

**Black Feminism in a Neoliberal World:
Resistance in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction**

Amber-louise Cora Lascelles

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Abstract

This thesis explores representations of black women's resistance portrayed in literature by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dionne Brand, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Edwidge Danticat and Taiye Selasi published between 1991—2018. I consider the ways their black women characters enact resistance to the economic, political and social structures of neoliberal capitalism which systematically constrain, oppress, exploit and even murder them. I develop a transnational black feminist way of reading which is applicable to the cross-border experiences within each text, and the affinities I see between the authors I consider. I am interested in the kinds of solidarity the authors imagine in their work, as well as the rapport and tensions between their distinctive literary renditions of black women's experiences. My outlook is transnational and global; however, resistance within local contexts remains fundamental. I explore the author's writing centrally by focusing on the literary articulation of the body, which both exposes constraint and complicity with, and performs and embodies different kinds of resistance to, neoliberal capitalist regimes. I argue that the texts expose the complex interrelation of neoliberalism, gender inequality and anti-black violence. Ultimately, I suggest that acts of resistance carried out by fictional black women become applicable and revolutionary to the way we live in the material world.

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Introduction

RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY! it says in huge block letters.

There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied.¹

— Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

These words precede the protagonist Tashi's death in Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). She is executed for killing the *tsunga*² M'Lissa who performed 'the ceremony' — female genital mutilation — resulting in her sister's death and her own physical debilitation and mental instability. In a mythic Africa of Walker's creation facing the threat of Christian missionary influence, Tashi's decision to undergo the initiation ceremony is intended to reaffirm her Olinkan tribal identity and womanhood. However, the ceremony is figured as a tool of patriarchal oppression which almost destroys the protagonist. Tashi resides in the US for most of the novel, and returns to Africa to sacrifice M'Lissa in the hope of releasing her mental burden. In Africa, she is tried and executed for murder. The women from her hometown, the fictional village of Olinka, holding the banner at her execution were 'warned they must not sing' as they stand opposite armed soldiers clutching their 'red-beribboned, closely swaddled babies'.³ They proceed to place their babies, who 'kick their naked legs, smile with pleasure, screech with terror, or occasionally wave', upon their shoulders or on top of their heads. Tashi sees the red cloth they wear and their children's freedom of expression as 'a protest and celebration the men threatening them do not even recognize'.⁴ These small acts of resistance symbolise that, moments before her death, Tashi is finally free from the crippling psychological stupors that plagued her since

¹ Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (London: Random House, 1992), p.264.

² *Tsunga* is the fictional title Walker gives to the Olinka village elder women who carry out the initiation ceremonies involving female genital mutilation. The Olinkas believe that, if left uncircumcised, women's sexual organs become an uncontrollable threat to the penis and therefore masculinity. Although fictional, this belief plays on the demonization of women's bodies present in many patriarchal interpretations of religions and traditions. See Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, p.112.

³ Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, p.263.

⁴ *Ibid.*

undergoing female genital mutilation. Walker's description of the women clothed in red with their young babies, alongside the protagonist's flight which represents her death, depicts an empowering moment which advocates black feminist solidarity and signifies hope for the next generation. Tashi's ultimate moment of resistance lies not in the act of killing M'Lissa, but in finding agency.

Possessing the Secret of Joy illuminates concerns which are aligned with the aim of this thesis: to discover, and to craft, specific iterations of black feminist solidarity through encounters with fictional representations of black women's lives⁵ and practices of resistance.⁶ Focusing on novels and poetry by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dionne Brand, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Edwidge Danticat and Taiye Selasi published between 1990 to 2018, I explore narratives based on black women characters that enact resistance to the political and social structures which constrain, oppress, exploit and even murder them. My methodology explores black feminist resistance through the prism of fiction because, I contend, it is an imaginative art form that centres and makes visible the experiences of fictional black women. As a researcher who identifies as a black woman, I understand deeply the significance of black women authors focalising their narratives on us. Their texts remain in conversation with, but are simultaneously untethered from, the limitations of the material world. Importantly, rebellions both overt and covert enacted by black women are a recurring phenomenon in the literature I explore.

I am specifically interested in how the aesthetic representation of black women's bodies in the contemporary literature I select communicates forms of agency, complicity, exploitation, violence and rebellion. Returning to Walker's novel, the protagonist Tashi exemplifies this complex rendition along corporeal and affective lines. Tracing the novel backwards, the opening words, 'I did not realize for a long time that I was dead',⁷ refer to her psyche as well as prophetically link to her execution. Tashi's distress is illustrated through her body, as we see in the haunting image of her 'slic[ing] rings, bloody

⁵ The black feminism I advocate is trans-inclusive. I recognise that the authors under study and their characters are cis-gendered which affords them a degree of privilege. There is certainly more scope to develop this project in terms of gender inclusivity.

⁶ Many scholars capitalise 'black' in their academic work. They make this choice to acknowledge that 'Black' is a racial identity, and therefore should be treated as a proper noun; to respect the politicised nature of 'Black' as a racialised category; and to linguistically assert humanity and agency. Whilst I understand the validity of its capitalisation, in the UK context (particularly in feminist work) 'Black' has at times referred to political Blackness: an umbrella term originating in the 1970s to refer to people of black and Asian descent organising together against racism. In the interests of clarity, I do not capitalise 'black' in this thesis.

⁷ Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, p.3.

bracelets, or chains, around her ankles’, yet her ‘feeling nothing’, suggesting an extreme bodily alienation.⁸ At the end of Walker’s novel, Tashi’s body no longer physically exists, suggesting a sense of freedom through death as the world ‘cracks open’ and she is released into flight. The cyclical form of the novel suggests closure but, at the same time, highlights an unresolved tension because its protagonist is only able to reach peace through death. Whilst Walker positions death as a kind of freedom because there are no alternative for Tashi, I seek to trouble this idea that death is a viable form of resistance. As black feminist scholar-activist Audre Lorde’s poetry advocates, survival is a political act.⁹ My thesis argues that, through fiction, alternatives are made possible for black women. Physical and psychological harm is repeatedly enacted onto black women’s bodies in the texts this thesis explores, and significantly, flight is also thematised in them. *Possessing*’s tragic ending leads me to ask: what kind of imaginative world is possible in which black women can not only exist, but thrive?

A second important contradiction in Walker’s novel which finds prescience with the concerns of this thesis is Tashi’s act of violence against a fellow Olinkan woman. M’Lissa’s murder disrupts the notion that cultural, racial and gender similarities lead to an easily reached sense of solidarity. I regard this tension as an opportunity to probe the notion of difference between black women further. Importantly, *Possessing* has been critiqued by Nigerian feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí for its ‘Western imperialist’ gaze which deploys ‘stock images and ideas about Africa’ and a ‘consanguineous’ assumption of commonality.¹⁰ I concur with Oyěwùmí’s assertion that Walker’s setting risks representing a flattened portrait of Africa imbued with stereotypes. One example is the description of a bare-breasted Tashi leaving her village on a donkey to embark on the initiation ceremony journey. She observes her environment, noting the ‘children, potbellied and with dying eyes, which made them look very wise [...] we had been stripped of everything but our black skins’.¹¹ Oyěwùmí’s critique rightly assumes a defensive position due to the Global North’s domination of narratives about Africa, but at times, she collapses Walker’s own views and experiences with those of her characters. If we pay careful

⁸ Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, p.49.

⁹ See Audre Lorde, ‘A Litany for Survival’ *Poetry Foundation* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival>> [accessed 19/09/2018].

¹⁰ Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003), p.160.

¹¹ Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, p.22–3.

and close attention to the contradictions and tensions within Walker's novel, we can discover a position that is multiplicitous and may even reach beyond the author's intentions. This is precisely why my methodology foregrounds difference between black women. I endeavour to create space for black women's perspectives outside of the dominant narrative of African American second-wave feminism, and to explore how black women characters might embody difference within a singular text, and between different ones, in order to create a productive heterogeneity. Difference, as represented in the fiction I explore, may be cultural, regional, or refer to class, sexuality or ability, suggesting there are important nuances between black women's experiences. When different black women are able to speak for themselves, we reach closer to the kind of powerful and productive solidarity carried out by the women portrayed by Walker who defiantly hold up the banner that demands resistance to the structures of patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism that continuously deny black women their humanity.

Walker's essentialising portrayal of African women could foreclose avenues for negotiating difference between black women if it did not also portray a turbulent kind of solidarity which serves to open up other routes. The conversation that takes place before Tashi kills M'Lissa, for example, is intriguing because each attempts to recognise and negotiate the ways their identities and actions are shaped by patriarchal Olinkan society on the one hand, and mutually deplore the encroaching influence of colonialism on the other. Tashi's and M'Lissa's deaths prompt another important question: what is at stake when black women resist? Importantly, the texts under study depict black women embroiled in a different political moment to Walker's. The onset and dominance of neoliberal capitalism characterises the environment navigated in the fiction I explore, and the questions raised in Walker's novel (set in a fictional African past) differ from the preoccupations of writers thematising a contemporary setting. The writers I am interested in portray black women negotiating a newly globalised world, wracked by the uneven forces of global capital. I will now briefly contextualise the roots of black women's resistance and outline the shifted milieu of the neoliberal capitalist world order so that I may situate my selected texts in the longer history of writing black women's resistance which continues to inflect the distinctive context of our neoliberal present.

Historicising Black Women's Resistance

Black women's resistance has a long history of global proportions. As Filomina Chioma Steady argues, 'for the majority of black women, liberation from sexual oppression has always been fused with liberation from other forms of oppression, namely slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism, poverty, illiteracy and disease.'¹² From Harriet Tubman's railroad escapes, to Nanny of the Maroon's guerrilla warfare against colonisers, to the British Black Panther's marches, black women's resistance responds to the urgency of particular historical moments yet it is always characterised, in Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande's terms, by 'a politics of liberation'.¹³ Black feminism, as they assert in *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (2019), is a 'revolutionary political action that imagines another world is possible beyond the plunder, exploitation and expropriation that are the bedrock of liberal democracies' in order to build a different way of 'seeing and being' which is a 'creative and dynamic production of thinking and living otherwise'.¹⁴ Their perspective is crucial because, as Hortense Spillers asserts, women racialised as black have been systematically excluded from definitions of 'the human'. In her influential essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' (1987), she argues that the enslaved black body was not considered bodily in the human sense and instead cast out as simply 'flesh', in all of its 'seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard'.¹⁵ Conceptualising black bodies as inhuman does not only apply to the context of slavery. It captures black women's exclusion from rights discourses, as well as the way we (here I include myself) are prohibited from what Hazel Carby refers to as 'the cult of true womanhood' because femininity has so often been presumed synonymous with whiteness.¹⁶ Spillers, however, sees an opportunity in 'this materialized scene of unprotected female flesh— of female flesh "ungendered"' which is placed 'out of the traditional symbolics of female gender'

¹² Ed. by Filomina Chioma Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Massachusetts: Schenkman Books, 1981), p.34.

¹³ Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande, *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), p.1.

¹⁴ Emejulu and Sobande, *To Exist is to Resist*, p.1.

¹⁵ Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), 64–81 (p.67).

¹⁶ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp.29–30.

[emphasis original].¹⁷ This ‘different social subject’, in Spiller’s view, ‘offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying’.¹⁸ The origins of black feminist resistance as a political stance, briefly outlined here, evidence black women across different national contexts and cultures organising regardless of their relegation to the margins. In this thesis I position black racialisation as a politicised, unifying and radical identity that challenges these very structures of exclusion and dehumanisation. Rather than seeking to displace or seize power, for black women that resist, blackness becomes an ontology essential to manifesting other ways of organising society— precisely because of its inhuman construction in hegemonic society.

Black feminist praxis, as outlined above, inspired the black feminist literary criticism to which my work is indebted and seeks to take forward. During the Civil Rights Movement in the US, predominantly female African American activists branched off to form their own political movement to address their gendered concerns, recognising the exploitive (to borrow bell hooks’ terms) white supremacist capitalist patriarchy¹⁹ as a fundamental source of their double-oppression.²⁰ On a national scale, African American women demanded a voice and fought for a space outside of black nationalist macho-sexism and beyond the race and class invisibility of mainstream second-wave, predominantly white, feminist movements. In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a prominent second-wave text focusing solely on the anxieties of white, suburban, middle-class women who were lacking economic autonomy and stifled in their roles as wives and mothers.²¹ Friedan exemplifies mainstream second-wave feminism’s almost exclusive concern with white, middle-class, heterosexual female progress, and her work was later aptly critiqued by bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre* (1984), which scrutinized Friedan’s ignorance to her privilege.²² In 1979 Michele Wallace published *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, a critical discussion of how black female

¹⁷ Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’, p.80.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ In *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: South End Press, 1981), bell hooks added the important extension ‘white supremacist’ to the phrase coined by Marxist feminist Zillah Eisenstein.

²⁰ See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (London: The Women’s Press, 1981), and Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982) for detailed overviews of the motivations, manifestos and goals of African American feminists during the second wave.

²¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963).

²² hooks, *Feminist Theory*, pp.1–3.

members of the Black Power movement were undervalued and oppressed by their male counterparts.²³ Many radical black feminists, like scholar and Black Panther activist Angela Davis, explicitly tied their feminist praxis to a politics of liberation grounded in Marxism and Leninism.²⁴ During this period, black women's political activism and written expression became fundamentally connected.²⁵ Black feminist scholars opposed the dominating social order, following the work taking place in women's movements led by groups like The Combahee River Collective, whose projects focused on abortion rights, domestic abuse, rape and health care.²⁶ Given these wider contexts, it is clear why the central concerns of black feminist literary criticism were rigorously political and insisted upon a necessarily anti-racist, anti-capitalist mode of reading. In the US in the 1970s and '80s, the work of Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith and British-born Hazel Carby was integral to establishing a black feminist way of reading which enabled black women writers to be understood and valued in a literary field dominated by white critics.²⁷ Literature has historically had an intimate relationship with black feminist resistance. Barbara Christian, for example, argues that in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978) black women character's bodies are inextricably bound to their material environments. In the same essay she reimagines Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grace Copeland* (1970) as a 'quilt of recurring motifs that are arranged, examined, and rearranged' to weave the non-linear fragments of black women's lives.²⁸ My thesis foregrounds the important legacy these black women critics shaped, but crucially, I acknowledge that this dominant narrative centred black women's experiences in the US, leaving little room to explore difference between black women both domestically and in an international frame.

²³ Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979).

²⁴ Davis, *Women Race and Class*, pp.10–11.

²⁵ Ed. by Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p.149.

²⁶ Ed. by Hull, Scott and Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, p.21.

²⁷ Significant titles include Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), Alice Walker's essay 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens' (1970), Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* (1980) and *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985), Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) and Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987).

²⁸ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985), p.85.

Seeing through the prism of difference is a vital part of the difficult work of solidarity, which is, in Chandra Talpale Mohanty's words, 'always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars / differences'.²⁹ I avoid defining 'black women' in an essentialising manner and pay close attention to multiplicity within identities. I argue that difference can cause the necessary division important for localising political and social demands, and is essential to the formation of the kinds of solidarity carrying the potential to create radical societal change. The authors under study exemplify difference, as they are influenced and shaped by their respective multicultural and classed social experiences. They also thematise difference in their fiction. Their rich descriptions of communication and contact between black women is the analytical material this thesis uses to reimagine and construct forms of solidarity in a contemporary context. The term 'intersectionality', coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, anchors the way I perceive difference between black women. Crenshaw argues that 'exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure.'³⁰ Intersectionality is central to my methodological approach because it addresses the overlapping and multiple ways black women experience oppression in order to 'sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.'³¹ Intersectionality is crucial for enacting a politics of solidarity.

I use the umbrella phrase 'black feminism' because of its radical political associations and cross-cultural potential. It is important, however, to acknowledge the multiplicity within black *feminisms*. In different contexts, especially across Africa, black women have rejected the association with Western whiteness and class privilege that the term 'feminism' carries and defined themselves as womanists,³² Stiwanists,³³ or in other terms that express the intersection between women's rights,

²⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003), p.7.

³⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140 (1989), 139–67 (p.140).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Womanism is a term coined during third-wave feminism which differentiates itself from feminism by emphasising African spirituality and solidarity across the African diaspora. Whilst Alice Walker popularised the term, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi was one of the first to define it: 'a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom', with 'the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing' at its core. See Ogunyemi, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English', *Signs*, 11 (1985), 63–80 (p.72).

³³ An acronym standing for social transformation including women in Africa, founded by Omolara Ogundipe-

racialisation and local concerns. In *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Hazel Carby highlights the danger of essentialising black women and argues that literary criticism should reflect multiplicity. For Carby, class differences between black women must be considered in any credible theory. The black feminism which this thesis espouses consequently pays careful attention to the nuances of locality and class. As I will explain further in due course, the authors have been selected because they empower an in-depth exploration of class difference in varying cultural contexts. One of my central concerns, then, is how these writers imagine we might build solidarity *across* (and despite) class and wealth privileges, but in a transnational, not strictly national, frame.

After its initial emergence in the US academy, black feminist literary criticism began expanding its focus upon national preoccupations to include pan-national and international perspectives. Much black feminist literary criticism in the 1970s and '80s was dominated by African American scholars and writers, a claim that Emejulu and Sobande support:

There is a constant tension within the Black diaspora of having Black American politics and culture dominate, with little reciprocal knowledge about the long history of anti-colonial struggles in Europe and against various European empires. Thus we read Angela Davis and Kwame Turé but less so Aimé Césaire and Gail Lewis. This lacuna matters greatly to how we think about Blackness, solidarity and resistance.³⁴

Because the black diaspora is vast and heterogenous, it is crucial to pay attention to different kinds of resistance across cultures. A broader engagement with black feminism in different contexts and national histories has emerged in the wake of the US academy's dominant narratives. One important early example is Filomina Chioma Steady's *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981), which argues for the necessity of feminism as a politics of liberation across Africa, the US, South America and the Caribbean. Published over twenty years later, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (2003) addresses the paternalism of Western feminists and considers the possibility of forming more beneficial alliances based on a reconstituted notion of solidarity, advocating a politics of 'sisterhood' based on difference rather than essentialism. Steady and

Leslie. Stiwanism proposes that African women's oppression must be resisted in the context of colonialism and neocolonialism which places African men at the top of the social structure. See Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 'Fighting Patriarchy in Nigerian Cultures Through Children's Literature', *CSCanada Studies in Literature and Language*, 10 (2015), 59–66 (p.61).

³⁴ Emejulu and Sobande, *To Exist is to Resist*, p.5.

Oyěwùmí evidence the continual expansion of the narrative of black feminisms and the necessity for women in Africa and its diaspora to work towards building a transnational politics. The gap between these two seminal publications shows that developing a new politics of solidarity which can reach across the North/South divide has constituted a long process of difficult work, and more recent publications like Emejulu and Sobande's *To Exist is to Resist* further evidence that black feminists are still attempting to build equitable transnational solidarities.

Carole Boyce-Davies' *Ngambika: Studies of African Women in Literature* (1986) and *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) exemplify the move towards a more expansive black feminist critique in the literary sphere. The former focuses on African women's fiction and poetry, and the latter on Caribbean women. They evidence the surge of critical engagement with African and Caribbean women's literature which, according to Alison Donnell, unfolded during the late 1980s and '90s.³⁵ Although the first major African women writers (including Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa and Grace Ogot) became established in the 1960s, feminist critiques of African writing did not become commonplace until the 1980s. I do not mean to suggest here that there were no women writers in Africa before this period, and those writing in indigenous African languages must also be acknowledged; notably, Lilith Kakaza, Victoria Swartbooi and Violet Dube published novels and short stories between 1900–1950.³⁶ Rather, *Ngambika* outlines the surge of African women publishing novels and the boom period in criticism accompanying it.³⁷ In the Caribbean, Erna Brodber, Merle Collins, Jamaica Kincaid, Olive Senior and others were part of a generation of women publishing novels and poetry in the 1970s and '80s, and scholars responded with a wave of criticism during the early to mid-1990s. The work of Joan Anim-Addo, Carole Boyce-Davies, Carolyn Cooper, Evelyn O'Callaghan, 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, to name but a few, reflects that in the Anglophone and

³⁵ Alison Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.131.

³⁶ See Carole Boyce-Davies' and Elaine Savory Fido's chapter 'African Women Writers: Towards a Literary History' in *Twentieth Century African Literatures*, ed. by Oyekan Owomoyela (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp.311–46.

³⁷ Ed. by Carole Boyce-Davies and Anne Adams Grave, *Ngambika: Studies of African Women in Literature* (New Jersey: African World Press, 1986), p.1.

Francophone Caribbean and across Africa, literature by women³⁸ was being published and read more widely.³⁹ The focus of these critics, however, remained somewhat limited to national, pan-national and occasionally international contexts. A text that transgresses this trend is Susheila Nasta's *Motherlands* (1991), an edited collection of literary criticism focused on African, Caribbean and South Asian women's writing. Nasta's text was one of the first of its kind to broker transnational cultural connections by exploring commonalities between women writers as well as differences. My readings of fictional texts in this thesis intervenes in the field of black feminist literary criticism by fostering what I name a transnational black feminist way of reading. Politically grounded in black feminist theory, my reading practice pays attention to the regional, historical and material particulars of the context in which each text is set, whilst at the same time rooting my thinking in an expansive vision of blackness that reaches across the diaspora.

As this thesis will demonstrate, rapid globalisation during and since the 1990s has increased mobility but deepened inequality. Black, diasporic, transnational perspectives with a global outlook are especially crucial because the context in which the authors write has distinctively shifted. The world's political, economic and social contours are defined by the system known as neoliberal capitalism. I now turn to outline this context in order to situate this thesis's exploration of black women's writing within this wider milieu.

Neoliberal Capitalism and Systematic Underdevelopment

The title of my thesis directly addresses the threat to black women's livelihoods in the contemporary moment: neoliberal capitalism. In its current iteration, unsustainable capitalist production is widely understood as a threat to the planet and the future of humanity. For decades, anti-racist feminist scholar-

³⁸ Generally, only certain women's voices were heard across the Caribbean and Africa: cis-gendered, heterosexual women.

