from colonialism.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the concerns about women’s plight in oppressive environments continues to be present in the Caribbean. In addition to scholars and activists, fiction writers have raised these concerns in literary works. So, why continue writing about this phenomenon? To answer the question, I venture to argue that while women are not able to find their voice, writers will continue to use the instrumentality of literature to help them explore how to fight back with all the weapons at their disposal.

As a methodology, “healing rehearsals” proves essential to analyze the issues that many Caribbean women still face today. The literary works examined here indicate that Afro-Caribbean women writers still turn to the trope of the madwoman and the site of the violated female body to depict the scars inflicted on both body and mind. As opposed to writing women out of the Caribbean rehearsal, my dissertation, as I hope to have achieved, contributes to an understanding of the [ab]used and often discarded women in need of healing and self-affirmation.

I also proposed that Afro-Caribbean women writers as well as the female characters populating their respective fictions are only beginning to scratch the surface of what I call a new

⁴³ Harris, Wilson. *The Infinite Rehearsal*, 1.

rehearsal, a transformative kind of sexual liberation, as well as serve as the main conduits to a restoration of nature and its relationship to human beings. Novels and short stories such as *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, “Oleander” and “Effigy,” *The Salt Roads*, and *Claire of the Sea Light* provide suitable narratives for the analysis of healing rehearsals, as these works are heavily populated by characters who deal with the crude social realities many oppressed women experience in the Caribbean. Brand, Bishop, Hopkinson, and Danticat have targeted the issues affecting Afro-Caribbean women by producing fiction that not only attempts to subvert the hegemonic narratives, but which also uses these texts to reflect on the multiple ways of women’s empowerment and subsequent healing. Although Danticat warns that these creative works function as a valuable proxy in processing difficult ideas and realities,⁴⁴ still they provide a safe place to explore these rehearsals. In addition to creating these spaces, what is common to all the women writers analyzed here is the way they advocate for a process of healing.

The term healing rehearsal helps to explain the processes engaged by battered women to discover their capacity to thrive and overcome the unspeakable acts of oppression and violence to which they have been subjected. Instead of remaining in the grasp of a colonial mindset, far from perpetuating victimhood, incapable of empowerment, these women in the narratives seek healing by self-affirmation through mounting outright challenges to existing acts that disempower them.

The narratives depict females who struggle with their respective pasts in a changing world that needs to be defined/redefined and coped with in order for them to assert themselves. Each work posits issues of identity, spirituality, and community ties as central to the character’s search for a place in the world. Each one also portrays a variety of choices available to

⁴⁴ Danticat, Edwidge. *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. (2011): 8-13.

emotionally distressed or wounded female individuals to explore or embrace, such as conformism, immigration, isolation, oblivion/madness, sexual liberation, and revolt. The healing rehearsals examined in this dissertation have revealed the negotiations these women engage in to claim a space and a voice.

Though I drew on an interdisciplinary approach, my analysis in each chapter has focused on a different aspect of trauma and healing, trying to determine whether the rehearsals performed have proven to be successful or failed attempts to heal the characters' wounded existence.

The first chapter centered on *At The Full and Change of The Moon*, *Unburnable*, and *The Salt Roads*, and focuses on a healing rehearsal manifested as sexual liberation in a dramatic break with the traumatic past or a history of traumatic relationships transgressing dominant regulations of the female body. In Brand's novel, I examined the link between sexuality and shame to exercising an ultimate subversive female sexuality. Cordelia, a woman constrained by the imposed performative roles of daughter, wife, and mother, is not allowed to experience the simple joys of her own skin. She later becomes skillful in reclaiming her body and discovering the pleasures of her sexuality. In Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable*, I continue to examine the link between shame and sexuality. Healing is impossible if the body is not at the core of the process. So, for characters like Carib-descended Iris and Lillian to undergo a substantial restorative process, a performance that uses the body as a site for physical expression is mandated to subvert the typical masculine dominance that oppressed women have experienced. The emerging Caribbean speculative fiction such as Hopkinson's explores explicitly sexually informed narrative. Mer, Tipingee, and Jeanne in *The Salt Roads* represent women oppressed by two different kinds of slavery. Mer and Tipingee live in colonial slavery in a sugar plantation, while

Jeanne works as a prostitute in the 1840s' France. All three women engage in survival modes, but rehearse sexual liberation to combat the numbing condition of their enslavement.