³⁹ See ed. Joan Anim-Addo, *Framing the Word: Gender and Genre in Caribbean Women's Writing* (London: Whiting & Birch, 1996), Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993), Evelyn O'Callaghan, *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), ed. by Carole Boyce-Davies and 'Młara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Moving Beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing* (London: Pluto Press, 1995) and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, 'Decolonizing Feminism: The Homegrown Roots of Caribbean Feminism' in *Daughters of Caliban: Essays on 20th Century Caribbean Women*, ed. by Consuelo López Springfield (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp.3–17.

activists like Angela Davis, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Vandana Shiva have recognised that capitalism has endangered the lives of poorer women of colour since its inception. Eric Williams argued in *Capitalism & Slavery* (1964) that the forced and cheap labour extracted from the bodies of people of colour (and, to a lesser extent, poor whites) was fundamental to capitalist expansion.⁴⁰ In *Women, Race and Class* (1981), Angela Davis extended this Marxist-inspired critique in a gendered direction, focusing on the way black female slaves were punished and exploited in ways exclusively tied to their femininity although their profitable labour was valued as genderless.⁴¹ In a more contemporary context, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva highlight local struggles led by women of colour to challenge the ecological destruction wrought by corporations, from logging in the Himalayas to deforestation in Ecuador, to confirm that ‘many women, worldwide, felt the same anger and anxiety, and the same sense of responsibility to preserve the bases of life, and to end its destruction’.⁴² Chandra Talpade Mohanty similarly highlights the exploitation of ‘Third World women workers’ under capitalist globalisation and charts the solidarity formed between them across nation-state borders.⁴³ Black women, therefore, face specific conditions which fuel the need to organise against neoliberal capitalist exploitation.

Neoliberal capitalism is a world-system that functions to maintain and increase global inequality. Lisa Duggan defines neoliberalism as a brand name for the ‘pro-corporate, “free market”, anti-“big government” rhetoric’⁴⁴ that has shaped Western national policy and dominated international financial institutions since the 1980s. David Harvey argues that the period between 1978–80 heralded the beginning of neoliberalism as it was ‘a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history’.⁴⁵ As Harvey asserts, governments implemented financial regimes with the aim to combat the stagnating economies in the Global North. This economic revolution can be mapped across specific locations, with Britain, China and the United States identified as key counterpoints. Whilst China aimed to accelerate wealth by developing into a capitalist economy, in Britain Margaret Thatcher

⁴⁰ Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1964), pp.5–7.

⁴¹ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p.5.

⁴² Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), p.3.

⁴³ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, pp.139–68.

⁴⁴ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p.10.

⁴⁵ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.1.

was elected, crushing unions to undermine labour-power and, in turn, curtail a stagnating economy.⁴⁶ In 1980, the newly elected US president Ronald Reagan developed policies ‘to curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage’.⁴⁷ Democratic welfare states embraced deregulation and privatisation, whether willingly or due to international pressures.⁴⁸ Neoliberalism became hegemonic globally as governments across the North introduced policies designed to reinvigorate flailing capital accumulation, opening up markets. Its origins can be traced back to a gathering, in 1947, of a group of economists, philosophers, and historians known as the Mont Pelerin Society.⁴⁹ According to Jodi Dean, these champions of neoliberal economics were committed to ‘the role of competitive markets in securing freedom’ and ‘vehemently opposed both Marxist theories of centralized state planning and Keynesian policies of state intervention in the economy’.⁵⁰ The regime is described as ‘liberal’ because of the trade ‘freedoms’ encouraged in the global free market, which are as detrimental to the South as they are beneficial to the North. Dean argues that the construction of ‘freedom’ inherent to the belief in the neoliberal economy is a fantasy:

In neoliberal ideology, the fantasy of free trade covers over persistent market failure, structural inequalities, the prominence of monopolies, the privilege of no-bid contracts, the violence of privatization, and the redistribution of wealth to the ‘have mores’.⁵¹

The fallacy of free trade allows capital to accumulate unevenly under the naturalised guise of market demand. During the transition period into neoliberalism, in order to boost the production of capital and ensure profits would continue to rise, the IMF and the World Bank encouraged underdeveloped countries to open their borders to trade and export primary commodities in return for the development loans they needed.⁵² Raw materials are extracted, for a cheap price, by economically stronger countries that have the infrastructure to manufacture them into more valuable goods that can be traded for a higher

⁴⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.3.

⁴⁹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.20.

⁵⁰ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (London: Duke University Press, 2009), p.52.

⁵¹ Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p.56.

⁵² Ed. by Francis Adams, Satya Dev Gupta and Kidane Mengisteab, *Globalisation and the Dilemmas of the State in the South* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p.3.

price. Neoliberal free trade, consequently, caused a global ripple effect which has led to further exploitation of the South's natural resources through extraction.

Immanuel Wallerstein outlines how neoliberal processes leave poorer countries 'underdeveloped' and trapped within a systematic cycle of poverty. He historicises world-systems thought, which emerged in the 1970s, to conceptualise the world as bound to a global capitalist economic system. According to him, world-systems deals with 'a spatial/temporal zone which cuts across many political and cultural units, one that represents an integrated zone of activity and institutions which obey certain systemic rules', a central rule being that 'the modern world-economy was a capitalist world-economy — not the first world-economy ever but the first world-economy to survive as such for a long period and thrive'.⁵³ His archetype of a 'core-periphery' economic process underlines how underdevelopment is reproduced:

A capitalist world-economy was said to be marked by an axial division of labor between core-like production processes and peripheral production processes, which resulted in an unequal exchange favoring those involved in core-like production processes [...] the ultimate result of exchange between core and peripheral products was a flow of surplus value [...] to those states that had a large number of core-like processes.⁵⁴

Wallerstein's summary of the economic unevenness characterised by a flow of surplus value surging to specific 'cores' is vital for understanding the infrastructures of the environments depicted in the fiction I explore. Highlighting its firm grounding in the era of globalisation, some advocates of world-systems theory, like Sharae Deckard, argue that the influence of US hegemony (closely followed by China) and neoimperialism cannot always be accounted for within the parameters of postcolonial studies due to its continuing emphasis on the colony.⁵⁵ Differently to Wallerstein and other advocates of world-systems theory, however, I argue that the fiction I explore in this thesis often foregrounds local yet transnationally connected domains as carrying the most potential to create radical change, and not necessarily the global arena.⁵⁶ I advocate, then, for a more expansive critique than the parameters of

⁵³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp.16–18.

⁵⁴ Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis*, p.17.

⁵⁵ See Sharae Deckard, "'Always Returning from It': Neoliberal Capitalism, Retrospect, and Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*", *CounterText*, 4 (2018), 169–91 (p.175).

⁵⁶ See Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp.1–48.

both world-systems analysis and postcolonial studies permit, taking into account local particularities but remaining attuned to inequality and unevenness on a global scale.

In Jodi Dean's words, neoliberalism is an all-encompassing 'philosophy' that has redefined 'social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations'.⁵⁷ Therefore, the way neoliberalism seeps into and shapes our lives warrants further investigation within the exploratory space of literary aesthetics. The period during which neoliberal capitalism took root defines the timeframe of the literature selected which I name contemporary, spanning 1991 until 2018. This study focuses specifically on literature published after 1990 because beyond this key turning point, neoliberal orthodoxy became fully embedded within governments and shaped global political and economic relations between the North and the South. The early 1990s marks a period of global instability. In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, apartheid was formally abolished in South Africa, and authoritarian regimes were crumbling in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia.⁵⁸ The sheer scale of this extraordinary transition has been documented in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). As she states, 'within a few years it seemed as if half the world was in a period of "extraordinary politics", or "in transition", as liberated countries came to be called in the nineties — suspended in an existential in-betweenness of past and future.'⁵⁹ However, the opportunity to create a more socially just, democratic world has been short-lived. In the face of global change, and under the powerful influence of financial centres, governments have taken the opportunity to turn to a new neoliberal world order. The consequences of neoliberalism for social justice movements, and for black women in particular, as we will now see, have been dire.

Feminism's 'Dangerous Liaison'

The twenty-first century has witnessed a necessary resurgence in black feminist activism. Brazilian politician Marielle Franco spoke out against state-sanctioned anti-blackness, the oppression of women of colour and LGBTQ+ rights, yet her advocating for radical reforms in politics in Brazil led to her tragic assassination in 2018. In the UK, Sisters Uncut formed in 2014 to organise against cuts to

⁵⁷ Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, p.51.

⁵⁸ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), pp.181–2.

⁵⁹ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, p.182.

women's refuges and government-funded domestic violence services during times of austerity. Police brutality against those racialised as black in the US has been exposed by the rise of technology and social media, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement was founded in 2013 by three black women. In the digital and social media sphere, black women have asserted their agency, forming grassroots organisations and resisting against the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that neoliberalism has bolstered. I use these prominent examples here (which are by no means exhaustive) to indicate a broader and wider shift which has seen black women across the Global South and North enacting resistance on smaller local and larger transnational scales as neoliberalism has entrenched and increased hierarchies of race, gender and privilege.

Yet, such crucial counterpoints of resistance must now rise to a new challenge. Alongside this resurgence in black feminist activism, feminist ideology has been worryingly co-opted by regimes of capitalist consumption and steered away from incisive and radical critiques. At a Dior fashion show in September 2016, models wore t-shirts with the words 'WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS' emblazoned across them.⁶⁰ This phrase was taken from Chimamanda Ngozi's Adichie's TED talk⁶¹ of the same name, which has received 5.6 million views at the time of writing. Adichie's talk, which I also mention in chapter two, highlights one aspect of feminist thought – the equality of the sexes – and makes reference to her Nigerian culture whilst phrasing her speech in a manner that appealed to a mass audience. Adichie's message went viral, and she is now, I argue, one of the spokespeople for a particular kind of popular culture feminism that is readily consumed in the form of fashion clothing and aesthetics, visual and digital media, and popular literature.⁶² The commodification of Adichie's talk is an example of the way a neoliberal world-system operates to obscure the radical doctrines of black feminism. As David Harvey asserts, 'to presume that markets and market signals can best determine all allocative

⁶⁰ Rachel Lubitz, 'Dior is selling a cotton "We Should All Be Feminists" T-shirt. It's \$710.' *MIC*, 16 March 2017, <<https://www.mic.com/articles/171332/dior-is-selling-a-cotton-we-should-all-be-feminists-t-shirt-it-s-710>> [accessed 10/11/2019].

⁶¹ TED is the acronym for Technology, Entertainment, Design, an online platform promoting emerging experts advocating new perspectives and innovative ideas.

⁶² Adichie's words were echoed in Beyoncé's single of the same year, 'Flawless'. Beyoncé Knowles, 'Beyoncé - ***Flawless ft. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie' *YouTube*, 24 November 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyuUWOnS9BY>> [accessed 20/10/2017].

decisions is to presume that everything can in principle be treated as a commodity.⁶³ Furthermore, as Immanuel Wallerstein argues, endless accumulation under capitalism constantly needs to expand its frontiers.⁶⁴ In this sense, even ideology can be readily commodified. As neoliberalism has advanced, movements subjected to attack in the US, according to Lisa Duggan, have included second-wave feminism and the anti-racist movements Civil Rights and Black Power.⁶⁵ Duggan argues that under neoliberalism, progressive left movements have been aggressively dismantled, perceived as oppositional because they advocate the downward redistribution of social power and wealth. In their place, a ‘stripped-down, nonredistributive form of “equality” designed for global consumption’ has become ubiquitous.⁶⁶ This link between feminism and capitalism is not new, but it has become more insidious. Mohanty highlights the problematic ‘consumerist (protocapitalist) feminism’ concerned with “‘women’s advancement” up the corporate and nation-state ladder’.⁶⁷ In agreement with Duggan, Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein assert that the second wave’s fight for ‘recognition’ corresponded with the neoliberal elite’s desire to ‘repress all memory of social egalitarianism’,⁶⁸ resulting in the labour force being expanded to include more women workers and drive the uneven accumulation of wealth on a global scale. Hereby feminisms’ ‘dangerous liaison’⁶⁹ with capitalism takes root.

The subtle difference I wish to establish in the case of Adichie’s TED talk, however, is that Adichie does not necessarily need to explicitly call for women to be empowered economically for her message to be made beneficial to capitalism. During the second wave, those who espoused and practiced the doctrines of feminism were labelled outcasts and sometimes criminalised, but in the twenty-first century neoliberal capitalism has warped feminism and other calls for social change into problems that can be alleviated through yet more capitalist consumption. Hence, once-radical feminist demands are reconstructed and morph into neatly packaged products to be bought, consumed, and circulated

⁶³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p.165.

⁶⁴ Wallerstein, *World Systems Analysis*, p.2.

⁶⁵ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, p.9.

⁶⁶ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, xii.

⁶⁷ Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, p.7.

⁶⁸ Nancy Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, *New Left Review*, 56 (2009), 97–117 (p.109).

⁶⁹ See Hester Eisenstein, ‘A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization’, *Science & Society*, 69 (2005), 487–518.

worldwide. Forms of black feminist resistance, then, must be acutely aware of the ways radical politics can be subsumed into capitalist modes of production.

Whilst the neoliberalisation of feminism has been critiqued by scholars like Duggan, Fraser and Eisenstein, little can be found about the specifics of race within their arguments and none address *black* feminism specifically. In a world where black women are readily commodified into archetypes to be consumed by a mass audience,⁷⁰ the potential hijacking of a social movement with such a long history of resistance is alarming. My thesis seeks to begin part of the necessary work to expose neoliberalism and its pernicious interaction with black feminism by exploring the ways black women in fictional worlds are implicated within regimes of capital. In the following chapters I offer an original contribution to black feminist scholarship by interrogating how the characters within the texts I analyse might exhibit complicity with, or resistance to, the opportunities offered or privations caused by neoliberal capitalism. As I have established, black feminist thought is experiencing an important resurgence in confluence with the aforementioned rise of black feminist activism; yet, not much of this work is happening explicitly in literary criticism. Emejulu's and Sobande's *To Exist is to Resist* gives insight into the different ways black women are currently organising, locally and transnationally, in a volatile political climate of state austerity, the rise of far-right political support, and anti-migrant sentiment. This work, and others, shows that black feminist activism and praxis is experiencing a crucial revival. In the past 10 years in particular, more black women writers across Africa and its diasporas have received mainstream attention, while in 2019 Bernardine Evaristo became the first black woman to win The Booker Prize. There has been a surge in literary production and black feminist activism across the African diaspora and within Africa, and subsequent engagement with this work within the academy is beginning to emerge.⁷¹ This thesis therefore fills a lacuna in the re-emerging critical sphere

⁷⁰ As Carolyn West argues, damaging stereotypes attached to black women, like 'Mammy', 'Jezebel' or 'Sapphire', are widely circulated and made profitable in popular entertainment culture. Carolyn West, 'Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their Homegirls: Developing an "Oppositional Gaze" Toward the Images of Black Women' in eds. Joan Chrisler, Carla Golden and Patricia Rozee, *Lectures on the Psychology of Women* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), pp.286–99.

⁷¹ During the past 10 years, although there have been many significant journal articles and some recent journal special issues, there have been few edited collections or monographs focusing exclusively on a black feminist critique of literature. For examples, see *Meridians, African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* and *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (special issue on black British women's writing forthcoming 2020).

of black feminism in the context of neoliberal capitalism by re-emphasising *literary* production and a newly transnational cultural politics that foregrounds intersectionality — one inferred by my critical engagement with the work of a range of contemporary writers drawn from diverse yet intersecting locations.

In my analysis, I define ‘resistance’ as a praxis of black feminist resistance as outlined in the previous section —rebellious and organising against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, to repeat bell hooks’ phrase. Resistance, which could range from guerrilla armies of enslaved people during the 19th century Haitian revolution to the Vodou art produced by Haitian artists during the 20th century,⁷² manifests differently according to particular manifestations of political, economic and colonial tensions dependent on nation or locality. The kind of resistance enacted through literature which I outline in this thesis merits further clarification. One foundational text in postcolonial criticism, Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987), exemplifies the radical roots of postcolonial studies and aids me in defining the specific form of literary resistance in which I am interested. Harlow draws attention to ‘a particular category of literature that emerged significantly as part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East’ which she terms ‘*resistance literature*’ [emphasis original].⁷³ The kind of resistance Harlow refers to echoes Frantz Fanon’s call for collective national resistance against colonial rule.⁷⁴ The rigorously anti-colonial work which her text undertakes emphasises the literature’s *likeness* to ‘the resistance and national liberation movements which it reflects and *in which it can be said to participate*’ [emphasis own].⁷⁵ I similarly argue that there exists a fundamental link between literature and a politics of resistance, albeit in the distinctly neoliberal climate I have outlined. Differently to Harlow, however, I move away from nationalism as the central arena of radical political struggle because neoliberal exploitation is legitimised at a global and transnational level. In order for literary texts to contribute to imagining how

⁷² The Saint Soleil art movement, founded by Louisiane Saint Fleurant, was subversive because it preserved the Vodou religion that was demonised during colonial rule. Saint Soleil artists would paint during spirit possession by Vodou deities.

⁷³ Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1987), xvii.

⁷⁴ See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p.30.

⁷⁵ Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, xvi.

we resist this global regime, as we will see in the following section, transnational connections rooted in local particularity are crucial.

Reimagining Transnational Black Feminist Solidarity

I have established that black feminist scholars carved out a literary-critical tradition, taking shape largely in the US and expanding to international and pan-national contexts across Africa, the Caribbean and their diasporas. Differently to internationalism, transnationalism emphasises the transitory nature of cross-border connections and allows more space for cross-cultural communication. In a globalised, post-internet world where mobility is more accessible (for some) and communication travels faster, transnationalism is a fluid and mobile term appropriate for capturing the increasingly blurred lines between specific national contexts. My transnational approach reaches outside of and beyond geographies and nation boundaries without neglecting the local particularities usually more closely associated with nationalism.

Nationalism and transnationalism have been much debated amongst scholars of postcolonial literature, often leading to bifurcated perspectives. For Neil Lazarus, capitalism is a ‘universal’ system and the only credible way to theorise ‘modernity’.⁷⁶ Lazarus perceives transnationalism as singularly implicated with the neocolonial exploitation of labour from the workers of formerly colonised nations within the global market.⁷⁷ His Marxist perspective heralds nationalism as a primary form of anti-colonial resistance, but as I argue, it is not the *only* form. My venture beyond national borders within and across the fiction I explore reveals complex webs of connection that negate this tendency to define formerly colonised places by their colonial pasts, and which recognise important political opportunities for women. Nationalism can often be masculinist and only symbolically inclusive of women. As feminist scholar Anikó Imre argues:

it has been well established that the *we* of nationalism implies a homosocial form of male bonding that includes women only symbolically, most prominently in the trope of the mother. [...] nationalist discourses are

⁷⁶ Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.16.

⁷⁷ Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*, p.34–6.

especially eager to reassert the ‘natural’ division of labour between the sexes and to relegate women to traditional reproductive roles.⁷⁸

The kind of nationalism outlined by Imre, serving to marginalise and exploit women, is echoed in some male-authored postcolonial novels. The way nationalism is narrowly conceived by critics like Lazarus, in conjunction with this masculinist bias, shows the limits of nationalism. Conventional nationalism appears to uphold a chauvinist imaginary. This is of course made further complex once we also consider race. Black feminist scholar Shirley Anne Tate draws attention to the historic and contemporary exclusion of Black British women’s bodies from ‘the UK’s national social skin’.⁷⁹ The fiction my project explores, as we will see across my chapters, exposes and further complicates the masculinist and racist limits of nationalism.

Elleke Boehmer’s scholarship, differently to Lazarus’, makes more complex the substance and efficacy of nationalism, pointing out its transnational conditions of possibility. Focusing on the period between 1890 and 1920, an era she defines as significant due to the increasingly cross-cultural nature of anti-colonial resistance movements, she argues in *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial 1890-1920* (2002) that:

Especially under the difficult, beleaguered conditions of emergent colonial resistance, oppositional nationalist, proto-nationalist, and anti-colonial movements learn from one another as well as drawing from their own internal political and cultural resources or the political nature of their oppressors. Looked at from this perspective, anti-colonial nationalism emerges as an allusive, cross-cultural, intertextual, or interdiscursive phenomenon, strung across borders of different descriptions as well as staked out within geopolitical boundaries.⁸⁰

Boehmer highlights the currents of exchange that allowed citizens within different nations to learn from one another and form strategies to oppose colonial rule. Here anti-colonial nationalism is not confined to borders, but reaches out and is ‘strung’ like a web, suggesting that different nations did indeed merge and influence one another to organise amidst European colonial expansion. This conceptualisation of

⁷⁸ Anikó Imre, ‘Lesbian Nationalism’, *SIGNS: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33 (2008), 255–82 (p.255).

⁷⁹ Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Women’s Bodies and the Nation: Race, Gender and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.7.

⁸⁰ Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial 1890-1920: Resistance in Interaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.3.

nationalism emphasises productive interactions across cultures without neglecting local particulars, as Boehmer's study later clarifies.⁸¹

Furthermore, Boehmer argues that a largely overlooked aspect of nationalist postcolonial movements is the fluid “‘contact zone’” of cultural and political exchange⁸² created *between* so-called peripheries; an interaction which creates a potential zone of what she refers to as cross-national resistance and cultural and political change. Here she repurposes the ‘contact zone’ which, as Mary Louise Pratt previously argued, was always uneven and serves to expose the ‘highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination’⁸³ between Europe and its colonies. But, as Boehmer's work reminds us, contact zones are not just spaces where dominance is inevitably performed; within this space between borders, interactions can create thriving forms of resistance against Global North dominance and exploitation. My sense of the term ‘transnational’ draws upon this longer history of ‘resistance in interaction’ that Boehmer highlights, but I recognise the transformed political, cultural and technological conditions of the present, where such ‘resistance in interaction’ is not tied so firmly to a nationalist agenda. The cross-border contact zone Boehmer attends to allows us to imagine the political potential of transnational contact in the neoliberal present for black women. In this fluid and transitive space, not as restricted by geographical distance or national agendas, there lies the potential to reimagine and recreate. Overall, I conceive transnationalism as more productive than nationalism in the current moment.

Historically, some well-known revolutionary black feminists have practised their activism transnationally, especially across Europe and the Caribbean. Audre Lorde inspired an Afro-German feminist movement during the time she spent in Berlin⁸⁴ and often advocated for transnational black feminist praxis. In a 1988 interview Lorde stated that ‘an international network is absolutely essential, and I think it is in the process of being born.’⁸⁵ Una Marson founded women's rights organisations and

⁸¹ Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial*, p.10.

⁸² Boehmer, *Empire, the National and the Postcolonial*, p.2.

⁸³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.4.

⁸⁴ Emejulu and Sobande, *To Exist is to Resist*, p.83.

⁸⁵ Ed. by Boyce-Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie, *International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing*, xv.

campaigns across Jamaica, Britain and Ethiopia,⁸⁶ and both Amy Ashwood Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey worked to develop a feminist Pan-African consciousness.⁸⁷ These examples of black feminists operating across borders emphasise the syncretic nature of black women's oppression and simultaneously allow room to address cultural and contextual difference. Their approaches have been consolidated in theories of transnational feminism. Nira Yuval-Davis' *Gender & Nation* (1997), as one example, explores the idea of 'transversal politics' coined by Italian feminists, arguing that it facilitates communication between feminists from diverse, potentially culturally conflicting backgrounds, allowing them to remain conscious of not reproducing the power dynamics they sought to oppose.⁸⁸ Yuval-Davis' notion of 'transversal politics' is a useful counterpoint from which to imagine its manifestation in literary representation, in the more specific context of solidarity between black women in the neoliberal era. Chandra Talpade Mohanty also puts forth a convincing example of how to build a politics of solidarity, using Marxist theory to build solidarity across labour divisions.⁸⁹ Taking inspiration from Boehmer's, Mohanty's and Yuval-Davis' scholarship, then, transnationalism is considered productive in my study due to the dynamic cross-cultural connections it facilitates which resist the determining dominance of neocolonial and neoimperial influence, and for its potential to foster a black feminist solidarity functioning in confluence *with* difference.

A literary black feminist resistance which is transnational in its reach is an emerging approach in postcolonial and diaspora studies. At present, there are few critical studies which adopt a transnational, explicitly black feminist approach to literature, but some important works are worth glossing here.⁹⁰ Most recently, Libe García Zarranz's *Transcanadian Feminist Fictions* (2017) considers an array of diasporic Canadian writers to argue that their 'cross-border assemblages open up a space where an alternative onto-epistemological ethic can be formulated.'⁹¹ Zarranz foregrounds

⁸⁶ See Delia Jarret Macauley, *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-1965* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

⁸⁷ Imaobong D. Umoren, 'This is the Age of Woman': Black Feminism and Black Internationalism in the Works of Una Marson, 1928-1938', *History of Women in the Americas*, 1 (2013), 50-73 (p.56).

⁸⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.129.

⁸⁹ See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp.2-5.

⁹⁰ See, also, ed. by Emilia María Durán-Almarza and Esther Álvarez López, *Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)Gendering Literature and Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

⁹¹ Libe García Zarranz, *Transcanadian Feminist Fictions: New Cross-Border Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), p.18.

corporeality to forge alliances between posthumanism and other strands of materialist feminism in order to ‘creatively explore how the failed orientations of those bodies that refuse to be pulled by economic neoliberalism, compulsory heterosexuality, or racial imperialism can become vehicles for alternative ethical routes’.⁹² Ultimately, she argues that her selected writers (including Dionne Brand) form ‘coalition, community-based activism, and social justice’ through their fiction.⁹³ Samantha Pinto’s *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (2013) carries out rigorous, feminist readings of fiction of the black diaspora to reveal how aesthetics act as literary expressions of material realities. Pinto’s title refers to Paul Gilroy’s foundational *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which maps the transformative potential within cross-cultural pan-African, diasporic connections, defining ‘the Black Atlantic’ as an overlooked but vital part of global history to argue that the epistemologies implicated with transnational cross-cultural links and interactions are fundamental to intellectual thought. Gilroy’s study, however, focuses largely on the cultural production and intellectual lives of men across the African diaspora. The texts Pinto explores together ‘begin to map the territory of “difficult diasporas”, the aesthetic and critical terrains that imagine the feminist potential for occupying diaspora’s very form itself’ in which diaspora becomes much more than a physical movement across borders, transforming into a ‘set of aesthetic and interpretive strategies.’⁹⁴ She is highly attuned to each writer’s use of literary form to create radical spaces of possibility connected to, yet lying beyond, the material realm.

Two further examples exploring black feminism, transnationalism and globalisation in fiction can be found in the 2013 issue of *Meridians*. Vanita Reddy’s article offers an analysis of beauty as cultural capital in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories, focusing on the intersections between capitalism, feminism, and racialised bodies. She engages with the ways in which transnational migrancy and exoticised global travel have shifted the perception of beauty to argue that ‘in their attachment of Indian female beauty to transnational mobility, Lahiri’s stories demonstrate continuity with the signs of elite cosmopolitanism that proliferate within transnational cultural flows of Indian female beauty’ and at the

⁹² Zarranz, *TransCanadian Feminist Fictions*, p.7.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p.11

same time ‘mobilize Indian feminine beauty’s affects in order to critique contemporary political and economic processes of globalization, migration, and travel that celebrate such rootless globality.’⁹⁵ Lastly, Sheila Lloyd’s article explores three literary, poetic and staged representations of Sara Baartman (a Khoekhoe woman transported, in 1810, from South Africa to London and exhibited to the public as the ‘Hottentot Venus’) written by African American women, arguing that such aesthetic representations are crucial to constructing transnational feminist visions of solidarity and social justice.⁹⁶ For Lloyd, Baartman is situated in these texts as an ‘ineluctably transnational figure’ who represents resistance through her heterogenous manifestations, and, across all of the texts Lloyd studies, occupies and embodies a nuanced array of locations and experiences.⁹⁷ I find her argument compelling because of the interrogation of each writer’s use of an imagined Baartman. Black women writers bound up with contemporary circuits of neoliberal capitalism, according to Lloyd, both creatively reinscribe Baartman as a historical figure with an ancestral connection to black feminism, and through their texts ‘represent a feminist cultural activism that challenges the hegemonic forms of neoliberalism and transnational market relations’ in the contemporary moment.⁹⁸ These significant works, published during the past ten years, show a burgeoning critical field engaging with feminism, race, transnationalism and fiction. Space remains, however, to focus more exclusively on black racialisation in conjunction with neoliberal socioeconomic and political contexts — a lacuna I identify within current scholarship which my thesis addresses.

A common theme across Zarranz’, Pinto’s, Reddy’s and Lloyd’s work is the literary representation of bodies. These critics similarly suggest that aesthetic representations of bodies transform them into vehicles that elucidate alternative ways of existing and living. It is necessary now to flesh out the kind of literary body I refer to in this thesis by briefly contextualising some important ideas concerning embodiment.

⁹⁵ Vanita Reddy, ‘Jhumpa Lahiri’s Feminist Cosmopolitics and the Transnational Beauty Assemblage’, *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 11 (2013), 29–59 (p.54).

⁹⁶ Sheila Lloyd, ‘Sara Baartman and the “Inclusive Exclusions” of Neoliberalism’, *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, 11 (2013), 212–37 (p.213).

⁹⁷ Lloyd, ‘Sara Baartman and the “Inclusive Exclusions” of Neoliberalism’, p.231.

⁹⁸ Lloyd, ‘Sara Baartman and the “Inclusive Exclusions” of Neoliberalism’, p.214.

Corporeal Resistance: A Possible New Politics

The violence and exploitation of neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy is often enacted upon and through the expendability of racialised, gendered, and abject bodies. The legacy of black women's resistance I outlined earlier is, necessarily then, also closely tied to the body. But Hortense Spillers' argument, as previously stated, that enslaved black women's bodies were rendered 'female flesh "ungendered"' does not apply in quite the same sense to contemporary modes of exploitation under neoliberal capitalism, even though the legacy of chattel slavery and colonialism still lingers. Building upon Michel Foucault's 'biopolitics' concept, Achille Mbembe coined the term 'necropolitics' as an ideology that exposes how the power to decide which bodies live and which die is the basis upon which Western modernity, democracy and sovereignty is built:

Operating on the basis of a split between the living and the dead, such a power defines itself in relation to a biological field—which it takes control of and vests itself in. This control presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others. This is what Foucault labels with the (at first sight familiar) term *racism*. [...] After all, more so than class-thinking (the ideology that defines history as an economic struggle of classes), race has been the ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice, especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples.⁹⁹

Mbembe highlights a 'biological caesura' constructed to *other* the black or brown body, revealing how deeply embedded racialised societal structuring remains. His argument echoes Foucault here, who asserts that 'the first function of racism' is 'to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower'.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to Marxist perspectives, Mbembe foregrounds race, rather than solely class, as the shadowy marker that legitimises domination and exploitation. He unravels just how crucial bodies are to the construction of otherness, and how otherness is necessary for the state to maintain sovereignty under the guise of protection against a common enemy. The extract above reveals how and why the bodies of people racialised as black or brown remain coded with otherness in the afterlife of chattel slavery and European colonialism. Otherwise known as anti-blackness in the context of black racialisation, it is integral to the functioning of Western society itself.

⁹⁹ Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15 (2003), 11–40 (p.17).

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended': Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76* (Penguin Books: London, 2004), p.255.

One poignant contemporary example of the result of such necropolitics is the quotidian reports of hundreds of black and brown migrant bodies found drowned every year in the Mediterranean sea between Africa and Europe.¹⁰¹ Under neoliberal capitalism, economic and class privilege may seem to offer security to people of all races, but exemption is an illusion because anti-black racism is the bedrock upon which it stands. In sum, the bodies represented in the literature I explore can be better understood in tandem with Foucault's biopower, in that they are instruments through which the state exercises and legitimises its power, and with Mbembe's necropolitics, in that they are racialised, considered abject, and othered, at the level of the supra-state structure that is neoliberal capitalism, which continues to define its sovereign power through the right of governance to police whether racialised bodies may or may not live. Mbembe's scholarship, to which I explicitly return in chapters one and five, shapes my understanding of the way black women's fictionalised bodies inhabit and experience the worlds their authors create.

The bodies represented in the fiction I explore are often imagined outside of dominant corporeal ideals. René Descartes' philosophy, which privileged the mind as separate from the body and was contingent on the philosophy, religion and science of his time, continues to influence the way we view and inhabit our bodies.¹⁰² Anjana Raghavan constructs an alternative to Cartesian dualism in *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism* (2017). Raghavan visualises a decolonial, feminist and affective embodiment that reimagines cosmopolitan belonging and resistance. She interprets the Cartesian body as 'an enclosed, discrete machine, an object of mechanical logic, piloted by the mind, rather than a site of knowing, feeling and experience connected to the larger cosmos.'¹⁰³ The body which Raghavan imagines is not closed, but open and porous, aligned more closely with Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's 'grotesque body'. His pre-Cartesian body is a 'plac[e] of fluidity and exchange, where boundaries are effaced.'¹⁰⁴ Raghavan fluidly connects the body and the mind in order for affective

¹⁰¹ Anon., 'Up to 150 feared dead in "year's worst Mediterranean tragedy"', *Al Jazeera*, 26 July 2019, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/100-migrants-refugees-feared-drowned-mediterranean-sea-190725150839996.html>> [accessed 10/01/2020].

¹⁰² Anjana Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), p.66.

¹⁰³ Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism*, p.66.

¹⁰⁴ Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism*, p.60.

feeling and emotion to become communicative ways of knowing and being. Her explicitly feminist re-articulation also makes use of theorists like H el ene Cixous to explicitly tie her own vision of the body to a decolonised interpretation of sexuality and the erotic:

I want to suggest that corporeality and affect as sites of experience and being are both capable of this heterogenous porosity. Making the sexual, erotic and affective central to our experiences, identities and politics means that we necessarily make room for multiplicity and openness. Because the body is porous, fluid and constantly traversed by desire, it is particularly important to understanding boundaries, *eros* and violence as political affect.¹⁰⁵

For Raghavan, the female body becomes heterogenous and porous, existing in the world in a sensory way. It lies outside of the ‘phallogocentric realm of logic/rationality’.¹⁰⁶ It is an alternative body signalling a possible new politics. Similarly to the ‘non-Cartesian bodyscapes’ that reside in some indigenous African, Native American and Mesoamerican cultures, which uphold female bodies as the source of divine creation not solely limited to the biological,¹⁰⁷ this kind of embodiment is particularly empowering for women of colour because of the ways our bodies are systematically silenced and erased.

I include Raghavan’s vision of corporeality here as a useful counterpoint from which to imagine bodies that might radically resist within the aesthetic realm of fiction. The literary bodies that appear in the texts under study can be read in productive dialogue with her decolonial feminist conceptualisation of the body. As we shall see, some of the authors I explore create fictional bodies that inhabit our material world, while others are interested in comparatively immaterial bodyscapes. I am interested in discovering both material embodied alternatives to dominant masculine conceptions of the body, and immaterial bodies manifesting as alternatives to the restrictive Cartesian body. Through imagined literary bodies, I search for other ways of living and being outside of the hegemonic Eurocentric, Western, Cartesian construction and allow space for racialised bodies to speak in affective and more fluid ways. My selected writers allow me to unravel the structures that oppress and exploit racialised and gendered bodies, and explore how bodies might reconstruct themselves, and even influence the worlds around them. Ultimately, I gesture towards alternative ways of thinking about bodies that resist Eurocentric ways of categorising and understanding them.

¹⁰⁵ Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism*, p.73.

¹⁰⁶ Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism*, p.73.

¹⁰⁷ Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism*, p.68.

Chapter Overview

This thesis explores representations of black women's resistance, in the imagining of acts of rebellion both overt and covert, portrayed in contemporary literature produced by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dionne Brand, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Edwidge Danticat and Taiye Selasi between 1991 and 2018. Not to be confused with an essentialising, assumptive *sameness*, I envision black feminist solidarity as a radical and powerful political force. I investigate a selected range of their contemporary fictional narratives to explore the ways their black women protagonists reject the constraints of the imaginative worlds in which they are situated. I figure agency differently to power throughout this thesis, aligning power with the exploitative power of neoliberal capitalism, and agency with a subversive praxis involving autonomy, rights, and (more tentatively) an empowering black feminist notion of liberation. I focus on writers who have roots in and connections to Africa and the Caribbean, positioning my scope of enquiry mostly within the Global South in an attempt to redress the scholarly bias towards the US in black feminist theory. I refer to black *women* throughout, engaging with a feminism which is transgender and non-binary inclusive, and strongly connected to my personal politics and identity as a researcher who identifies as a black woman. The texts under study are mostly realist, with Brand's work being an important exception. Realism interrogates and directly confronts manifestations of exploitation, coercion and violence under neoliberalism. Acts of resistance carried out by fictional black women become applicable and transformational to how we live in the material world. I carry out a transnational black feminist way of reading that considers the tensions within each text, thrown up by the interaction between the experiences of characters within various local sites. This mode of reading is therefore applicable both to the cross-border experiences within each text, depicted through character, and the solidarities I build between the writers and the locations each text explores, which I expand upon further in the conclusion. My outlook is global, but attention to anti-colonial resistance in transnational contexts remains fundamental to my materialist analysis. My methodological approach develops a transnational black feminist way of reading which, in its attention to both local particularities and global concerns, is central to my original contribution to scholarship. In order to look closely at how blackness functions as a unifying political identity, the texts selected are in some way

implicated by whiteness — whether in the form of European colonisation, white minority settlement, or in a Global North setting in which the majority of people are racialised as white. However, I do not centralise whiteness; blackness, as a politically unifying ontology, is my primary concern. In each chapter I briefly and selectively contextualise the places where the texts under study are set: Haiti, the US, Nigeria, Ghana and Zimbabwe.¹⁰⁸ I do not centre colonialism, yet the way it has shaped literary representations of black women's lives in these particular locations is, of course, imperative.

Chapter one begins by exploring how the unravelling of a neoliberal world-order impacts upon the lives of three generations of rural Haitian women in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1991) in the specific contexts of Haiti and the US. By focusing on this novel in the first chapter I theorise the different forms of violence which simultaneously underpin the politics of migration and expose unequal power relations, and contextualise the relationship between violence against black women's bodies and historical colonialism and contemporary US neoimperialism: a form of state intervention which buttresses the gains of neoliberal capitalism. Part one argues that Danticat offers tentative ways for her characters to recover their agency through their bodies and attempt to heal the scars endured under the Duvalier regimes. In part two I focus on two short stories in Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* (1997) to argue that collectives of black women facilitate resistance at two disparate points in Haiti's history. I contend that re-making national memory and reconciling a traumatic past form an important part of Danticat's challenge to black women's continued exploitation under contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

In part one of chapter two I critique Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013) to uncover the kind of feminism it proliferates. Class, alongside race, is crucial to my analysis. My engagement with Afropolitanism — an 'African way of being in the world' involving mobility and cultural interweaving¹⁰⁹ — enables me to complicate Adichie's depiction of the Nigerian middle-class. In part two of this chapter, I argue that *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), due to the multi-voiced nature of this short story collection, prompts us to visualise a transnational black feminist solidarity that

¹⁰⁸ Dionne Brand's fiction is an exception because both of her texts are set in fictional or obscure places.

¹⁰⁹ Achille Mbembe, 'Afropolitanism' in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. by Simon Njami (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2005), pp.26–9 (p.28).

is mobile and based on what I term a sense of radical empathy. Focusing on ‘Imitation’ and ‘A Private Experience’, I explore how Adichie uses the short story form to imagine the differing experiences of Nigerian women embodying states of precarity within the overlapping structures of patriarchy, capitalism and migration to the US.

I further develop my transnationally black feminist line of enquiry in chapter three, focusing on Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go* (2013), an important text which illuminates my thinking about the interaction between the local and the global. The novel follows the Sai family, first-generation migrants to the US by way of Ghana and Nigeria. The characters reflect the fluctuating instability of being black and middle-class, and their anxieties highlight the negative side of the cultural multiplicity inherent to Afropolitan experiences. I look closely at important moments that illustrate each protagonist’s relationship with their material environment and their bodies to tease out how their sense of selfhood and belonging is figured. Whilst part one of this chapter focuses on the ways Selasi’s novel complicates and furthers ideologies of transnationalism, part two proposes that the expansive feminism constructed in *Ghana Must Go* — part of a syncretic blackness manifesting in the diaspora and rooted in empathy between black women — could alleviate the sense of fragmentation experienced by the relatively privileged across the African diaspora. In chapter four I move to consider the far less privileged position of the protagonist of Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *This Mournable Body* (2018), the final instalment in a trilogy beginning with *Nervous Conditions* in 1988. I explore Tambu’s sense of alienation from her body and fractured, distressed psyche, arguing that it is primarily through peripheral characters that moments of resistance can be glimpsed in the narrative. Part two of this chapter continues my analysis of this novel, focusing more squarely on the fallout of neoliberal capitalism in the Zimbabwean context and its implications for the kind of black feminist resistance Dangarembga advocates.

Part one of chapter five argues that Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) offers an aesthetic that I read as enacting ‘fugitive feminism’: an emerging emancipatory concept in black feminist thought and Black Studies grounded in Hortense Spiller’s assertion that black women exist liminally, outside of dominant modes of femininity. The novel’s protagonists transform into fugitives, and its ending takes inspiration from a real-world act of resistance to capitalist exploitation: the Grenada Revolution. My reading unravels the fugitive feminist possibilities of love between two queer,

rebellious black women that believe another world is possible. Part two explores Brand's experimental long poem *Ossuaries* (2010), which I position as an attempt to creatively imagine how we might break through and beyond our material boundaries to live fugitively. This text takes us to the limit of our journey to construct a transnational black feminism. *Ossuaries* troubles the very grammar of language itself to build an alternative, material, yet surreal space outside of the limits of our world.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation sparked by re-emerging black feminist activism and praxis in our neoliberal present. I am interested in the kinds of solidarity that Adichie, Brand, Dangarembga, Danticat and Selasi seek to imagine in their work, as well as the rapport and tensions between their distinctive engagement with black women's experiences. My transnational way of reading seeks to support and empower a globally reaching solidarity. I explore their writing centrally by focusing on the literary articulation of the body, which both exposes constraint and complicity with, and performs and embodies different kinds of resistance to, neoliberal capitalist regimes. Several key research questions drive my exploration. First, how do cultural texts expose the complex interrelation of neoliberalism, gender inequality and anti-black violence? Second, how might intersectionally feminist ways of reading women's writing contribute to revealing and challenging unequal power structures? And crucially, can the literature I consider contribute to a model for transformative social justice through the aesthetic creation of a transnational black feminism? Led by heterogenous fictional narratives providing an expansive analytical scope, this thesis takes these questions as its point of departure.

Chapter One

Part One

Contesting Violence in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Our family name, Caco, it is the name of a scarlet bird. A bird so crimson, it makes the reddest hibiscus or the brightest flame trees seem white. The Caco bird, when it dies, there is always a rush of blood that rises to its neck and the wings, they look so bright, you would think them on fire.¹

— Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

Names have a prophetic quality in Edwidge Danticat's 1994 debut novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.

The words above are spoken by the narrator Sophie Caco's aunt, Tante Atie. The image of the Caco bird that reveals the origins of their family name is carried throughout the narrative, becoming a metaphor for flight. Flight highlights migration as a central concern of the novel; specifically, from Haiti to the US. The sheer brightness of the red imagery here and its connection to plants — the 'reddest hibiscus' and the 'brightest flame trees' — creates a striking, empowering image. Tante Atie's suggestion that the bird remains extraordinarily red, as if enflamed, even in the throes of death is indicative of the novel's ending. I will continue to unpack the various meanings of redness in the novel throughout part one of this chapter, but for now I will focus on one of its most jarring manifestations: the suggestion of bloody violence.

Compellingly, Danticat's novel does not reveal that the Cacos also share their namesake with the Haitian Cacos. The armed organisation led by Charlemagne Péralte revolted against the US occupation of Haiti which began in 1915 and officially ended in 1934.² It was named after the birds because of its methods of attack. Utilising the mountainous regions, its fighters would, according to historian and Haitian politician Horace Pauléus Sannon, 'hide, like the bird of the same name, under the leaves so as to come unexpectedly upon and attack their enemy'.³ According to Karen Salt's nuanced exploration of black sovereignty in Haiti, the US occupation proposed to 'establish control and order;

¹ Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p.150.

² Ed. by Laurent Dubois, Kaiama L. Glover, Nadève Ménard, Millery Polyné and Chantalle F. Verna, *The Haiti Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), p.177–8.