The second chapter looked at the female characters' healing 'rehearsals' as they negotiate with traumatic memories. Although in this chapter I intend to probe the uses of memory as one of therapeutic value, the characters in these texts fail to attain healing by succumbing to madness or isolation and oblivion. I use Laura Murphy's concept of "the suffering of survival" to show how the rehearsals in memory by female characters in these texts fail as a transformative tool. Lillian in *Unburnable* struggles to recover and understand her family past by going back to Dominica and reliving her childhood experiences and making sense of the chanté-mas song about her grandmother. Her rehearsal in memory does not help her succeed, and she is left with the decision of taking her life. I also explore how women's transformation of restrictive, repressive patriarchal structures shift into the inclusion of men in the healing rehearsal. Bishop's short stories "Effigy," "Oleander," and Brand's *Full Moon* depict men lending a sympathetic ear and/or actively participating in the women's rehearsals.

The third chapter mined the nexus of alternate healing practices such as grounding in nature and spirituality. While I do not wish to exclude men, I propose that Afro-Caribbean women are the main conduits to a restoration of nature and its relationship to human beings by appropriating a rehearsal in fierceness. I followed the ecocritical insights of Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Isabel Hoving to examine how the characters commune with elements of nature and spirituality and engagement in modes of resistance, mothering and healing.

Many people regard healing as lofty and unattainable. Far from prescribing a permanent solution to the trauma the fictional female characters endure, my deeper ambition here has been

to promote a heightened attention to the options available not only as mechanisms of survival, but a way to heal and thrive. From an optimistic view, psychiatrist Bessel Van Der Kolk shares his enthusiasm: “We are on the verge of becoming a trauma conscious society” (349). This awareness of trauma, specifically for the female individual, is increasing in the Caribbean as witnessed throughout activist theatrical pieces, such as the ones performed by the Sistren Theatre Collective of Jamaica and groundbreaking scholarly and literary works.

At its heart, this dissertation has explored Caribbean women’s multiple rehearsals of the body, individual and collective memory, and nature-spirituality. Although, the performance of the rehearsals in the fictional works examined lead to restoration and healing of the bodies that bear slavery’s heritage, their treatment suggests that healing cannot always be accounted for. For this reason and because these rehearsals repeatedly surface in Caribbean literature, I propose that more thorough studies be conducted on concerns with the policed body and spirituality, as well as with madness. To demonstrate some of the ways these rehearsals continue in contemporary Caribbean fiction, I close my project with a look at twenty-first-century narratives.

With Jamaica as its setting, Jacqueline Bishop’s novel *The River Song* (2007) deals with women processing their traumas and healing rehearsals. The *bildungsroman* sports a cast of female characters, each of whom experiences a wound that needs healing. The main character, Gloria, draws on her adolescent memories, attempting to understand the events that helped shape key stages in her life. While looking into these memories, Gloria explores the roles of women not only in her family structure, but also in the community within the yard where she lives with her mother. Matrifocality and female-headed households—topics often discussed in Caribbean literature—become essential subjects in Gloria’s quest for coming to terms with her upbringing,

as well as her challenges to the status quo in addressing the complexities of sexual and socio-economic issues through the lens of memory.