³ Horace Pauléus Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint-Louverture* (Port-au-Prince: Aug. A. Heraux, 1920), p.142.

to make bridges and roads (using Haitian labourers); and to stabilise commerce and industry.’⁴ The occupation was predicated on an imperialist, racist, paternalist ideology, as ‘the USA believed that Haiti was unable to solve its own problems — and those problems had now impacted negatively on Americans and American interests.’⁵ The Haitian Cacos were spurred to begin an armed uprising to oppose the US occupation because of the harsh labour regimes that were implemented heavy-handedly. Local *gendarmes*⁶ captured rural Haitians and forced them to build roads, under US marine orders, in a coerced labour system commonly known as *corvée*.⁷ Although, as Salt emphasises, US imperialism has never really left Haiti, the Cacos’ opposition is part of a legacy of resistance that finds its roots in the very origins of the independent state. The image of the flaming Caco bird expressed in Tante Atie’s words makes palpable this bloody legacy of colonial and imperial oppression and resistance to its grip.

Understanding Haitian history is important in order to contextualise Danticat’s fiction, so let us briefly dwell here on Haiti’s independence in the nineteenth century in a context dominated by the transatlantic slave trade. Haiti’s forced integration into global capitalism during Spanish, then French colonisation, was violent. The indigenous Taíno population inhabiting Haiti was comprised of ‘lived entities who settled in complex towns, celebrated life, battled for power, expressed themselves through figurative and ceremonial art and were ruled by a mosaic of leaders’.⁸ On a large scale, they died from foreign diseases, the brutality of forced labour, and the crop famine linked to mass deforestation.⁹ Previously a French colony named Saint-Domingue after being seized from the Spanish in 1697, Haiti was once the richest colony. By the 1780s it provided seventy-five percent of the world’s sugar and was the single largest producer of coffee, due to labour-power predominantly derived from West Africa.¹⁰ Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James’ *The Black Jacobins* (1938) offers a succinct summary of how the Haitian Revolution unfolded:

⁴ Karen Salt, *Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p.195.

⁵ Salt, *Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, p.195.

⁶ A paramilitary police officer in France and Francophone countries.

⁷ *The Haiti Reader*, p.194.

⁸ Salt, *Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, p.3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment* (London: Verso Books, 2007), p.9.

In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men, and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte's brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte's expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day.¹¹

The political unrest of the French Revolution travelled across the Atlantic and had a knock-on effect, causing tensions amongst the French slave-owner settlers who often rebelled against the laws implemented by the royal administrators for the colony, and stirring up rivalry and power hierarchy between them.¹² At the same time another social group, the 'Mulattoes and free blacks', became politically conscious and demanded more rights and ownership; *mulatto* Vincent Ogé was amongst one of their leaders.¹³ In the midst of this unrest enslaved people took the opportunity to organise. According to James, 'in Fort Dauphin, one of the future centres of the San Domingo insurrection, the slaves were stirring and holding mass meetings in the forests at night. [...] Revolutionary literature was circulating among them.'¹⁴ A development from the mass poisonings of slave owners committed by maroons (that sometimes included their enslaved 'chattel' to ensure financial ruin), these slave rebellions were coordinated and carried out through simultaneous sabotage. James makes reference to the battles against the British and Spanish seeking to capitalise on the enslaved people's defeat of the French troops and seize San Domingo for themselves, highlighting the sheer scale of resistance required to win and sustain the revolution. He attributes the slave rebellions' impetuosity to an educated 'free black' and former slave, Toussaint L'Ouverture,¹⁵ and a *Vodou* 'Papaloi' (priest) and maroon named Dutty Boukman.¹⁶ The contributions of both of these men remain integral to the narrative of Haitian history, as does the role of *Vodou*, a religion specific to Haiti.

Communication between enslaved people was often carried out through *Vodou*. According to James, 'in spite of all prohibitions, the slaves travelled miles to sing and dance and practise the rites

¹¹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963), ix.

¹² Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: the Story of the Haitian Revolution*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p.29–31.

¹³ James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.62–7.

¹⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.82.

¹⁵ James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.90–3.

¹⁶ James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.86–7.

and talk; and now, since the revolution, to hear political news and make their plans.¹⁷ Vodou is a complex belief system rooted in West Africa that originated with the Fons and Yorubas of Benin.¹⁸ In Haiti enslaved people from different West African local communities practiced it as a way to unite them across their differences.¹⁹ In Vodou there are many *loas* (deities) that each represent facets of the natural world and human nature. Loas are best understood not as single entities, but multi-layered, many-faced spirits that have different manifestations depending on the region, context, and the needs of the community or individual that Vodou is serving. As a syncretic belief system that has morphed over time and space, Haitian Vodou differs substantially from Louisiana Voodoo (practiced in New Orleans) and West African *Vodun*. Vodou was a subversive practice because of the way it became linked to ceremonies that were believed to ensure victory in battle.²⁰ As we shall see, Danticat draws upon several Vodou loas in her fiction.

Haiti's victory over colonial powers was unprecedented. After L'Ouverture's capture and imprisonment in France, another former slave named Jean-Jacques Dessalines led an army that defeated Napoleon Bonaparte's and Rochambeau's militia, leaving a death toll of 50,000 soldiers and sailors sent to the colony since 1802.²¹ The previously enslaved Haitian fighters won the Battle of Vertières to establish the only state in history formed by mass slave revolt. Dessalines returned the nation to its indigenous Taíno name, and the nation we know as Haiti was born. But the establishment of Haiti was so unthinkable that at first France, the US and Britain refused to acknowledge its existence. Karen Salt draws attention to the formerly enslaved freedom fighters' choice to code Haiti as a *black* nation-state:

As a nation formed through rebellion, violence and anti-colonialism, Haiti would represent the least 'normal' nation in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world as it outlawed slavery from the beginning and articulated, at least on paper, that all of its citizens were politically equal *and* black [...] regardless of skin-pigmentation or prior racial categorisation. [...] In short, it was led by people of African descent who declared in their performance of power and rights that black people could be racialised as black *and* political.²² [emphasis original]

¹⁷ James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.86.

¹⁸ Marie-José Alcide Saint-Lot, *Vodou, a Sacred Theatre: The African Heritage in Haiti* (Florida: Coconut Creek, 2003), p.13.

¹⁹ Saint-Lot, *Vodou, a Sacred Theatre*, p.14.

²⁰ Colin Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p.46.

²¹ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, p.262.

²² Salt, *Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*, p.13–14.

Haiti's democratic ideology intrinsically tied black racialisation to political equality and free will by outlawing slavery and creating a nation of black citizens. Whilst the majority of its citizens were formerly enslaved people of African descent, Haitians were unanimously legally racialised as black. For example, the Polish soldiers part of the French army who joined Haitian fighters against the French, although white-skinned, were classified as black in terms of social status.²³ Far from indicating racial harmony, this fascinating distinction means that, in the context of anti-colonial resistance, blackness was imbued with a political meaning which altered the social construction of race itself. I am concerned less with Haitian nationalism here and more so with the opportunity to legitimise blackness with unifying political meaning that crosses cultures and boundaries, despite applying to the specific context of a country demarcated by a border. Through the lens of Danticat's fiction, Haiti is a compelling site of exploration in this thesis due in part to this unique history of resistance and, secondly, its coding as a politically independent state of black citizens.

The final, and most important, reason for reading *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in chapter one is to redress the erasure of the integral role black women have historically played in anti-colonial resistance struggles. The dominant narrative of the Haitian Revolution, however indicative of a triumph over colonial domination, is simultaneously masculinist and patriarchal. Scholars like Colin Dayan highlight the way women's contributions to the Haitian Revolution have been systematically suppressed:

Haitian history has been written by men, whether colonisers who distort or negate the past, or the colonized who reclaim what has been lost or denied. What is the name of the Mambo who assisted the priest Boukman in the legendary ceremony of Bois-Caïman? [...] Arlette Gautier has argued in *Les Soeurs de solitude* that, as opposed to the men of the revolution, women left no records. 'They remain nameless except for Sanite Belair, Marie-Jeanne Lamartinière for Saint-Domingue and the mulatta Solitude in Guadalupe.'²⁴

The stories of so few Haitian women are known, pointing towards a lacuna in the archive that can be attributed to patriarchal bias. The significant role Vodou played in allowing news about the organised rebellions to travel would have been connected to both male and female followers of the faith. The unnamed Vodou *Mambo* (priestess) who, according to Dayan's study, made the fighters drink the fresh blood of an animal to gain invincibility in battle, remains in Boukman's shadow. The spirit of the

²³ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, p.294–300.

²⁴ Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, p.46.

Haitian Revolution evidently did not extend to women's emancipation, and the erasure of women's involvement in anti-colonial struggles continues beyond this era. Returning for a brief moment to the connection between the Caco soldiers and the Cacos of Danticat's novel, *The Haiti Reader* (2020) contains a rare photograph of an unnamed woman, part of the Caco organisation, which was mailed across the country in 1924.²⁵ The woman, standing straight towards the camera and wearing a white dress and head wrap, seems to be guarding a public place. Her facial expression is serious, yet serene, as she holds the gun. We do not know her story, but her image is part of the scant archive of Haitian women's involvement in resistance struggles. Danticat's rural, poor, and working-class black women characters speak into this silence, in a more contemporary moment, to make tangible the experiences of ordinary Haitian women that have been hidden throughout history.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is concerned with the ways in which the Caco women, as part of both Haiti's and New York city's sprawling rural and urban poor, are susceptible to the different kinds of violence routinely enacted under capitalism in the Global South. The spectre of colonialism, bound up with continued US imperialism, haunts the novel. Most overtly, Danticat writes about the violence of an especially cruel dictatorship known as the Duvalier dynasty. François Duvalier's brutal regime in the late 1950s, succeeded by his son Jean-Claude Duvalier's in 1971,²⁶ shapes the novel's setting; although, I should add, neither Duvalier is explicitly mentioned in the text. Responsible for an estimated 50,000 deaths, they murdered, tortured and raped Haitian citizens. The authoritarianism of the US occupation, according to literary critic Maha Marouan, 'set the groundwork for the presence of successive corrupt authoritarian regimes.'²⁷ The Duvaliers' legacy shapes the lives of the Cacos in several ways. As a young girl, Sophie's mother Martine Caco was subjected to rape by a 'faceless' man, most likely a member of the *Tontons Macoutes*. We learn that the rape conceived Sophie. Furthermore, Haiti's fragile economy under the Duvalier dictatorships is the likely cause of Martine's migration to New York to find work in the novel. The Duvaliers were especially dangerous because of the way they legitimised state violence against women. As Carolle Charles argues, 'in a country where the ideology

²⁵ *The Haiti Reader*, p.196.

²⁶ Hallward, *Damming the Flood*, p.1.

²⁷ Maha Marouan, *Witches, Goddesses, and Angry Spirits: The Politics of Spiritual Liberation in African Diaspora Women's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p.59.

of women's weakness was strong, the regime's indiscriminate use of violence against women and children was also a negation of the previous paternalist discourse of the state' and a 'violation of the cultural codes of Haitian patriarchy.'²⁸ In other words, whilst previously women were suppressed under patriarchy and thus somewhat protected by a widespread paternalist attitude, the Duvalier dictatorships changed this by politicising the violation of women's bodies and legitimising abuse in the name of the state. Tellingly, Haitian-born Danticat migrated to New York in 1981 after living much of her childhood through the Duvalier regimes.²⁹ I read *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as a novel that tries to make sense of the violence endured under the Duvaliers and draws attention to the collateral damage women faced, which was both physical and psychological.

It is necessary now to unpack what I mean by violence. It represents more than the manifestation of physical harm inflicted on a sentient body. Slavoj Žižek poses a crucial question: how do we think violence?³⁰ For Žižek, 'symbolic', subjective violence is *visibly* acted out as violence, and 'systemic' objective violence is *invisible*, embedded in our capitalist economic and political systems.³¹ Žižek helps us to understand that violence is not one distinct phenomenon; it is present in multiple forms, both visible and invisible. It is not necessarily symbolic violence itself which interests me in this chapter, but symbolic violence as a manifestation of systemic violence, which is at the root of the visible violence in Danticat's novel. Turning to colonial violence as the ultimate manifestation of power, Frantz Fanon's case study of the Algerian revolution in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) highlights the radical nature of anti-colonial violence during a time which saw the erosion of colonial power and the gradual independence of nations across Africa and the Caribbean. Fanon asserts that because all forms of violence were a force inherent within colonisation, decolonisation must always be a violent phenomenon.³² Žižek and Fanon epistemologically 'think violence' as a means to deploy the ultimate control to maintain power. In sum, violence is synonymous with power insofar as power has a need to

²⁸ *The Haiti Reader*, p.387.

²⁹ Ed. by Martin Munro, *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p.17.

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p.1.

³¹ Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, p.1–2 and p.10–13.

³² See Frantz Fanon, 'Concerning Violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), pp.27–84.

reinforce itself. In my view, at the heart of these definitions of violence is economic capital which reproduces and upholds power structures. If violence, then, is the overt manifestation of neoliberal power, my interest in this chapter lies in exploring this violence from the perspective of Danticat's protagonists.

In the introduction I established the kind of gendered and racialised body I refer to and argued that this body is a political one. Throughout this chapter we bear in mind Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics that draws upon Foucault to suggest state sovereignty lies in the power to decide which bodies are expendable. Returning for a moment to Anjana Raghavan's scholarship, we can understand how the racialised feminine body in particular is coded in a specific way. She suggests that violence is integral to the process of othering a body, which is simultaneously linked to the process of reclaiming this same body: 'the tortured, or violated, body, particularly if it has been abused by the state, or other forms of hetero-patriarchal domination, is a crucial manifestation of political identity and participation'.³³ In other words, black women's bodies are both politicised and political in an agential sense. I read the text through the lens of Martine's, Sophie's and Tante Atie's bodily representations, opening up a similar line of enquiry as Saidiya Hartman as she asks: 'what does the exposure of the violated black body yield?'³⁴ As a narrative strategy, Danticat's focus on the Caco women's bodies calls into question the material conditions which shape them in variously conflicting and constraining ways to carve out a space where the reshaping and transformativity of their bodies can be enacted. Centrally, I am interested in the ways in which black women's bodies are impacted by and respond to the forms of violence outlined above in the novel. If Žižek asks how we might 'think' violence, then Danticat suggests how we might critique and respond to it through fiction.

Placing the setting of Haiti at its core — a site characterised by a legacy of resistance, yet hegemonically patriarchal — part one of this chapter unpacks the myriad ways that violence towards black women manifests in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Crucially, I argue that the novel moves beyond depicting Haitian women solely as victims. Danticat offers tentative ways for her characters to recover

³³ Anjana Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), p.76

³⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.3.

their agency through their bodies and attempt to heal the scars endured under the Duvalier regimes. Violence underpins the forces of migration, connecting New York and Haiti and simultaneously exposing the exploitive power imbalance between the US and the Caribbean. Furthermore, I argue that the bodies of the Caco women are mobilised, and immobilised, by these forms of violence and find precarious ways to resist it. It is this sense of bodies as both moving and static that I interrogate through Danticat's literary representation of the Caco women.

A number of scholars have explored gendered bodies and diasporic identities in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, but few scholars offer a black feminist reading which centres upon both violence and Danticat's attempt to redress trauma. Clare Counihan's 2012 article in *Small Axe*, for example, states that the Caco women's bodies act as 'sites of memory that testify to the nation'.³⁵ The idea that characters embody memory is a useful way to conceptualise certain elements of Danticat's prose, grounded as it is in the Haitian tradition of oral storytelling that serves to memorialise and mythologise the past. However, the idea that 'women are the nation' feeds into a somewhat essentialist (yet widespread) critical reception of the novel as representative of *all* Haitian women. Counihan's reading of Danticat's novel as a postcolonial text that is directly representative of a particular political condition constrains the particularities of the narrative. Her perspective recalls what Fredric Jameson has named the 'gap' between the 'first-world', or Western, reader and 'the third-world text', manifesting as a form of cultural alienation because the Western reader (or, in this case, critic) is unwilling to negotiate difference and the text is instead read as a 'national allegory', a process which functions to flatten out cultural nuances and meanings.³⁶ Literature, as a primarily *cultural* product, is intended to illicit multiple responses. It is a creative space within which we might reconsider how we view the world. Furthermore, if we follow Counihan's assertion that women are 'the' nation, this negates a consideration of the ways Danticat navigates the transformative nature of migration. My reading attempts to resituate Counihan's notion of 'bodies as memory' by positioning the bodies of the Caco women not as an essentialist representation of Haitian women, but as women implicated with the trauma

³⁵ Clare Counihan, 'Desiring Diaspora: "Testing" the Boundaries of National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *Small Axe*, 16 (2012), 36–52 (p.37).

³⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65–88.

of overt physical violence and the more covert, insidious violence of global capitalism. I focus on sexual violence against women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, intertwined with the legacy of chattel slavery that coded bodies as capital. I argue that far from a simplistic ‘voicing’ of poor Haitian women’s experiences, which several reviewers claim,³⁷ and moving beyond mere representations of whom Gayatri Spivak calls the voiceless ‘subaltern’,³⁸ the novel offers an important exploration of subtle and contingent modes of resistance.

Against the backdrop of the turbulent history I have outlined thus far, spanning colonisation to the Duvalier era, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* narrates the lives of four generations of the Cacos, ‘daughters of the hills, peasant stock’³⁹ in rural Haiti. The narrator Sophie migrates from the village Croix-de-Rosets, where she has lived with her aunt Tante Atie, to join her mother, Martine, who left for New York in search of wage labour when Sophie was an infant. The short chapters navigate through her childhood to young adulthood as she becomes a mother to baby Brigitte. Split into three sections, Danticat narrates Sophie’s attempt to understand her relationship with her mother. In part one, Sophie recalls significant moments from her childhood which link her mother’s life to her own experiences. In part two, tensions begin between Sophie and her mother as she reaches college age and begins a relationship with their neighbour, an older African-American musician named Joseph who later becomes her husband. In part three Sophie returns to La Nouvelle Dame Marie, where her grandmother and aunt have relocated, with her baby daughter. It seems Sophie is searching for a possible way to understand her mother, to reconcile and heal their damaged bodies and psyches. They begin to rebuild their mother-daughter bond, but Martine’s sudden unplanned pregnancy reveals the true extent of her psychological suffering. Tragically, Martine commits suicide by stabbing herself repeatedly in the uterus. The novel ends with her funeral in La Nouvelle Dame Marie.

³⁷ Danticat’s critically acclaimed novel has been praised for its ability to ‘give a voice to Haitians’ in *The New York Times* (1994), *Publisher’s Weekly* (1994) and by several literary critics in Martin Munro’s edited collection *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader’s Guide* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010). See Jim Gladstone, ‘In Short: Fiction’, *The New York Times*, 10 July 1994 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/10/books/in-short-fiction-605530.html>> [accessed 29/05/2020] and Anon., ‘Breath, Eyes, Memory’, *Publisher’s Weekly*, 4 April 1994 (1994) <<https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-56947-005-3>> [accessed 29/05/2020].

³⁸ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory, A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.66–111.

³⁹ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.20.

Danticat's use of form influences the way we read the novel. Time progresses as Sophie recalls memories from her childhood until her mother's funeral, but, formally, there are significant gaps in the narrative. I read this uneven narration of the Cacos' story through the prism of Édouard Glissant's useful concept of 'ruptures'. The three parts of the novel constitute an archival recovery of the intergenerational stories of the Caco women, pieced back together in parts that threaten to become 'lost except in the vivid eyes of one's memory'⁴⁰ because Sophie's recovery of her mother's story is simultaneously a recovery of her own, Tante Atie's, and Grandmè Ifé's. Glissant asserts that the Caribbean's violent 'irruption into modernity',⁴¹ which left in its wake a 'nonhistory',⁴² is characterised by irreconcilable 'ruptures'.⁴³ 'Modernity' for the Caribbean meant the extermination of indigenous peoples, the establishment of the sugar plantation (a technologically advanced mode of production), and colonisers exploiting forced labour from peoples shipped from another continent, therefore violently engulfing it into the capitalist system. For Glissant, this nonlinear, disharmonious and forced integration into global capitalism stands in the way of Caribbean peoples reconciling a coherent 'nature' and 'culture' which forms a history (or *herstory*, in this novel's case).⁴⁴ If the history of Caribbean peoples is not linear, as Glissant suggests, the form of Danticat's novel can be read as an attempt to respond creatively to this historical amnesia. 'Ruptures' are configured as a mode of formal disruption throughout Danticat's novel, breaking through the constraining material realities that the Cacos face as women of a poorer class. Danticat's fictionalised recovery of the stories of the Cacos is an attempt to exhume the 'bones' of the history of Haiti, which has been tainted by colonial and neoimperial violence. These 'bones' do not easily form a complete story. Instead, Danticat pieces together these recovered 'parts' of memory to envision the beginnings of a reconciliation of traumatic memory from which to move forward. This way of reading the novel also speaks to its title, suggesting the Cacos are witness to, remember, and endeavour to heal their trauma. I focus on some significant moments in which 'ruptures' of resistance can be glimpsed, suggesting tentative ways that a black feminist vernacular

⁴⁰ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.170.

⁴¹ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Virginia: the University Press of Virginia, 1989), p.100.

⁴² Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.61–5.

⁴³ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.64.

⁴⁴ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p.61.

could break the cycle of trauma in which lie the remnants of chattel slavery, colonialism and imperialism.

Corporeality permeates *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Martine first appears to us in Sophie's dreams, only known to her daughter in a single framed photograph. In the narrator's recurring dream her mother chases her through 'a field of wildflowers as tall as the sky' catching her to 'squeeze her into the small frame so I could be in the picture with her.'⁴⁵ The height of the flowers suggests distance which the mother transgresses. Here migration across borders is configured through this towering distance, which is at once disrupted by the imagined body of the diasporic mother. The mother swoops from the sky, endangering Sophie's connection to what is local and natural: the 'wild' flowers connecting the land to the sky. In the dream, Sophie imagines her mother crossing the borders which separate Haiti and New York to attempt to reconcile the severed mother-daughter bond, and contain it in an object, the picture frame. Here Martine is imagined as a migratory body that can move across borders whilst Sophie remains immobile in Haiti. This cosmopolitan mobility is reimagined in Sophie's dream as monstrous. On the contrary, Sophie feels a strong sense of belonging to Haiti, evident in the sheer height of the indigenous 'wild' flowers which form a protective barrier. This barrier of flowers marks a boundary, a 'border' constructed in Sophie's imaginary, separating her land-bound location in Haiti from the unknown 'elsewhere' to which her mother has migrated. Significantly, Sophie calls for Tante Atie to save her from becoming trapped in the picture frame, for this object threatens to remove Sophie from her Haitian surroundings and into a state of non-materiality. The real fear is perhaps not the mother herself, but the threat to Sophie's distinctly Haitian identity; a fear which pervades throughout her childhood and into adulthood.

In a similar vein, Martine's constant, vicious nightmares mark her vulnerable state of mind which has caused the degradation of her fragile physique. The connection between the mind and the body shows that the effects of violence — in her case, rape — are not only physical, but psychological. Although she now works as a carer in New York, when Sophie migrates from Haiti to meet her mother for the first time she notices that her scarred hands look 'as though she had never stopped working in

⁴⁵ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.8.

the cane fields after all.’⁴⁶ Martine has not escaped a life of hard labour. She has traded her work in the cane fields for a low-paid job as a carer, displaying the scars of her inescapable social class on her body. In this light, Martine’s migration is not an escape. Migration instead maps a cycle of poverty within which the Caco women are entrapped. Martine is acutely aware of her powerlessness, repeatedly reliving the rape in her nightmares as she continues to be locked in this cycle of violent exploitation. Returning to Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*, but bearing in mind that Hartman’s focus is the *enslaved* ‘chattel’ body, it is important to note that redressing the exploited bodies of black women can be ‘articulated in the very endeavour to heal the flesh.’⁴⁷ Hartman’s call to reconcile the pain of the black body is as relevant today, under neoliberal exploitation, as it was to the enslaved peoples of the nineteenth-century. I will continue to explore how Danticat attempts to ‘heal the flesh’ through Martine’s character, but for now I turn to another important body in the text that represents a counter to Martine’s.

Tante Atie’s body is strong, nourished and plentiful. She nourishes herself with locally grown sweet potatoes, cassava and plantains. Her local consumption aligns her body with her environment and she is figured as the embodiment of home for Sophie. As Mimi Sheller asserts, Caribbean cultural products are often consumed at the expense of the bodies that produced them. These products are ‘mobile’ because they produce capital and ‘leach’ across borders to be consumed by the Global North.⁴⁸ For Sheller, the mobility of cultural products (whether sugar or reggae music) render local Caribbean bodies ‘immobile’, locked within sites of production and stripped of economic power.⁴⁹ The South’s ‘immobile labour pool’⁵⁰ is exploited, yet Danticat’s novel complicates these relations. As the only unmarried daughter, Tante Atie’s obligation to care for Grandmè Ifé renders her ‘immobile’, but importantly, she does not suffer the same bodily alienation that Sophie and Martine experience. Her body and feet are referred to as large, and she has ‘lungs like mountain echoes’.⁵¹ Although she still longs for an imagined ideal of Western modernity, a desire that is represented through the t-shirt she

⁴⁶ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.42.

⁴⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p.75.

⁴⁸ Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: from Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.34.

⁴⁹ Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, p.27.

⁵⁰ Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, p.34.

⁵¹ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.128.

wears with the New York skyline emblazoned on the front,⁵² her immobility roots her to her local environment in La Nouvelle Dame Marie. Her distinct corporeality suggests that she belongs in Haiti, the place that Sophie views as her homeland. Furthermore, the subtle suggestion of a romantic relationship between Tante Atie and another local woman accentuates bodily alterity by emphasising her queerness. Beyond the positive embodiment of home for Sophie, Tante Atie's alternative, locally situated body is fully dimensional — unlike Martine's. Tante Atie's tangible corporeality, representing both 'home' for Sophie and the immobile body, parallels our first encounter with Martine as the ghostly, imaginary mother. In contrast to Sheller's argument, in the novel the immobile body is not always the most exploited. It is Martine, the migrant, whose labour is most exploited, despite her ability to move to the US.

Martine's physically and mentally damaged self constitutes the most evidently fraught body in the text. Her tortured psyche, haunted by the nameless man who raped her in a cane field, mirrors her physical weakness: her face is 'hollow', and her legs 'long and spindly'.⁵³ Martine's small, frail frame is almost always covered in loose clothing which functions to obscure her bodiliness. When the narrator first arrives at the apartment in New York, her mother 'disappears' behind a bedroom door and she is 'startled' when her name is called.⁵⁴ Danticat's formation of Martine's corporeality through language suggests that her character dwells at the border between physical existence and non-existence. Martine's act of suicide at the novel's crux finally confirms her inability to exist in a world in which she is continuously undervalued. Gayatri Spivak has highlighted that:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization.⁵⁵

Within 'nothingness' lies a displaced 'figuration' in place of the material body of Spivak's 'third-world woman'. The double oppression of patriarchy and imperialism forces the (subaltern) woman out of a valued existence. Martine's suicide could indeed be a literary representation of the voiceless third-world

⁵² Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.106.

⁵³ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.42.

⁵⁴ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.44.

⁵⁵ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p.102.

woman. This critique validates my reading of Martine's body as a ghostly, intangible figure alienated from her own body and therefore her existence. Martine cannot escape the overt violence that taints her memories of Haiti nor the covert violence that codes her as a working-class black woman in New York. The traumatic sexual violence enacted on her body by the *Tonton Macoutes* leads her to desire non-existence and eventually enact a bloody suicide. Danticat conveys Martine's 'body' as a displaced phantom presence, falling into the liminal space between subject and object. Martine rarely appears as a whole body or as uncovered flesh, but mostly as disembodied parts (a hand, a face), and finally, ceases to exist.

Disrupting Martine's 'non-existence', however, is Danticat's continuous alignment of her character's body with the corporeality of one of the most revered and empowering Vodou goddesses known as Erzulie. Erzulie has multiple manifestations which include 'the Black Venus', 'the Tragic Mistress' and 'the Goddess of Love', or Erzulie-Freida.⁵⁶ In several written representations, Erzulie evokes a myriad of conflicting ideologies, embodying both love and vengeance, virginity and sin.⁵⁷ When Martine asks Sophie 'am I the mother you imagined?',⁵⁸ Sophie's mind conjures a mother who was 'like Erzulie', the 'healer of all women and the desire of all men' adorned with commodities, 'satin, silk [...] necklaces, bracelets, anklets' and 'French perfume.'⁵⁹ Erzulie-Freida embodies empowering femininity, affirmed with materially valuable objects sensuously placed on various parts of her imagined body. At this point in the narrative, Martine's and Erzulie's embodiments are analogous. The former's pale, fatigued face, transparently ghostly due to the skin-lightening creams that betray the influence of colourism,⁶⁰ contrasts with the latter, the visually and sensually plentiful goddess. Erzulie acts as the powerless Martine's agential counterpart. Sophie had imagined their 'like'-ness, and this metaphorical language sustains both difference and similarity to shift our perception of the living,

⁵⁶ Jayne Boisvert, 'In the Image of Erzulie Fréda: Literary Examples of the Goddess of Beauty, Love, and Support', *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, 13 (2007), 99–109 (p.9).

⁵⁷ Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods*, p.59.

⁵⁸ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.59.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Alice Walker coined the term colourism in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, defined as 'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color' which 'like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us' (p.290). This form of anti-blackness can often be traced back to slavery because mixed raced, lighter-skinned people generally had more access to wealth and class privilege. Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1983).

corporeal body (Martine's) into the territory of the unknown spiritual 'body' (Erzulie's). The shift that takes place through metaphorical language acts as a transformative moment for Martine's bodily agency. Erzulie's and Martine's embodiment also defies the conflicting dichotomies of sin and virginity. Martine is repelled by sex because of the trauma of the rape, and it is also the 'sin' of the rape which means she is repelled by sex. In contrast, Erzulie's sexual prowess is a central part of her divine strength. Although Martine wants Sophie to be her 'Marassa' double (meaning 'the same person, duplicated in two'⁶¹) here Danticat's language aligns Martine with Erzulie, not Sophie. This suggests it is actually Erzulie that Martine desires as her double. At this moment, Sophie's imagined Erzulie ruptures the reality of her perception of her mother as powerless and exploited. This first overt reference to the goddess sets up one of the most fascinating ways that the bodies of the Caco women transformatively resist both symbolic and systemic abuse.

Blood and the colour red appear consistently throughout *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. I read their significance as Erzulie rupturing the narrative at significant moments to suggest that feminist empowerment of the Caco women is possible. Returning to Tante Atie's revelation that the Cacos are named after 'a scarlet bird' which in death has a rush of blood 'so bright' the wings appear 'on fire', this image of flight refers to the afterlife as a transitive place beyond the confines of embodiment.⁶² Martine's New York apartment is covered in red furniture, 'her favourite colour since she left Haiti'.⁶³ The significant colour of material possessions represents Martine exhuming Erzulie's vernacular agency through objects, since black vernacular resistance is often evoked through the use of objects and ritual. For Saidiya Hartman, everyday black resistance lies within the use of objects and resistance within slave societies were often enacted through the material; for example, using an overturned cooking pot to absorb the sound of forbidden prayers can be related to the use of sacred water pots in Africa. In contemporary times, inverted flowerpots are placed on African-American gravesites to signify departed spirits.⁶⁴ Red appears again when Sophie chooses the clothes for her mother's burial in the hills of La Nouvelle Dame Marie, selecting a 'bright red, two-piece suit' that embodies 'a Jezebel,

⁶¹ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.84.

⁶² Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.150.

⁶³ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.226.

⁶⁴ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p.73.

hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made *them* her slaves, raped them, and killed *them*.⁶⁵ Sophie adorns her mother's body materially in death, evoking the agency that she never possessed whilst living. Zoë Brigley Thompson reads this moment in the novel similarly. She calls upon Sara Ahmed's notion of the 'feminist killjoy' (a term that reinscribes the word 'killjoy' into a feminist praxis that refuses to accept the normative rape culture propped up by patriarchy)⁶⁶ to suggest that Martine's suicide represents a refusal to accept the physical and psychological pain which black women are forced to endure, manifesting this pain in a bleeding wound which 'cannot be contained'.⁶⁷ For Thompson, the red of Martine's suit represents her 'refusal to be healed'.⁶⁸ It is tempting to read Martine's refusal as empowering, but ultimately, her suicide cannot be a form of black feminist resistance because she was left with no alternative. Significantly, it is Sophie who chooses to dress her mother in red to align her with the goddess Erzulie.

Resistance in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* can be more readily glimpsed through Sophie's character. Physical sexual violence against women in the novel is underpinned by a tradition embedded in Christianity known as 'the test', which is passed down through the generations. 'Testing' involves the mother intimately checking the daughter for physical signs of lost virginity in order to keep the daughter's chastity. Although testing is enacted upon daughters by their mothers, the violating and painful act is the result of dominant patriarchy which bases women's value for marriage on their sexual purity. In the novel, this practice is framed as a traumatic experience which defines a young girl's value because marriage is often the only means to acquire economic security. The novel's second part marks the beginning of Sophie and Joseph's relationship in New York. Their relationship is non-sexual at first, but when Martine finds out, she begins to 'test' Sophie. Significantly, Sophie attempts to break the matriarchal cycle of testing by breaking her own hymen in the following disturbing scene. Danticat's narration of this act is graphic, marking a significant moment of change which goes beyond the physicality of Sophie's act:

⁶⁵ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.227.

⁶⁶ Zoë Brigley Thompson, 'Happiness (or not) after rape: hysterics and harpies in the media versus killjoys in black women's fiction', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26 (2017), 66–77 (p.67).

⁶⁷ Thompson, 'Happiness (or not) after rape', p.75.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

I was feeling alone and lost, like there was no longer any reason for me to live. I went down to the kitchen and searched my mother's cabinet for the mortar and pestle we used to crush spices. I took the pestle to bed with me and held it against my chest. [...] My flesh ripped apart as I pressed the pestle into it. I could see the blood slowly dripping onto the bed sheet. [...] It was gone, the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me.⁶⁹

Taking ownership of something she can control, Sophie makes bloodily visible the intangible patriarchal violence that underpins the 'test'. Critic Mireille Rosello reads this moment as a 'rebellious' act of 'freedom',⁷⁰ but I suggest that it is, in some ways, a complicit act. Sophie is unable to break the cycle of systemic violence which causes objective violence to be enacted onto her body by her own mother. Therefore, her reaction is to perform yet more objective violence. Sophie's and Martine's bodies act as vehicles which reveal these unseen forms of violence in visible, physical ways. However, within my reading of this moment as a complicit act, I also wish to suggest that there is a moment of self-possession within Sophie's breaking of her hymen. As blood pours, this systemic violence becomes visual, a vivid red. Red here once again conjures up Erzulie, the vengeful Vodou goddess. Sophie's maiming of her body is preceded by a Creole myth: 'the story goes that there was once a woman who walked around with blood constantly spurting out of her broken skin.'⁷¹ Erzulie turns the mythologised, nameless woman into a butterfly upon her request to heal her affliction. Once again, the immobile body (as flesh) cannot break the confines of subaltern womanhood. The strategic placement of this Erzulie myth, preceding the act of self-harm, suggests the goddesses' presence within the act itself. Erzulie is again manifest here in the form of bloody redness, representing both vengeance towards the mother who enacts the test and a trace of divine feminist agency connected to Sophie. Critic Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo similarly stresses Erzulie's role in the text as a protector of women.⁷² Furthermore, Maha Marouan suggests that 'bleeding [...] marks the Caco women's struggle with their womanhood and sexuality and expresses their desire for transformation'.⁷³ Read together, the role of Erzulie and blood becomes doubly powerful and radically feminist. Sophie's body is now damaged, like her

⁶⁹ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.87-8.

⁷⁰ See Mireille Rosello, 'Marassa with a Difference: Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*' in *Edwidge Danticat: A Reader's Guide*, ed. by Munro, p.128.

⁷¹ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.87.

⁷² Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo, 'Rewriting Folklore: Traditional Beliefs and Popular Culture in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*', *MaComère*, 3 (2000), 123-140 (p.131).

⁷³ Marouan, *Witches, Goddesses, and Angry Spirits*, p.38.

mother's, but the suggestion that Erzulie is present hints towards her attempt to find agency and, crucially, her vow to physically and metaphorically break the cycle of violence perpetuated by the test.

The mythical Creole tale that depicts Erzulie turning a woman into a butterfly is significant. Much like the Cacos being named after a scarlet bird, flight suggests the possibility of an escape from flesh through transforming into another, non-human bodily form. Marouan concurs that the story of the butterfly represents 'female transformation' in the novel.⁷⁴ Similarly to the purpose of the novel's 'Guinea' imaginary, which I will later discuss, here the butterfly anticipates a yet to be completed process of transformation for Sophie. The mythical transformation of woman into butterfly represents a spiritual journey which is a migration of sorts, albeit a different kind. Instead of reaffirming exploitive power relations, the migratory butterfly leads us to glimpse the possibility of a black feminist resistance that reaches beyond the bodily. Sophie later recalls that she could not explain to her husband that breaking her hymen was like 'breaking manacles, an act of freedom.'⁷⁵ In this novel where women's bodies are subjected to routine abuse, Sophie's act of self-harm is at once complicit yet represents her will to break the cycle of violence — however painful. Crucially, Sophie breaks the cycle of testing by vowing never to test her own daughter. Whilst her self-inflicted act is extremely damaging, Danticat's inferred alignment of Sophie's blood with Erzulie's presence reaffirms that even within the most desperate acts and impossible choices, resistance can be glimpsed.

For Danticat, it seems, to heal is not to revert back into an undamaged state, but to remake that damage into something new, which may still carry this damage but in another form, able to survive it and potentially create future generational change. Towards the end of part two we realise the meaning of the pre-emptive lines at the end of part one, as Sophie's mother finally tells her the truth about her conception. For Sophie, this confession is only one part of the pieces which form her mother's entire story. When Sophie returns to La Nouvelle Dame Marie at the beginning of part three, the purpose of her visit becomes clearer to the reader. Sophie's aim is to gather the fragmented pieces of her mother's life in the hope that this completed 'story' can facilitate a process of healing for herself and her mother. Healing in Danticat's novel can be understood as a physically and psychologically transformative state

⁷⁴ Marouan, *Witches, Goddesses, and Angry Spirits*, p.38.

⁷⁵ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.130.

which requires the remaking of the body. We note that upon Sophie's initial return to Haiti with her baby daughter, she bathes in 'a pot-pourri of flesh healers: [...] the petals of blood red hibiscus, forget-me-nots, and daffodils'.⁷⁶ In this vein, it seems Danticat's novel is to some extent aligned with Michael Niblett's argument that the local environment is a potential site of cultural rebuilding within postcolonial literature.⁷⁷ For Danticat, an environmental connection with locality in the form of bodily healing assisted by bathing in plant petals is one of the transformative stages that encompasses a healing of the body subjected to violence. However, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* challenges Niblett's call to resurrect the nation-state by suggesting that cultural rebuilding can take place not only within the confines of a single nation, but also on a transnational scale.

Disrupting the notion that the nation-state is the *only* potential site of liberation, 'Guinea' is referred to at several crucial points in the narrative. Grandmè Ifé's storytelling mythologises 'a group of people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads', the 'people of Creation' who can 'bear anything'.⁷⁸ Reaching far beyond the confines of La Nouvelle Dame Marie and towards vernacular African ancestry, Grandmè Ifé conceptualises an imagined place which is a source of strength and healing for the Cacos. According to Marouan, 'Guinea is Africa, which is described in Vodou cosmology as a place under water where one goes after death to join their ancestors'.⁷⁹ Guinea carries connotations of the Middle Passage in a far more hopeful sense. Sophie insists that her mother is 'going to Guinea'⁸⁰ at the novel's end. The imaginary 'Guinea', a spiritual, non-material 'place', represents a further transgression in the Cacos' healing process. Danticat's novel suggests that, when they occur between the global North and South, transnational links fail. Yet, the mythologised 'Guinea' evokes the imaginary of an indigenous, strong, sustainable African peoples. Here nation boundaries are crossed through the mode of Haitian storytelling, imagined as a central part of transnational black feminist vernacular healing. Danticat's novel maps out a path which links the Caco women to not only uncover how forms of violence operate, but to suggest to the reader that despite seemingly impossible obstacles,

⁷⁶ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.112.

⁷⁷ Michael Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1945: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp.14–22.

⁷⁸ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.25.

⁷⁹ Marouan, *Witches, Goddesses, and Angry Spirits*, p.49.

⁸⁰ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.228.

a feminist rendering of these fictional bodies as potentially powerful agents resists the supposed ‘immobility’ of subaltern livelihoods. The Caco women are depicted as having a sense of self which is deeply connected to Haiti, yet in the afterlife they imagine travelling to a place beyond Haiti. Danticat suggests that vernacular knowledge enables a resistant imaginary. The Guinea imaginary is the only truly productive example of transnationalism — here meaning travel across borders — in the novel.

In sum, despite constant immobilisation under the legacy of neoliberalism, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* suggests that symbolically returning to a reimagined African ancestry is a fleeting opportunity for healing. These cross-cultural connections constitute a mode of remembering and an opportunity to confront a violent past and present in the formation of a cultural transnationalism. Returning once again to Erzulie, the goddess is an important cross-cultural connection in the novel. As an expression of transcendent Creole culture, rooted in African genealogy and cultural folklore and diasporic Caribbean mythology, Erzulie’s presence reaffirms the transnational imaginary that Guinea represents. Erzulie’s syncretic diasporic range is crucial, doing the reparative work needed within the empty space of cultural ‘non-history’, to again use Glissant’s terms. Erzulie ruptures the cycle of immobilising violence in the novel. Danticat creates spaces of transformative healing for the Cacos through the embodiment of Erzulie and the Guinea imaginary, yoking together indigenous culture as an antidote to the relentless imperial and neoliberal exploitation of Haiti.

Several critics have read the novel’s ending as a resolution.⁸¹ Donette Francis, for example, claims that Sophie’s beating of the cane fields during her mother’s funeral ‘suggests a confrontation with social practices’.⁸² Whilst the scene does suggest defiance, Francis argues that this moment totally frees Sophie from subjection. Differently to Francis, I suggest that rather than creating a completely emancipatory imaginary, Danticat emphasises the difficulty of the Caco women’s quest to become untethered from cyclical violence. The scene in the cane fields suggests violence is inescapable:

⁸¹ See chapter ‘Rewriting the Marassa: Story-Telling and Healing in the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*’ in Nancy Gerber’s *Portrait of the Mother-Artist: Class and Creativity in Contemporary American Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2003), pp.69—84 and Helen Scott, “‘Ou libéré?’: History, Transformation, and the Struggle for Freedom in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” in *Haiti: Ecrire en pays assiégé / Writing Under Siege*, ed. by Marie-Agnès Sourieau and Kathleen M. Balutansky (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp.459–78.

⁸² Donette Francis, “‘Silences Too Horrific to Disturb’: Writing Sexual Histories in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*,” *Research in African Literatures*, 35 (2004), 75–90 (p.87).

I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed over the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding.

[...] From where she was standing, my grandmother shouted like the women from the market place, ‘*Ou libéré?*’ Are you free?

Tante Atie echoed her cry, her voice quivering with her sobs.

‘*Ou libéré!*’⁸³

The cane carries connotations of slave labour, suggestive of the legacy of exploitation in Haiti’s past. A cane field was also the site where Martine was raped and conceived her daughter. Sophie’s anger towards the abuse her mother endured manifests in visible, subjective violence, but the beating has no effect and the resilient cane stands tall. Yet, there is a glimmer of hope within this moment. As her hand bleeds, redness appears again. Redness represents the repeated presence of the potential for resistance, which, like violence, is positioned as constant and cyclical. Grandmè Ifé’s question and Tante Atie’s reply goes beyond expressing their pain and grief. The phrase ‘*Ou libéré!*’ does not simply articulate their freedom; it demands it. Zoë Brigley Thompson reads *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as similarly empowering because it does *not* suggest there is a simple route to healing for black women. She argues that Danticat’s novel is ‘uncompromising in the refusal to heal by Aunte Atie, Sophie, and especially Martine. Seeking justice sometimes means refusing joy [...]. Grief, anger, shame, disbelief, disillusionment: all of these feelings can be powerful and subversive for the rape survivor’.⁸⁴ In representing such emotions, Danticat advocates for a black feminism that is radical in its refusal to accept the forms of violence perpetuated under patriarchy and deepened by the pervading history of colonialism and imperialism.

The novel’s final climatic scene, from Sophie’s perspective, roots the Caco women in a distinctly Haitian locality. This draws the reader back to Haiti as not only a site where violence takes place. Hope and redemption can also thrive there:

There is always a place where women live near trees that, blowing in the wind, sound like music. These women tell stories to their children both to frighten and delight them. These women, they are fluttering lanterns on the hills, the fireflies in the night, the faces that loom over you and recreate the same unspeakable acts that they themselves lived through. There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through

⁸³ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.233.