Bishop's novel helps to continue explore the idea that female characters serve as main conduits to a restoration of nature and that Caribbean authors create a discursive field wherein female characters commune with flora and undergo modes of resistance and healing. For instance, in Loretta Collins Klobah's interview with Bishop titled "Bringing It All Together: The Creative Process of Artist and Writer Jacqueline Bishop," Collins Klobah asks Bishop to expound on the importance of nature in her work, to which she responds:

[I]n my work nature is also supremely grounding—a source of beauty, a healthy, healing balm that connects one to the ancestors, those partially-known heritage stories, settling and unsettling places of memory, a means of belonging, and subliminal and unconscious links between past and present. Nature is a source for mother culture and woman-strength, folkloric knowledge, and redemptive spiritual practices handed down and intuitively inherited from African or Taíno belief systems" (13).

In addition to nature, Bishop explores in her work the germinal richness of the female body, which frequently "is conflated with the landscape all around her" (13).⁴⁵

Though I chose to study fiction by Caribbean women and focused on female characters, it is worth reading male writers who write about healing. Many theorists and writers have dedicated their work to the study of women's discrimination and its roots in Caribbean male hegemony, but it has not been until more recent times that attention has been shifted to yet another minority group in the Caribbean: the homosexual or 'gay' community. Given the

⁴⁵ Collins Klobah, Loretta. "Bringing It All Together: The Creative Process of Artist and Writer Jacqueline Bishop." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: 2016, Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 8. <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol13/iss2/8>

hypermasculine nature of men in the region, homosexuality has been historically and legally proscribed if not condemned or frowned upon in many societal pockets of the Caribbean. In an effort to reverse that historically-entrenched discriminatory stance, writers such as H. Nigel Thomas (*Behind the Face of Winter*) and Kei Miller (*Fear of Stones and Other Stories*) have given in their respective fictions a voice to oft-oppressed homosexual men.

In *Behind the Face of Winter* (2001), diasporic writer H. Nigel Thomas deftly lays out ways by which Caribbean masculinity can break away from a simplistic view of masculinity, not only in terms of a macho hegemonic pattern, but also in terms of how that hegemony subordinates other male individuals at odds with the mentality that feeds it. Like Gloria in *The River Song*, Pedro Moore, recounts his early childhood and sees in retrospective the early beginnings of his search for identity. When he is five-year old, Pedro's mother leaves the country in hopes of attaining a better life. From this early stage in his life, his upbringing by his grandmother, encounters with other boys and men on Isabella Island, a fictional Caribbean island, as well as his experiences as a teenager in Canada, will all be factors eventually posing challenges to Pedro's identity quest. Pedro's coming-of-age narrative explores not only a young sensitive boy's transition from childhood to adulthood, but also all the rituals of macho hegemonic discourse and mentality he endures—including verbal and physical violence, conformity to peer pressure, the absence of positive male role models, and sexual (mis)education—that he somehow resists and survives, but not before such experiences leave their scars upon him. Thomas continues to explore the hardships gay men endure in his upcoming novel *Easily Fooled* to be published in April 2021.

In *Fear of Stones and Other Stories'* (2006) opening story "Walking on the Tiger Road," Kei Miller presents the life of gay Jamaican young man Mark returning home to his mother Mary for

the first time in ten years. In his hometown, rumors concerning his sexuality even when he was still just a child due to his effeminacy prompted his fearful mother Mary to make arrangements in the hope to protect him from physical danger: "I make him do sixth form in Kingston, and then college, just hoping that the distance would do him some good, make him start to behave like a proper man, and get him away from them no-good people round here who just want to destroy him, to take him down!" (6). But after being involved in an "act of buggery" that left him "bruised up," Mary decides to send him away to Miami. Feeling nostalgia for his home and mother, and experiencing the double discrimination of racism and homophobia, an emotionally bruised Mark returns home to find that his community has grown even more intolerant towards homosexuality.

Another story in Miller's collection, "The Fear of Stones," presents Gavin, a young boy who does not quite fit in school, nor at home with his grandmother who tries to shield him from becoming an outsider by teaching him the ground rules of 'manly' conduct. The threats and abuse that Caribbean homosexual men, such as Mark and Gavin face, and to be decried as social pariahs leave scars that call for an extension of a literary analysis of trauma and healing rehearsals in literature by and about men, as well as women.

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