⁸⁴ Thompson, ‘Happiness (or not) after rape’, p.75.

generations like heirlooms. Where women like cardinal birds return to look at their own faces like stagnant bodies of water.⁸⁵

In this passage women are inextricably bound to the locality of their environment. The trees that ‘sound like music’ are reminiscent of the sound of stories being told to children, like the stories that Grandmè Ifè told Sophie on her porch during childhood. The certainty of the phrase ‘there is always’ combined with the generalisation ‘a place’ suggests the comforting familiarity of returning home. Cycles of violence may repeat through the generations, but so does a rich cultural heritage. Women continue to return to their own reflections as cardinal birds return to water. Radical change has not yet been realised at the novel’s end, but importantly, Danticat hints at future change. Women like Sophie Caco return to Haiti with the hope to heal. Significantly, Martine’s physical body returns to Haitian earth, but spiritually, Sophie believes her mother has become ‘a butterfly or a lark in a tree’; another recurring motif which suggests transcendence.⁸⁶ Although she pays with her life, Martine’s figurative transformation suggests she is free of her bodily prison and has perhaps travelled in spirit to Guinea. If Martine’s corpse returning to her birth nation at the end of the novel represents the impossibility of a successful migration, then it might seem reasonable to conclude that the novel denounces the possibility that a strong sense of identity can thrive beyond the borders of one’s cultural home. After all, what remains richly alive in the novel is the local Haitian landscape: its colour, scents, and plants poetic and vivid. However, the Guinea imaginary disrupts this, suggesting a transcendence that reaches beyond the confines of material reality.

In sum, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a narrative that attempts to redress the violence inflicted upon Haitian women, and reconnecting with the local environment is a crucial part of this. Haiti is envisioned as an integral part of the Cacos’ identity and a central component of Sophie’s healing. If, as the extract above suggests, intangible nightmares are metaphorically passed on like valuable ‘heirlooms’, then the novel functions as an ‘heirloom’ that recollects and preserves memory through storytelling, confronting the consequences of state-sanctioned rape and the ‘unspeakable act’ that is the ‘test’. Danticat attempts to resolve Haiti’s traumatic past, and Sophie’s return is a migratory journey that is an antidote to her

⁸⁵ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.234.

⁸⁶ Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, p.228.

mother's. Just as the 'cardinal birds' return to their habitat, Sophie returns, not to simply be freed from cyclical violence, but in search of reconciliation through healing. The return 'home' is figured as more productive than the migratory journey. Crossing borders is either feared, as we see in Sophie's childhood dream, or exploitive, exemplified by Martine's migration to the US for low-paid labour. A productive transnationalism is not, in the novel, possible materially; it exists only in the mythologized Guinea, which can be reached in the afterlife. Danticat ultimately locates black feminist resistance within a strong connection to Haiti. This is a different kind of national identity to the masculinist narrative of nationalism that has been established since the revolution. It is based on an empowering connection to, first, other black women, and second, to the local rural environment intimately known to the kinds of Haitian women Danticat places at the centre of her stories.

Part one of this chapter has focused on the ways Danticat balances writing about oppressive and constraining violence with a resistantly feminist remaking of black women's bodies. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* ruptures both systemic and symbolic violence through covert and overt glimpses of the goddess Erzulie, functioning as a figure of feminist resistance. I established that Vodou played a crucial role in facilitating the communication needed to organise slave rebellions during the Haitian Revolution. Vodou is a syncretic belief system which travels across borders and manifests in different parts of the African diaspora, and Erzulie is an important and radical component of the black feminist resistance in the text. However, it is a locally based identification with Haiti that ultimately serves as Danticat's central concern. The kind of black feminist resistance she advocates for is intricately tied to a distinctly Haitian imaginary. Through depicting the Caco women's bodies as an intrinsic part of this cycle of systematic violence, I have endeavoured to show that the novel's ending is a testament to survival, and future hope, rather than to freedom. Much like the Caco soldiers of their namesake, the four generations of Caco women offer resistance to US imperialism not through overt violence but through an embodied kind of resistance. The novel suggests that Sophie Caco specifically can only begin to reconcile her Haitian identity and attempt to heal when these fraught histories are confronted through narration. Whilst there is no simple resolution towards the healing of such turbulent histories, Danticat's creative imaginary suggests that once trauma has been survived, one potentially successful way to move forward

is to resist, and rupture, this cycle. Crucially, this cycle is ruptured and interrupted through a particular kind of embodiment which is both physically and spiritually powerful.

Part Two

Transformative Embodiment in Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*

Part one of this chapter explored the myriad ways that violence is exposed and challenged through embodiment in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Keeping these ideas about violence and bodies at the centre of the discussion, in part two I turn to consider two of Danticat's earliest short stories from the collection *Krik? Krak!* (1995). Published during the tumultuous period of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's exile and subsequent re-election, many of the stories can be read as attempts to look back at Haiti's historical and mythological past in order to envision what resistance could look like in the present. President Aristide's era was characterised by the onset of neoliberal underdevelopment in Haiti. According to Peter Hallward, after Aristide's democratic re-election in 1995 (due largely to his socialist-leaning policies), he was forced into adopting structural adjustment programmes by the US government.⁸⁷ The IMF-supported programmes were deployed to 'free up' capital in Haiti, but in reality, they forced privatisation for profit, cut the public sector workforce and drove down wages for already impoverished workers.⁸⁸ This kind of foreign economic exploitation has been deeply rooted in the country since independence. For example, France agreed to maintain essential diplomatic and trade relations if Haiti paid them 150 million francs in compensation for the loss of slave labour, a debt that dominated the international budget until 1947.⁸⁹ Uneven development continues to shape the political sphere in Haiti. I see the stories in *Krik? Krak!*, many of which invoke historical moments or figures from Haitian history, as Danticat's literary attempt to challenge increasing exploitation under neoliberalism. The short story collection can be read as an attempt to revisit Haiti's past to learn from its past legacy of resistance whilst centring a distinctly black feminist perspective in order to enact resistance to US imperialism in the present. In the two short stories I focus on in this chapter, 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven' and 'Caroline's Wedding', the literary portrayal of bodies serves to expose the

⁸⁷ Hallward, 'Option Zero in Haiti', p.30.

⁸⁸ Hallward, *Damming the Flood*, p.5.

⁸⁹ Hallward, 'Option Zero in Haiti', p.26.

oppression enacted under US imperialism both during the mid-twentieth century of the former story's setting and in a contemporary context influenced by the grip of neoliberalism in the latter.

Both 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven' and 'Caroline's Wedding' richly exemplify Danticat's investment in exploring how black women's bodies register the material environment they are situated in. Located in rural Haiti and New York, respectively, they explore the potential that two families of women across multiple generations carry to facilitate resistance within two different historical eras and environments. Danticat challenges the physical limits of bodies in the material world, using fictional spaces as places where it becomes possible to radically transform the body. In these stories resistance is enacted through the trope of the body, which undergoes a process of radical transformation. Through the prism of the representation and transformation of bodies, then, my critique across these stories seeks to discover how the author might further the work to imagine black feminist solidarity began in her debut novel.

Krik? Krak!'s title refers to call-and-response storytelling commonly practised in Haiti. The storyteller says 'krik?' and the listener replies 'krak!'. Through storytelling, folklore and proverbs are carried across the generations. Danticat uses the short story cycle form to assemble a diverse range of narratives based on working-class and poorer, rural characters located in Haiti. Whilst the nine stories can be read separately, there are subtle clues tying the stories together; for example, several of the characters are familial relations or cross paths with one another. Rocio Davis' critique of *Krik? Krak!* suggests its short story cycle form is important because it is an 'appropriate [form] for the quest for a definition of the cultural pluralism that incorporates immigrant legacies'.⁹⁰ The form is also useful, I would add, for exploring black feminist solidarity. The stories, and the women characters they contain, speak to one another in productive ways (figuratively and in terms of speech). *Krik? Krak!* has received significant critical attention, especially during the 10 years after its publication, and a special issue of the *Journal of Haitian Studies* about Edwidge Danticat in 2001 has discussed it in detail alongside *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. But much of this scholarship is descriptive and surface-level rather than

⁹⁰ Rocio Davis, 'Oral narrative as short story cycle: Forging community in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*', *MELUS*, 26 (2001), 65–81 (p.65).

rigorous, attempting to briefly discuss many of the nine stories at once.⁹¹ My reading focuses on just two stories in an attempt to carefully critique Danticat's contribution to a literary black feminist resistance.

We immediately learn the significance of the date in 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven''s title. It is the year the narrator was born, on the night that President Rafael Trujillo ordered the massacre of all Haitians living in Dominica in the wake of the US occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. This event is known as the *kout kouto a* (the stabbing) in Haitian Creole and *el corte* (the cutting) in Spanish⁹² due to the use of machetes to murder around 15,000 Haitians living in the Dominican Republic.⁹³ The genocide is called the Parsley Massacre in English because, allegedly, Creole speakers were targeted by Dominican soldiers who would test if they could properly pronounce the 'r' in the Spanish word '*perejil*'.⁹⁴ After the Haitian Revolution a period of unrest followed during which Haitian, Spanish and British armies fought for control of the Dominican Republic, then known as Santo Domingo. In 1821 the Spanish declared a short-lived period of independence.⁹⁵ Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer soon joined the island together, an era known as the 'Unification', and established many of the same laws as Haiti, including the abolition of slavery.⁹⁶ For Dominicans, the unification was later referred to as the occupation because Boyer's rule led to agricultural and economic decline. In 1843 Boyer was overthrown and the unification was overturned by a group of activists in Santo Domingo.⁹⁷ A treaty acknowledging Santo Domingo's independence and establishing diplomatic trade relations was eventually agreed with Haiti in 1875,⁹⁸ but the volatile relationship between them had already been cemented. These historical factors likely played a part in President Trujillo's use of anti-Haitian

⁹¹ See Amanda Putnam, 'Braiding Memories: Resistant Storytelling within Mother-Daughter Communities in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*', *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 9 (2003), 52–65, Helen Pyne-Timothy, 'Language, Theme and Tone in Edwidge Danticat's Work', *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 7 (2001), 128–137, Sharrón Eve Sarthou, 'Unsilencing Défilés Daughters: Overcoming Silence in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*', *The Global South*, 4 (2010), 99–123 and Susana Vega-González, '(Dis)Locations of Oppression: Redemptive Forces in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*', *Irish Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2002/03), 47–60.

⁹² Langley, 'Performing Postmemory', p.64.

⁹³ *The Haiti Reader*, p.267.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Harmannus Hoetink, 'The Dominican Republic c. 1870–930' in *The Cambridge History of Latin America Volume V: Circa 1870 to 1930*, ed. by Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.287.

⁹⁶ *The Haiti Reader*, p.94.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Micheal R. Hall, *Historical Dictionary of Haiti* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2012), p.83.

sentiment as a nationalist tool to order the massacre of Haitians living in certain regions in the Dominican Republic in 1934. The Haitian and Dominican communities had lived peacefully and the river bordering both countries once allowed citizens to pass fluidly between them until it became a site of bloodshed.⁹⁹ This brief history shows that the process of colonisation which originally divided the two sides of the island is one of the root causes of the tensions between the two neighbouring states.

In ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ the narrator’s mother (referred to as *Manman*, Haitian Creole for mother) escaped the brutal Parsley Massacre by leaping the river bordering the Dominican Republic and Haiti, later referred to as the Massacre river, whilst pregnant with her daughter. In the present context, some years after this event, Manman has been imprisoned after the death of her close friend’s sick baby. When the baby dies she is accused of being an evil spirit that takes off its skin at night and eats children. This myth refers to the *soucouyant* spirit, a well-known folkloric figure across the Caribbean that I will later contextualise in full. Manman is jailed along with countless other women. Their heads are shaved and they are beaten by prison guards and fed meagre rations. As their skin becomes looser due to their starvation, some women are condemned as incurable *soucouyants* and brutally killed. Tragically, this becomes Manman’s fate. The narrative is told from the perspective of her daughter who also remains unnamed, although in a story that follows Danticat suggests her name is Josephine. The narrator attempts to memorialise her mother by re-telling the story of her miraculous survival of the Parsley Massacre and joining the other women who knew her to hold a ceremonial funeral. Critics Jana Evans Brazier and Elizabeth Langley underscore the significance of the Parsley Massacre to the story.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, Evans Brazier suggests that Manman’s character mirrors an important but obscure figure in Haitian mythology: Dédée Bazile, also known as *Défilée-la-folle* (Défilée the Madwoman). In *Krik? Krak!* we find out Manman’s first name is Défilé in the story narrated by her granddaughter, ‘Between the Pool and the Gardenias’.¹⁰¹ Danticat’s Défilé is a common ancestor who links together several of the women characters across the short story collection. Her name

⁹⁹ *The Haiti Reader*, p.267–8.

¹⁰⁰ See Elizabeth Langley, ‘Performing Postmemory: Remembering the Parsley Massacre in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” and *Song of The Water Saints*’, *The Latin Americanist*, 60 (2016), 63–77.

¹⁰¹ Although most critics refer to Manman by her first name Défilé, I refer to her as Manman to retain the integrity of the original story and emphasise the importance of the mother-daughter relationship.

is a clear reference to this important yet overlooked figure in Haitian history. Details about Défilée's life are vague and debated by scholars — again suggesting the erasure of women from the archive of Haitian history. Evans Braziel attempts to recover her story using a blend of biography and legend.¹⁰² Following the revolutionary leader Dessalines' murder in 1806, Défilée was said to have found 'the mutilated remains of his body; and she collected, then carried *le corps de Dessalines* to his burial place', proceeding to mourn at his grave side which indicates the proper burial rites important in Vodou faith.¹⁰³ Both Evans Braziel and Colin Dayan double the two figures, Défilée and Dessalines, with figurative meaning that troubles the demarcation between body and spirit. Danticat's character Défilé similarly blurs these lines. Rather than solely representing 'the embodiment of the Haitian nation' in the place of Dessalines, as Dayan argues, I see her character as doing something more overtly feminist, but equally as radical.

Vodou and folklore ideology sit in tension with the influence of US neocolonialism in 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven'. The story is set after the nineteen-year US occupation of Haiti has recently ended, but the influence of their military and security force remains. At the story's opening the narrator describes the prison where her mother is incarcerated:

The yellow prison building was like a fort, as large and strong as in the days when it was used by the American marines who had built it. The Americans taught us how to build prisons. By the end of the 1915 occupation, the police in the city really knew how to hold human beings trapped in cages, even women like Manman who was accused of having wings of flame.¹⁰⁴

Built by the US marines, the fictional prison is an emblem of the imperial power used to subjugate Haitians. Due to its yellow colour, it is most likely based on Fort Dimanche, a prison where thousands were tortured under the Duvaliers' rule.¹⁰⁵ Danticat closely ties the US military occupation to Haiti's own suppression and violence towards its people. Differently to Helen Scott, who argues that this story and the others in the collection 'do not overtly contest the role of foreign domination in creating the

¹⁰² Jana Evans Braziel, 'Re-membering Défilée: Dédée Bazile as Revolutionary *Lieu de Mémoire*' *Small Axe*, 18 (2005), 57–85 (p.59).

¹⁰³ Evans Braziel, 'Re-membering Défilée', p.68.

¹⁰⁴ Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* (New York: Random House, 1995), p.35.

¹⁰⁵ Patrick Lemoine refers to the prison as 'the Duvalier's dungeon of death' in his memoir *Fort Dimanche, the Dungeon of Death* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 1996).

conditions they describe’,¹⁰⁶ I see Danticat’s critique of US imperialism woven subtly throughout *Krik? Krak!*, manifesting through black women character’s embodiment.

Manman’s alleged ‘wings of flame’ in the above passage refer to a mysterious figure known as a *soucouyant*. Giselle Anatol defines it as follows:

A woman by day, this ‘creature’ slips out of her skin at night and can transform herself into a ball of fire to move from house to house. She creeps into homes through cracks and keyholes and sucks the blood or ‘life blood’ (human life essence, or soul) of unsuspecting neighbours.¹⁰⁷

The punishment for a suspected *soucouyant* ranges from severe beatings, exile, or torturous murder. The *soucouyant* is a feminised figure often attributed to non-conforming or rebellious women, suggesting its mythological creation is a manifestation of patriarchal control. Interestingly, the creature derives from a ‘Caribbean colonial and postcolonial space, where European, West African and New World African cultures [...] come together in a complicated mix’.¹⁰⁸ In Danticat’s story the image of the *soucouyant* appears to pathologize rural Haitian women.

In a similar vein, Vodou has been pathologized in Haiti. Commenting on the French slave trade in the country, Marie-José Alcide Saint-Lot highlights that ‘the colonizers feared the slaves’ religion because it represented an element of cohesion, of unity among the slaves. Vodou became a target because it was a base of resistance, a threat to the colonial establishment.’¹⁰⁹ Later, it became perceived as a form of dissent against European Catholicism as well as colonialism. In March 1860 President Fabre Geffrard ordered the closing of all *hounfòs* (Vodou temples). In 1935 President Stenio Vincent adopted a law forbidding Vodou, calling it ‘sorcery’. Zora Neale Hurston’s early anthropological study *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938)¹¹⁰ suggests that Haitians used European

¹⁰⁶ Helen Scott, ‘Replacing the “Wall of Disinformation”’: *The Butterfly’s Way*, *Krik? Krak!* and Representation of Haiti in the U.S.A.’, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 7 (2001) 78–93 (p.82).

¹⁰⁷ Anatol, ‘Transforming the Skin-Shedding *Soucouyant*’, p.44–5.

¹⁰⁸ Giselle Anatol sees in the *soucouyant* influences of Late Victorian era vampirism and Caribbean obeah; the *loup-garou* (werewolf) figure merging with the fear of promiscuous women and blood-sucking creatures. Its flying fireball and skin-shedding qualities may originate from the *obayfo* figure of the Ghanaian Akan people. See Anatol, ‘Using Folklore to Reclaim Female Agency in Caribbean Literature’, *Small Axe*, 7 (2000), 44–59 (pp.48–9).

¹⁰⁹ Marie-José Alcide Saint-Lot, *Vodou, a Sacred Theatre: The African Heritage in Haiti* (Florida: Coconut Creek, 2003), p.27.

¹¹⁰ It is worth mentioning here that the anthropological credibility of Zora Neale Hurston’s text is contested. Maha Marouan, for example, criticises her refusal to condemn the US occupation and her exoticised portrayal of Vodou (see *Witches, Goddesses, and Angry Spirits*, p.57).

statues, photos and illustrations to represent their Vodou deities due to the availability of the images (it was particularly difficult to distribute and obtain more accurate representations of deities created by Haitian artists).¹¹¹ Later, the government compromised and Vodou ceremonies were permitted as long as they were preauthorised.¹¹² The religion's defamation was top-down and deliberate. Nevertheless, it was linked to rising Haitian nationalism and black consciousness in the wake of the Parsley Massacre. As a belief system that unified disparate African tribes and facilitated guerrilla armies that led to Haiti overthrowing French colonial rule, Vodou evidently has the potential to unite people towards a collective vision. Its repression was the reason for the rising atmosphere of suspicion that led to older women being criminalised — although I should emphasise that Danticat's story does not suggest Manman practised Vodou prior to the arrest. Rather, Danticat highlights that women racialised as black are associated with pathology and often victimised by a state struggling to assert authority and control over its citizens due to the destabilising influence of US imperialism.

Danticat uses Haitian Vodou and folklore as a strategy of resistance centrally through two of the story's images: the Madonna statue and the soucouyant spirit. The unnamed narrator carries a small statue of a Madonna to visit her mother in prison. In Vodou the Madonna does not represent the Virgin Mary of Christianity, but the deity Erzulie-Dantor, a strong and vengeful mother and protector.¹¹³ In part one I discussed the presence of Erzulie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, mostly drawing upon Erzulie-Freida's qualities, but Erzulie has various other manifestations which are now necessary to fully flesh out. Erzulie represents a family of loa: Erzulie-Freida, Erzulie-Dantor, and Lasyreen (associated with the water-mumma or mami wata spirit).¹¹⁴ There are further manifestations even within these categories, but for simplicity I will focus on these. Whilst Erzulie-Freida belongs to the group of 'Rada' spirits, who are non-violent in nature, Erzulie-Dantor is a 'Petro' spirit, meaning she is vengeful. Vodou worshippers believe that petro spirits originated during chattel slavery, and that Erzulie-Dantor fought

¹¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Voodoo gods: an inquiry into native myths and magic in Jamaica and Haiti* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1938), p.127. The title was later renamed to *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Erzulie is the Gallicized spelling of the deity. The Creole spelling varies but it is usually 'Ezili'.

¹¹⁴ Karen McCarthy, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.221.

‘beside her children’ in the Haitian slave revolution.¹¹⁵ Differently to Erzulie-Freida, who is commonly believed to hold contempt for women, Erzulie-Dantor is ‘hermaphroditic’ and loves men and women equally. She has both male and female lovers, breaking Eurocentric gender constructs and heteronormativity.¹¹⁶ Because she is the protector of children she is associated with the Black Madonna, also known as Santa Barbara Africana.¹¹⁷ According to Saint-Lot’s study, Erzulie-Dantor’s qualities are conflicting. She is at times ‘dangerously possessive’ or portrayed as ‘jovial’; at others, she is ‘utterly anguished’ and howling, unable to articulate speech.¹¹⁸ The emotional pain she displays could bear a resemblance to the pain experienced by enslaved women separated from their children. Erzulie-Dantor is a complex figure whose manifestation is apt for a character like Manman, unjustly imprisoned and demonised by the state.

Differently to Erzulie-Freida in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Erzulie-Dantor is here summoned to suggest an empowered, nurturing, yet vengeful mother figure that Manman embodies throughout her imprisonment and even after death. ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ begins and ends with references to Madonna/Erzulie-Dantor:

My Madonna cried. A miniature teardrop travelled down her white porcelain face, like dew on the tip of early morning grass. When I saw the tear I thought, surely, that my mother had died.¹¹⁹

The statue becomes a Vodou object that facilitates a communicative solidarity between the daughter and mother separated by the prison walls. The presence of Erzulie-Dantor is suggestive. The statue must be ‘mute’ because it is an object, yet it is portrayed as emotionally anguished. In linking the Madonna statue to Erzulie-Dantor and then to Manman, Danticat articulates the otherwise inexpressible physical and emotional pain that represents Manman’s plight. Because she is unnamed, the traumatic wounds in the body and psyche also refer more broadly to the troubled relationship between Haitian women and the state of Haiti. As a protector and mother who seeks revenge, Erzulie-Dantor is cleverly aligned with

¹¹⁵ McCarthy, *Mama Lola*, p.228.

¹¹⁶ See Saint-Lot, *Vodou, a Sacred Theatre*, p.142 and Colin Dayan, ‘Erzulie: A Women’s History of Haiti’ *Research in African Literatures*, 25 (1994), 5–31.

¹¹⁷ Refers to an image of Santa Barbara Africana, also known as the Black Madonna. Saint-Lot, *Vodou, a Sacred Theatre*, p.143.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.33.

Manman's body; particularly after the prison officers brutally murder her. As a complex loa with a contradicting range of manifestations and emotions, the many faces of Erzulie are mobilised by Danticat according to the forms of oppression her characters experience and the agency they need to exhume in order to enact resistance to them.

The Madonna statue does two things. First, it evokes black feminist embodiment through an alignment with the deity Erzulie; second, it memorialises a Haitian mother unable to survive the trauma enacted by the state. The collective and syncretic nature of the Vodou deity, who has slightly different names in West African, Caribbean and African-American folklore, speaks to the sense of collective trauma that Danticat's story articulates. However, I do not wish to suggest that aligning the mother's body with Erzulie-Dantor represents reconciliation, freedom, or escape at the story's close. The figure of the Madonna, as a Vodou object carried by the narrator, forms collective intergenerational solidarity between the narrator and her mother, allowing her to sustain hope. Like the statue, hope is carried through generations of Haitian women, and surviving such legacies of violence and trauma becomes a political act in itself. Whilst survival may not seem radical, and remains far from the right to thrive in a progressive society, in 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven' surviving is the first step. This story forms part this legacy of radical survival.

The shape-shifting soucouyant, however, functions quite differently to the Madonna statue. The spirit is commonly evoked in Caribbean fiction and oral stories, so it is fitting to use another story to further contextualise its representation. A fascinating description of the soucouyant appears in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998). In *Brown Girl*, a young Caribbean woman in a future-dystopian Toronto named Ti-Jeanne activates her powers as a seer and becomes locked in a battle in the spirit world. Ti-Jeanne first sees the spirit enter her home after she has finished breastfeeding her baby:

A fireball whirl in through the window glass like if the glass ain't even there. It settle down on the floor and turn into a old, old woman, body twist-up and dry like a chew-up piece a sugar cane. She flesh red and wet and oozing all over, like she ain't have no skin. Blue flames running over she body, up she arms, down the two cleft hooves she have for legs [...] She looking at me and laughing [...] but I ain't want to know what could sweet a Soucouyant so.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), p.44.

The soucouyant is not overtly mentioned in *Krik? Krak!*, but in Hopkinson's novel it is an active character with a distinct form, name and shape. It appears inflamed as a fireball and then transforms into an old woman. The spirit can alternate between bodily states, sliding through matter and shedding its skin to reveal its bloody flesh.

Compellingly, though, there are overlaps between Hopkinson's and Danticat's descriptions in 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven's penultimate paragraph. The passage that follows is a flashback. The narrator imagines her mother's escape from the Parsley Massacre as she leaps, as if in flight, across the river back to Haiti:

Then the story came back to me as my mother had often told it. On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames.¹²¹

Like Hopkinson's soucouyant, Manman's glowing and bloody red skin looks metaphorically enflamed. Momentarily Danticat aligns her character with the soucouyant, meaning she is somehow able to survive by leaping like a fireball across the river. Mirroring the malevolent spirit, Manman is determined to survive the Parsley Massacre and give birth to her daughter. The weight of her daughter's body in her womb weighs her down, so instead of depicting a surreal departure from the body, the body is kept tied to earthly reality. In this sense the body is empowered through the soucouyant myth whilst remaining connected to Manman's lived reality. Giselle Anatol similarly suggests that the soucouyant myth can be alternately read as a metaphor for escape and transformation. For Anatol, the soucouyant's skin is like a cocoon where 'the constrictive outer layers are shed and left behind, and a transformed being emerges, endowed with the freedom of mobility.'¹²² She concludes that in Danticat's story 'the image of the soucouyant is therefore transformed and celebrated as desirable'.¹²³ This feminist reading of the soucouyant's purpose highlights notions of deviant women in flight, defying the social order despite the dangers it might entail. Fascinatingly, Danticat subverts Vodou back to its original anti-

¹²¹ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.49.

¹²² Anatol, 'Transforming the Skin-Shedding Soucouyant', p.52.

¹²³ Anatol, 'Transforming the Skin-Shedding Soucouyant', p.54.

colonial origins to offer alternative possibilities as a form of solace to her black female characters, compounded by the narrator's declarative: 'my mother did fly'.

Flight often connotes transcendence in literature, but I wish to briefly unpack its significance in 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven'. Flight appears across literature and film of the African diaspora, and one of the earliest examples of women in flight takes place in Toni Morrison's 1978 novel *Song of Solomon*. The novel ends with Milkman Dead's proclamation as his aunt Pilate slips away into death: 'now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly.'¹²⁴ In an interview Morrison contextualises the story she was told as a child — a well-known myth amongst older generations of African Americans and Caribbeans — of the enslaved growing wings and flying back to Africa, free of the bondage of slavery. Whether flight is metaphorically achieved through death or takes place in the material world as a means of escape, its mythic qualities suggest a defiance that transcends reality. Flight, when it pertains to the feminine body racialised as black, is an undeniable act of resistance.

Collective groups of women who support and sustain one another are an important part of the feminist imaginary Danticat builds in 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven'. After the protagonist's mother is horrifically beaten to death by the prison guards, the other inmates hold a makeshift funeral for her. The women form a circle and hold something that belonged to her — including a white dress and pieces of rationed food — and use stones to create a crucifix in the middle of the room. Six other imprisoned women sit 'like statues in different corners of the cell' keeping their arms 'close to their bodies, like angels hiding their wings'.¹²⁵ The ceremony is reminiscent of Vodou rituals, where specific foods, drinks and occasionally sacrificial animals are offered to the deities in exchange for a change in fortune.¹²⁶ Whilst the funeral is not explicitly referred to as a Vodou ceremony, its ritualistic nature highlights the use of this anti-colonial practice in the face of extreme violence and trauma. The metaphor of angel wings blends Christianity with Vodou rites. The holy qualities of the women, rather than suggesting an image of Catholic chastity, here affirm their soucouyant powers. A crucial moment takes

¹²⁴ See Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Random House, 1978), p.336 and Aleksander Sochan, 'Toni Morrison on Myth and Flying Africans', *YouTube*, 2 May 2013 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmSWQWMHW2c>> [accessed 20/11/2019].

¹²⁵ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.47.

¹²⁶ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, p.123.

place when one of the women takes the narrator's hand, her fingers feeling 'warm and balmy against the lifelines of my palm'.¹²⁷ Her touch prompts the memory of her mother telling her the story of how she once flew across the Massacre River. Interestingly, Vodou deities are believed to offer a 'catalyst' that activates 'group wisdom and group resources'.¹²⁸ Vodou, then, is a belief system that fosters and thrives upon group solidarity, making it compatible with feminist resistance in a fresh and radical way. The image of collective feminist solidarity is suggestive of the intergenerational feminist strength that runs through Danticat's fiction.

Danticat aligns black women's bodies with Vodou to create a mobilising force, allowing Manman's legacy to live on. Most importantly, Vodou furthers our understanding of the relationship between the spirit and the body. For Danticat, the spirit is *of* the body, but the spirit is *not* the body. The spirit is the gateway to a liminal realm where the limits of the body can be stretched and distorted to respond to the constraints of the material. This becomes doubly important because we know that Erzulie-Dantor is the protective mother deity that seeks vengeance for those that harm mother and child. The soucouyant is a similarly rebellious spirit and anger causes it to commit evil, murderous acts. Whereas the soucouyant in Nalo Hopkinson's novel plays into patriarchal stereotypes by taking the form of a grotesque old woman who feeds on the blood of babies, Danticat subverts the stereotype by portraying vengeful spirits as liberating. Following the image of the soucouyant are the story's closing lines, just before the burning of the mother's body begins:

In the prison yard, I held the Madonna tightly against my chest, so close that I could smell my mother's scent on the statue. [...] I raised my head toward the sun thinking, One day I may just see my mother there.¹²⁹

Like the single tear, the scent of the mother on the statue associates an object with the mother's body. Although scent is immaterial, it is fundamentally bodily. It is both of the body and has a manifestation beyond the purely visceral. Combined with the enflamed image of the soucouyant in flight, Danticat suggests that refusing the constraints of material existence permits a form of bodily agency. Whilst Elizabeth Langley reads Manman's death as the final act that silences her, the uplifting tone of the last

¹²⁷ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.48.

¹²⁸ McCarthy, *Mama Lola*, p.230.

¹²⁹ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.49.

sentence suggests otherwise.¹³⁰ The narrator turning her head towards the sun in the sky again suggests flight, and even reincarnation. The burning of the body, then, points towards a reincarnation of the soucouyant. Erzulie-Dantor's nature as a 'Petro' spirit is linked to the vengeance of enslaved black women repressed under chattel slavery, and the 'evil' soucouyant is another manifestation of this retaliatory violence. During Manman's imprisonment she is linked to bodily things (the scent and tears of the statue, and the soucouyant's bloody skinless body) that offer, for herself and her daughter, a sense of solace. Whilst Erzulie-Dantor is the static statue that remains to memorialise and mourn the murdered mother's body, the enflamed and vengeful soucouyant soars towards the sky. Moving beyond the violence inflicted on the 'fleshy' black woman's body, Danticat uses the soucouyant and the Madonna to transform bodily materiality into an agential existence beyond the confines of human flesh.

To conclude my reading, 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven' aligns literary bodies with Haitian folklore in radical ways, and Vodou becomes a tool for both oppression and liberation, transforming the world the characters inhabit. As Maha Marouan similarly argues, 'Haitian Vodou here represents an alternative space where black womanhood can be examined, challenging a patriarchal discourse that has suppressed the complexity of Haitian womanhood.'¹³¹ Danticat makes use of Vodou practices and beliefs to resist the trauma enacted upon black women's bodies under the influence of US imperialism, using the past to create productive strategies of resistance in the present through re-telling and reshaping Haitian folklore. In some ways, Manman represents Danticat 'writing back' to emphasise the role of marginalised women alongside male revolutionaries like Dessalines. This is one of the reasons why Danticat returns to Défilée's legend to write this story in 1995, during a time where US imperialism is once again exerting its influence on Haitian democracy. The fact that Danticat also revisits the 1937 Parsley Massacre from the perspective of a female survivor shows what she is doing is more radically feminist than simply writing the story of Manman's character's namesake. Rather than Défilée's story being consistently tied to the death of Dessalines, she is given her own alternative narrative. In her own right, she contests the prison system and state violence furthered during, and continuing after, the US

¹³⁰ Elizabeth Langley suggests that Manman's 'personal testimony and traumatic experience is silenced, at least momentarily, through her death'. Langley, 'Performing Postmemory: Remembering The Parsley Massacre in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" and *Song Of The Water Saints*' *The Latin Americanist* (2016) 60, 63–77, p.69.

¹³¹ Marouan, *Witches, Goddesses, and Angry Spirits*, p.41.

occupation. Revisiting this period of Haitian history from which women's voices have been erased (we might think again of the female Caco soldiers) is timely because it suggests Haiti should not repeat history in the present and allow the US to influence its sovereignty. The kind of resistance Danticat advocates in this story is most closely tied to a nationalist imaginary, but one that eschews its masculinist associations. I read 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven' as a personal and intimate story of violence, vengeance, intergenerational survival, and future hope, one of Danticat's earliest calls to resist continued US imperialism under the contemporary guise of neoliberalism.

Our understanding of literary bodies has been deepened by exploring the representation of embodiment through Vodou practices in Danticat's fiction. Thus far, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven', Danticat's most productive representation of bodies has been firmly situated in Haitian environments. Haiti is conveyed complexly, as both a place of cultural belonging and where symbolic and systemic violence is endured (to borrow Žižek's words). A strong sense of Haitian identity is palpable in the characters we have considered so far. The next story I discuss, 'Caroline's Wedding', portrays a more tenuous and flexible sense of Haitian identity as we move to a location part of the Haitian diaspora. Since I have outlined that a radical black feminism must be transnational and applicable in different contexts, it is important to now consider how robust a black feminist politics rooted in Haiti might be. I will now carefully consider whether Danticat's vision of black feminist resistance, that seems so firmly tied to Haiti, holds up to scrutiny as we move into the shifting context of the diaspora. Whilst 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven' focused on the oppression of rural women of that era, 'Caroline's Wedding' focuses on first and second-generation migrants in the US in the 1990s in a very different political climate.

This final story in *Krik? Krak!* is told from the perspective of Grace Azile (or Gracina, her Haitian name). She lives in New York with her mother, referred to as Ma, and her sister, Caroline Azile. Their father passed away during their childhood. The narrative follows the build-up to Caroline's small non-traditional wedding and the backlash she faces from her mother because her fiancé Eric is not Haitian. Caroline was born with her left forearm missing, and her mother believes that an injection administered by an immigration prison officer whilst she was pregnant after the sweatshop she worked in was raided led to this birth defect. As part of the Haitian diaspora, the family searches for ways to

reconcile their Haitian cultural connection with their environment in New York. I draw upon only a few other critics here because, as I have mentioned, there is little scholarly work focusing solely on ‘Caroline’s Wedding’. With the exception of Mark Shackleton’s critique, it is mostly discussed in passing alongside the other stories.¹³² Hal Wylie’s 1996 review of *Krik? Krak!* highlights how important family ties are to the ‘larger social rituals’ in ‘Caroline’s Wedding’, which are ‘important in peoples finding their way in the urban labyrinth’.¹³³ I consider how the black women characters in this story navigate the diaspora to broaden my understanding of Danticat’s perception of the usefulness of transnationalism to the political, as well as aesthetic, black feminism embedded in her fiction. Again, bodies are central to Danticat’s representation of resistance in this story. Like ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’, ‘Caroline’s Wedding’ is also concerned with bodies that transform — notably in the very different context of the Haitian-American diaspora. My reading suggests that, differently to embodying deities and malevolent spirits in the previous texts, bodies more firmly situated in the material realm are also a central part of Danticat’s literary resistance. I argue that ‘Caroline’s Wedding’ offers fictional representations of bodily transformation and healing through what I term radical bodily practices.

Significantly, ‘Caroline’s Wedding’ opens with the moment Grace is granted American citizenship. Danticat highlights Grace’s relief in order to bring the tensions between Haitian diasporic identity and American citizenship into sharp focus:

It was a cool September day when I walked out of a Brooklyn courtroom holding my naturalization certificate. As I stood on the courthouse steps, I wanted to run back to my mother's house waving the paper like the head of an enemy rightfully conquered in battle.¹³⁴

American citizenship is represented as highly valuable. For Haitian migrants (and Global South migrants in general), obtaining it is a long and gruelling process. The triumphant moment is fittingly tinged with visceral, violent language, suggestive of the power American citizenship grants. Elizabeth Anker offers a similar reading of this moment, arguing that ‘these figures for the structures of injustice

¹³² Two critics briefly mention that ‘Caroline’s Wedding’ links back to the first story ‘Children of the Sea’. See Cherie Meacham, ‘Traumatic Realism in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat’, *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 11 (2005), 122–39 (p.125) and Judith Misrahi-Barak, ‘The Vocalisation of Silence in Caribbean short stories by Edwidge Danticat’, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 47 (2006), 1–10 (p.3).

¹³³ Hal Wylie, ‘*Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat’ *World Literature Today*, 70 (1996), 224–25.

¹³⁴ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.157.

[...] underscore Gracina's own feelings of complicity' because 'mortgaged labor and a "war zone" also stand in for the predatory economic exchanges sustaining American prosperity.'¹³⁵ This notion of complicity highlights Grace's inner conflict because she realises that gaining American citizenship is a privilege her parents have sacrificed for. They were part of the supply of cheap migrant labour from Haiti to the US. The seemingly triumphant moment is made more complex as the story unfolds because identity in the diaspora, for these characters, is not made simple by gaining citizenship. For those migrants racialised as black, belonging is far more contingent than legal status may suggest. I will now briefly contextualise some scholarly definitions of diaspora in order to understand the kind of diaspora represented in Danticat's fiction more deeply.

Diaspora is, at its core, a transnational journey. Scholars of diaspora have challenged notions of 'origins' and 'roots', reaching beyond the connection to the homeland, and central to diaspora's original association with Zionism. Robin Cohen, for example, recognises that some diasporas retain this 'idealized [...] collective memory, vision or myth' about the 'homeland'.¹³⁶ Whereas, for Paul Gilroy, diaspora offers an 'alternative to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging'.¹³⁷ In other words, it contests the boundaries of national citizenship. Avtar Brah similarly argues that diaspora as a concept critiques 'discourses of fixed origins'.¹³⁸ Stuart Hall offers a compelling loose definition of what I refer to, throughout my discussion of Danticat's story, as cultural identity:

In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. [...] It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. [...] It has histories — and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. [...] It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Elizabeth Anker, 'Embodying the People in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*' *NOVEL: A Forum On Fiction*, 47 (2014), 149–66 (p.155).

¹³⁶ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.6.

¹³⁷ Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.123.

¹³⁸ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1997), p.180.

¹³⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp.227–37 (p.226).

Similarly to diaspora, cultural identity is not fixed and is closely bound to history and culture. Here Hall troubles the notion that one can return to one's cultural 'origins'. Thus, diasporan cultural identity is an 'unstable' positionality constructed through 'memory, fantasy, narrative and myth' rather than solely through material experiences. I highlight Brah's, Gilroy's and Hall's ideas to foreground a fluid notion of diasporic identification. I retain these specific notions of diaspora and cultural identity in mind as I move to consider the way they complicate the feminine, racialised bodies of Danticat's characters.

Danticat is interested in the ways 'roots' and 'origins' morph to form fluid cultural identities in the diaspora. Returning to 'Caroline's Wedding', when Grace returns home to show her mother her naturalization certificate she is making bone soup, a Haitian remedy she believes can cure 'all kinds of ills'.¹⁴⁰ Danticat's evocation of bones is significant here. They carry meaning in Haitian culture, folklore and Vodou ritual. A common image in Haitian art, bones simultaneously evoke Haiti's legacy of trauma and resistance. Myron M. Beasley's study of ritual performances of death in Port-au-Prince highlights the following:

In the context of Haitian Vodou, to engage with death is to open the physical body to a series of performative possibilities. The body becomes the site of the sacred and profane simultaneously, never fully separating the two but interrogating a host of limitless engagements with the spiritual realm.¹⁴¹

Beasley elaborates to suggest Haitians practising Vodou understand human bones as bodily matter forming a bridge between the human and spirit realms. Bones are the human materiality remaining after death, carrying the past within them. We might again think of the myth of Défilée gathering Dessaline's bones. In 'Caroline's Wedding', bones represent the distinctly Haitian belief in the connection between the body and the spirit, and they are an important part of Danticat's representation of embodiment. Differently to the clear evocation of Vodou in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven', this very subtle reference to bones indicates the far more tentative connection to cultural identity Haitian women create in the diaspora.

Danticat's description of Grace returning home to find Ma making bone soup immediately after she gains American citizenship reveals intergenerational differences in identity construction. For Ma,

¹⁴⁰ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.159

¹⁴¹ Myron M. Beasley, 'Vodou, Penises and Bones: Ritual performances of death and eroticism in the cemetery and the junk yard of Port-au-Prince', *Performance Research*, 15 (2010), 41–7 (p.44).

existing in the diaspora involves continuously evoking Haiti. The soup's strongly scented steam conjures up an empowering affiliation with Haiti, evoking the traditional meaning of bones. Making and drinking bone soup expresses the way Haiti can be carried within bodies, serving as a partial (but not total) rejection of North American culture and disrupting the 'boundless possibilities' Grace's citizenship represents.¹⁴² The ritualistic boiling of the medicinal bones is a healing mechanism creating a tentative connection between Haitian and US environments. This tension between the US and Haiti plays out through Ma, Caroline and Grace within the domestic space of the kitchen, revealing the difficulty involved in creating a coherent identity in the diaspora. Ma's character succeeds in creating, in Robin Cohen's words, the idealised 'myth' of Haiti the homeland affirmed within the traditions she follows. In addition to her cooking, Ma expresses her allegiance to Haiti by opposing her daughter's choice to marry the Dominican Eric, and she regularly attends Sunday Mass at a predominantly Haitian church. Danticat emphasises Ma's strong sense of connection to other Haitians as she grieves for the unnamed young woman drowned at sea during Sunday Mass, alluding to Célianne from the opening story 'Children of the Sea'. Caroline, on the other hand, has no memories of Haiti and struggles to have faith in the homeland their mother imaginatively and materially recreates. Critic Sharrón Eve Sarthou sees Caroline's character as similarly disconnected from her cultural identity. She argues Danticat's story shows that 'when Haitian-Americans go too far and lose touch with their Haitian culture, they lose more than just language. [...] Caroline Azile was born in the U.S. and has little or no interest in retaining much of her family's cultural heritage'.¹⁴³ Whilst I consider Caroline's attempts to retain Haitian cultural identity significant as the story unfolds, it is clear Danticat represents her as the most Westernised of the three. Situated somewhere between her sister and mother, Grace constantly searches for ways to reconcile her Haitian identity with her life in the US. Ma's form of diasporic longing fails to adequately represent her daughters, whose ways of being reject the trajectory they must remain 'rooted' to a place of origin. Differently to Ma, Grace and Caroline are diasporic characters who find other ways of articulating their positionality as young Haitian women in New York.

¹⁴² Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.159.

¹⁴³ Sarthou, 'Unsilencing Défilés Daughters', p.117.

Caroline's bodily representation serves to trouble her status as an American citizen. We are first introduced to her in the opening kitchen scene. Grace reveals an important detail about her sister:

Caroline had been born without her left forearm. The round end of her stub felt like a stuffed dumpling as I squeezed it hello. After my mother was arrested in the sweatshop immigration raid, a prison doctor had given her a shot of a drug to keep her calm overnight. That shot, my mother believed, caused Caroline's condition.¹⁴⁴

Ma's assumption that the injection caused Caroline's disability represents the violence routinely enacted upon black, female, migrant bodies. Despite her American-born status, Caroline's missing forearm serves as testament to the violence enacted against migrants under US immigration laws in a system that depends on cheap migrant labour but continuously denies their humanity. Elizabeth Anker concurs, arguing that '[Caroline's] incorporation into the body politic requires a type of blood sacrifice that literally maims her, permanently impairing her full participation in American society'.¹⁴⁵ However, there are other ways to interpret the character's 'missing' limb. In a compelling scene, Grace recalls one of her childhood memories, imagining the day Caroline's arm would 'come bursting out of Ma's stomach and float back to her'.¹⁴⁶ If we view Caroline's limb as part of her mother, linking the two together like a metaphorical umbilical cord, her 'disability' can be seen differently. Emerging scholarship within black feminist disability theory criticises the Western construction of disability as 'deficit' rather than 'a system of oppression' or 'an identity and variant of human diversity'.¹⁴⁷ As Grace's affectionate 'squeeze hello' shows, Danticat represents Caroline's disability as an accepted part of her identity. The arm's absence becomes a presence. Therefore, the kitchen scene contains a double image: the bone 'missing' from Caroline's body and the animal bones used for the medicinal Haitian broth. In sum, bones in 'Caroline's Wedding' simultaneously represent Haitian Vodou beliefs, the violent legacy of US imperialism, and the strong and affirming mother-daughter connection between Ma and Caroline. Bone imagery reveals how Danticat's characters cultivate a Haitian way of being in the diaspora through embodying multiplicity.

¹⁴⁴ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.159.

¹⁴⁵ Anker, 'Embodying the People in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*', p.155.

¹⁴⁶ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.174.

¹⁴⁷ Angel Love Miles, "'Strong Black Women': African American Women with Disabilities, Intersecting Identities, and Inequality' *Gender and Society*, 33 (2019), 41–63 (p.44).

The story portrays Caroline's body as one that does not fit a normative paradigm, which opens up new possibilities for black feminist resistance. The way Danticat describes the two sisters' childhood wish that Caroline's arm would one day return depicts an empowered body that is able to transform:

When we were younger, Caroline and I would spend all our Sunday mornings in bed wishing that it would be the blessed day that the rest of Caroline's arm would come bursting out of Ma's stomach and float back to her. It would happen like the brass sections in the Ruizes' best rumbas, a meteoric cartoon explosion, with no blood or pain.¹⁴⁸

The return of Caroline's limb is imagined as a bloodless, painless, celebratory spectacle. Taking place on a holy day, the girls' imaginations depict the surreal event, their child-like perspective imagining the impossible to reach beyond the ordinary limits of bodies. Caroline's limb is reimaged as a momentarily severed body part that remained in their mother's 'stomach', viscerally linking her to her mother permanently. Danticat draws parallels between Creole music and dance as reparative practice as the limb's return is accompanied by rumba and a cartoon-like explosion of energy. Saidiya Hartman, referring to the black body during enslavement, sees particular forms of dance and movement (namely 'juba' on the plantation) as a form of 'redress'. For Hartman this form of redress cannot recover the black body from the ravages of slavery, but it can result in a 'transfiguration of the broken and ravenous body into a site of pleasure, vessel of communication, and a bridge between the living and the dead'.¹⁴⁹ It is worth highlighting here that Danticat's characters are fictional in a context long after the transatlantic slave trade was abolished. Nevertheless, Hartman's language (the transfiguration of the body, dance and music as pleasure, the body as communicative) describes a process of redress similar to the function of the sisters' imagination game. Evidently, the meaning of the missing limb goes beyond representing only the violence enacted upon black bodies. Although the sisters know the limb will not reappear, imagining becomes a comforting form of healing. A liminal 'no-place' is opened up in the imagination, connected to the realities of Haiti and the US but set apart from them. This 'no-place' is made possible through the very liminality of living in the diaspora. Within this space, the transfiguration of the body can take place.

¹⁴⁸ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.174.

¹⁴⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p.77.

We have established that articulating an empowering sense of agency in the diaspora is an important part of Danticat's vision of black feminism in 'Caroline's Wedding'. Importantly, diaspora is articulated in the imagination as well as through physical bodily practices. Like Caroline's limb, their late father is an absent presence. Grace and Caroline disobey their mother's rule and refuse to wear the red underwear she told them would prevent their father visiting in their dreams. Whilst my reading of Danticat's fiction has so far argued that redness usually appears alongside moments of resistance, Grace and Caroline choose to wear black underwear. They reject their mother's Haitian superstition because they desire to reconnect with their father, which is possible in the realm of dreams, if not reality. After attending Sunday Mass with her mother, Grace dreams:

That night I dreamt that I was at a costume ball in an eighteenth-century French château, with huge crystal chandeliers above my head. Around me people were wearing masks made from papier-mâché and velvet. Suddenly, one of the men took off his mask. Beneath the mask was my father. [...] I tried to run to him, but I couldn't. My feet were moving but I was standing in the same place, like a mouse on a treadmill.¹⁵⁰

The dream, which echoes Sophie's in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, represents the father as physically unobtainable, just as the attempts to return to the Haiti of Ma's and Grace's past is impossible. Within the luxurious French château setting, evoking Haiti's history of colonisation, the masks call to mind the façade Grace feels in New York. When her father drops his mask, laughing, he frees himself from assimilation into the setting of the French château. The dream seems symbolic of the pressure Grace feels to mask her Haitian cultural identity whilst in New York. It is telling, however, that she cannot reach her father. After the nightmare a distressed Grace writes down the following proverb he once told her: 'you have memory of walking in a mist at dawn in a banana jungle that no longer exists. You have lived this long in this strange world, so far from home, because you remember'.¹⁵¹ Haiti is situated as home. The 'jungle' no longer exists physically but it is remembered within Grace's recollection of the proverb. The proverb is suggestive of the diasporic imaginative space in her mind, a 'strange world' in which she is able to retain a memory of something that no longer exists. Unlike Grace's nightmare, the world the proverb evokes does not cause fear and offers her solace. As Mark Shackleton suggests, 'the father's absence foregrounds the power of memory, the living presence of the past, and a sense of an

¹⁵⁰ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.176.

¹⁵¹ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.177.

absent culture that is constructed through dreams'.¹⁵² Through Grace's memories of her father Danticat contests the notion that all diasporans wish to physically return home. Grace's father's evocation of home creates it in her imagination.

In 'Caroline's Wedding', Danticat consistently returns to embodied transformation and healing through bodily practices. One compelling example of bodily transformation takes place on the morning of Caroline's wedding day. The night before, she admits to feeling pain in the space where her arm should have been and refers to this feeling as 'phantom pain'. She tries on her wedding dress and decides to wear a robotic arm to help alleviate the pain following a doctor's advice. When she explains this phantom pain to her mother, Ma replies 'what? The pain of ghosts?'¹⁵³ This literal translation of the phrase 'phantom pain' reveals an interesting slippage between Haitian and American linguistic heritage. In English the phrase 'phantom pain' means the feeling of pain from a body part which is no longer there, which is especially strange considering Caroline was *born* without her forearm. In Haitian culture the 'phantom' spirit world and material reality are not necessarily imagined as two binary opposites, so when Ma describes Caroline's feeling as 'the pain of ghosts', Danticat hints at the past pains of their ancestors, their father, and their fellow Haitians. Returning again to Anjana Raghavan's scholarship on the body, she draws upon feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz to offer a useful interpretation of the phantom limb:

Grosz uses the phenomenon of phantom limbs to illustrate this blurring of corporeal, material and imaginary realities. The phantom limb is an anomaly — experienced as real but *visibly* absent, and explicable both physiologically and emotionally. It is in this sense that it is both spectral and material, and thus defies the premises of binarized, or oppositional, language. [...] A certain sense of ghostliness, a visceral memory of something which used to be, is recreated as a haunting, a presence that is not governed by optics but by feeling.¹⁵⁴

Caroline's phantom limb similarly represents a 'blurring of corporeal, material and imaginary realities' that are complicated by being in the Haitian diaspora. Thinking of her phantom limb as 'both spectral and material' means it is in a transitory state, mirroring the state of diaspora. The presence of the limb cannot be seen, but it can be felt. This sense of affect, alongside Ma questioning whether phantom pain

¹⁵² Mark Shackleton, 'Haitian Transnationalism: Edwidge Danticat's 'Caroline's Wedding', a case study of literary anthropology', *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, 28 (2003), 15–23 (p.17).

¹⁵³ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.198.

¹⁵⁴ Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism*, p.74.

could be the pain of ghosts suggests that dwelling in Caroline's body is an ancestral connection to Haiti and a familial connection to her mother, the two bound by the traumatic experience in the womb. The phantom pain causes Caroline to wake on the morning of her wedding day drowsy and barely mobile. Ultimately it is not the prosthetic arm, or any Western cures, that heal Caroline from her wedding-morning stupor. Ma bathes Caroline in leaves, perfuming the house 'like a forest', running them across Caroline's skin with a gentle determination.¹⁵⁵ The 'old leaves', perhaps from a past place, hint at Haiti's presence. Ma uses the water and leaves as a healing practice, evoking Haiti to soothe her daughter's anxiety over leaving the domestic home. Haiti, remembered and recreated in the body, bonds the mother and daughters together despite their contrasting experiences in the diaspora. These bodily practices can be read as a black feminist praxis. All three characters root their Haitian way of being in the diaspora through radical bodily practices, allowing them to form a feminist collective identity as they support and heal one another.

Healing, then, is necessary to cultivate an empowering diasporic Haitian identity in New York. The story's ending both supports and complicates the notion of a coherent diasporic identity. Grace and Ma return home after Caroline's registry office wedding to find a passport has arrived, 'addressed to Gracina Azile' which Grace feels is her 'real and permanent name.'¹⁵⁶ Her feelings are described as 'like being in a war zone and finally receiving a weapon of my own, like standing on the firing line and finally getting a bullet-proof vest'.¹⁵⁷ The powerful feeling prompted by her gaining the American passport is marred by her connection to her Haitian cultural identity. We note the use of violent language that Elizabeth Anker rightly points out: 'comparing the military-industrial complex to a "bullet-proof vest," Danticat further invokes the metaphor of the body politic, although redeploying it to register the neo-imperial violence that armors an idealized conception of citizenship.'¹⁵⁸ Whilst her citizenship can never be completely untethered from inequality, ultimately, Grace/Gracina's Haitian name emblazoned on the US passport represents — at least symbolically — an empowering merging of her cultural identity with her place of residence. Rather than depicting a clear sense of resolution, though, Danticat

¹⁵⁵ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.201.

¹⁵⁶ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.213.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Anker, 'Embodying the People in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*', p.155.

troubles this marrying of identities in the next scene, back in the kitchen as Ma brews another pot of bone soup. The ritualistic boiling of the medicinal bone soup is a healing mechanism that attempts to create a connection between Haitian and North American environments, however tentative that may be. The story's final page solidifies a sense of intergenerational solidarity as Grace speaks to her mother using *krik? krak!* call-and-response: 'when I become a mother, how will I name my daughter?'¹⁵⁹ These questions point towards a future where embodied Haitian traditions are carried through the generations. They change and morph, but they can be carried within, never entirely lost to North American assimilation.

I have thus far suggested that embodiment and bodily practices are crucial to articulating a sense of self tied to a black feminist politics for the characters in 'Caroline's Wedding'. Through the representation of bodies, the constraint Ma, Caroline and Grace navigate in the US, and the resistance they cultivate to it, is simultaneously realised. Danticat uses embodiment and bodily practices to complicate diasporic identity through her characters' bodies. 'Caroline's Wedding' explores existence in the diaspora as a transformative process which is articulated through the body and the imagination. Diasporic identity is represented as embodying cultural multiplicity. As Grace's dreams and memories of her father show, remembering is a process of recollecting physical and imaginative experiences. She accepts the liminality of being in the diaspora in her mind. Although Grace's and Caroline's positioning in the diaspora is tentative and difficult to articulate, it is Ma's evocation of Haiti which ends the story with a sense of closure. The family are thus firmly rooted in diasporan cultural identity and kinship. The story closes with lines suggesting finality. Stirring the bone soup, Ma asks Grace: "why is it that when you lose something, it is always in the last place that you look for it?". Grace replies, the lack of speech marks suggesting the reply is to the reader, not her mother: 'because, of course, once you remember, you always stop looking'.¹⁶⁰ Grace refers cryptically to the Haiti she and Caroline carry imagined memories of, tied to an embodied sense of connection to home. We leave Danticat's characters in their domestic home in New York, the air thick with the scent of bone soup, evoking Haiti.

¹⁵⁹ Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*, p.216.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

‘Caroline’s Wedding’ articulates a vision of black feminism that is transnational in its reach, thriving in the transitional space that defines the diaspora. Through its memorialising of Haitian women, ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ reconfigures the Haitian nation in a feminist sense. Both of these perspectives are crucial for creating a black feminist way of reading that can pay attention to the contours of different histories and experiences. In both stories black female characters are able to reassert their agency through embodiment, outside of white supremacist structures in the US context. When it belongs to black women’s bodies, flesh can be the nexus of violence, pain and exploitation, but it is simultaneously the vehicle for radical solidarity and resistance.

My discussion of ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ and ‘Caroline’s Wedding’ has asserted that Danticat offers strategies of resistance through her Haitian female characters to challenge shifting and exploitive structures under US imperialism. As ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ evidences, through specific kinds of black feminist embodiment, we can maintain an awareness of historical imperialism and how it is tied to neoliberalism and the continued exploitation of black women’s bodies. Because capitalist individualism allows neoliberalism to thrive, collectivity is a radical way to resist structures of neoliberal exploitation in the contemporary moment. Returning to Saint-Lot’s assertion that Vodou was feared because it represented unity, it is clear that, for Danticat, black women’s collective unity is a radical tool. Danticat re-appropriates Caribbean folklore as a survival mechanism and literary device which rebels against the violence that Haiti has endured under its dictatorships — regimes which have historically been fuelled by the US. We note that in ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ Manman does not use Vodou only to call upon a spirit; momentarily, she *is* the spirit. Danticat re-appropriates the soucouyant, associating it with divine feminine wrath. In ‘Caroline’s Wedding’ the association of bones with a connection between the body and the spirit allows Danticat to articulate the process of carrying both a Haitian and American identity in the diaspora, acknowledging the tensions at play and imagining a sense of collective kinship in a female-centred family. Across *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, ‘Nineteen Thirty-Seven’ and ‘Caroline’s Wedding’, Danticat achieves a black feminist literary aesthetic of resistance through different manifestations of black feminist embodiment, making use of anti-colonial Vodou beliefs and practice, giving us some of the tools required to reimagine black feminist resistance in the present neoliberal moment.

Chapter Two

Part One

Class, Privilege and *Afropolitan* Spaces in Chimamanda N. Adichie's *Americanah*

Privilege is provisional. Privilege can be denied, withheld, offered grudgingly and summarily withdrawn. Entitlement is impervious to the kinds of verbs that modify privilege. Our people have had to work, scrape for privilege, gobble it down when those who would snatch it away weren't looking.

— Margo Jefferson, *Negroland: A Memoir*, p.37.

In her memoir *Negroland* (2015), Margo Jefferson suggests that being part of the African-American elite is predicated on a kind of privilege that sits in tension with whiteness. To be middle or upper-middle class and African-American is entirely different to being a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP): the large group of elite North Americans who hold influential institutional power. Jefferson suggests that blackness modifies privilege; it morphs, from a stable and tangible acknowledgement of middle-to-upper class entitlement, wealth and power, into a fleeting, unstable and intangible aspirational desire to attain social capital. In her memoir, Jefferson and her family are consistently reminded that despite their highly skilled, well-paid professions and elite education, they will always be 'Negroes' in the eyes of 'America'. But once we consider different cultural contexts — Nigeria, for instance — an important nuance is brought to light. Within Nigeria's predominantly dark-skinned population, difference is often determined not primarily by race, but class. Nigerian diasporans residing in the US further complicate the paradigm of race and class. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is concerned with upper-middle class Nigerians, and the ways that privilege is always relative, arbitrary and contextual. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), 'new ways of conceptualizing oppression and activism that take class differences of a global matrix of domination into account' are important.¹ In the thirty years since Collin's assertion, class is still a pertinent yet underdeveloped area in black feminist theory. Part one of this chapter addresses this challenge through a consideration of class privilege and the ways this interacts with blackness in Adichie's *Americanah*.

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.228.

Since this chapter considers the politics of privilege, it is tempting to include Adichie's significance as a feminist cultural critic and her personal views surrounding privilege, which are indeed relevant to my earlier discussion of the implications of the corporate co-option of feminism under neoliberal capitalism. This facet of her authorship surely interacts with and influences aspects of her fiction, but I do not wish to suggest in this chapter that her fiction is entirely analogous with her discussions of feminism during talks and interviews. However productive might be a discussion of the author as cultural critic, I preface this chapter by making it clear that Adichie's persona is not of primary interest and stands secondary to my discussion of her fiction. I consider sensitively the relationship between the author and the text in light of Barbara Christian's and Hazel Carby's scholarship, who advocate a subjective way of reading.

Adichie is at the forefront of what some critics name a 'third-generation'² of African writers exploring and complicating contemporary issues of class and gender, many of whom are women or non-binary.³ Whilst the intersection of feminism and blackness is present across Adichie's fiction, the most common scholarly lines of enquiry into *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) tend to be her treatment of memory, nationalism, postcolonialism, religion, and war.⁴ African feminisms are increasingly at the forefront of policy, public discussion and popular culture, and African feminist organisations are becoming more prevalent.⁵ This political shift has gradually been reflected in recent criticism of Adichie's fiction. In the first book-length study of her fiction, *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* (2017), Jane Duran, Janet Ndula and Carol Ijeoma Njoku consider the feminist aspects

² Aghogho Akpome, 'Narrating a new nationalism: Rehistoricization and political apologia in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*' *English Academy Review: a Journal of English Studies*, 30 (2013), 22–38 (p.23).

³ In recent years NoViolet Bulawayo, Oyinkan Braithwaite, Akwaeke Emezi, Yaa Gyasi and Namwali Serpell, to name a few, have won literary awards and received mainstream attention.

⁴ See Akpome, 'Narrating a New Nationalism', Anthony Chennells, 'Incultured Catholicisms in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*', *English Academy Review*, 26 (2009), 15–26, Madhu Krishnan, 'Abjection and the Fetish: Reconsidering the Construction of the Postcolonial Exotic in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48 (2012), 26–38, Pauline Uwakweh, '(Re)Constructing Masculinity and Femininity in African War Narratives: The Youth in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 7 (2012), 82–106.

⁵ See for example organisations like Women in Nigeria, 'Better Life for Rural Women' and Forum of Nigerian Women in Politics as detailed in Ayesha Imam's chapter 'Dynamics of WINning: An Analysis of Women in Nigeria (WIN)' in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.280–307 and Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 'Fighting Patriarchy in Nigerian Cultures Through Children's Literature', *CS Canada Studies in Literature and Language*, 10 (2015), 59–66 (p.60–1).

of her novels and short stories.⁶ Zoe Norridge’s sensitive analysis examines the ways that Adichie intimately ties sex to the violence of conflict to form a language that explores and resists violence against women in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.⁷ Another example of such a critique is Eyoh Etim’s article which attempts to read this novel through the lens of African ‘Motherism’— yet fails to consider its female protagonists as agential women in their own right outside of their roles as mothers and wives.⁸ Sandra Nwokocha’s reading of *Purple Hibiscus* successfully critiques the feminist agency of Adichie’s women protagonists, in contrast to readings of the novel that emphasise its ‘reformist’ liberal feminist standpoint, like Cheryl Stobie’s.⁹ Nwokocha emphasises the moments of female agency and resistance in the text — which culminates in the domestic abuser Eugene’s homicide by poisoning, committed by his wife. However, her references to radical feminism draw from a framework dominated by white feminist theorists of the second wave, missing an opportunity to engage with the usefully racialised perspective radical black feminist theory offers.¹⁰

Rather than paying attention to Adichie’s works chronologically, I first focus on *Americanah*, using the concept of ‘Afropolitanism’ as a catalyst to explore the ways in which Adichie’s most recent novel might enact a transnationally feminist discourse. Its publication fuelled a broader scholarly conversation surrounding Adichie’s work, and critics have referred to her as a ‘transcultural’ or ‘Afrodiasporic’ writer as well as an African and feminist author.¹¹ Although beginning my analysis with Adichie’s most recent novel may seem unusual, *Americanah* demonstrates a particularly interesting relationship with neoliberal politics, an ‘Afropolitan’ aesthetic, and an intricately nuanced depiction of black womanhood, all articulated through the lens of cross-cultural migrancy between the Global South and North. An ambitious third novel, spatially and thematically, it illustrates the ways that politics,

⁶ See ed. by Ernest Emenyonu, *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2017).

⁷ Zoe Norridge, ‘Sex as Synecdoche: Intimate Languages of Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* & Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 43 (2012), 18–39 (p.37).

⁸ Eyoh Etim, “‘Herstory’ versus ‘history’: A Motherist Rememory in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*”, *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7 (2020), 1–12.

⁹ Cheryl Stobie, ‘Dethroning the Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*’, *Literature and Theology*, 24 (2010), 421–35 (p.424).

¹⁰ See Sandra Nwokocha, ‘Subversive responses to oppression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54 (2019), 367–83.

¹¹ See Niyi Akingbe and Emmanuel Adeniyi, ‘Reconfiguring Others’: Negotiating Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*’, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 9 (2017), 37–54 and Aretha Phiri, ‘Expanding black subjectivities in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*’, *Cultural Studies*, 31 (2017), 121–42.

economics and globalisation are bound up with public and private life, developed centrally through the third-person narration of our protagonist Ifemelu. Part two of this chapter discusses *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), moving geographically from a novel set between the Global South and North to a short story collection that travels between the two. Adichie's literary interaction with a rising neoliberal world order can be explored through these two texts in illuminating ways.

Americanah is told from the perspective of two Nigerian protagonists, Ifemelu and her childhood sweetheart, Obinze. The novel opens with Ifemelu's visit to an Afro hair salon in Trenton, US, and we learn that Ifemelu has been in the US for fifteen years. The narrative retrospectively reflects on Ifemelu's childhood, her time at University in Nsukka, Nigeria, and the gradual unravelling of the Lagos she knew. Eventually she had little choice but to migrate to the US to complete her university studies. Teasingly, her peers believe she will become a 'true Americanah', a term that describes a Nigerian who assimilates into American culture to such an extent that they identify more heavily with the US, rather than their Nigerian cultural origin. After struggling to find a job to support her studies, Ifemelu begins work as an au pair for a wealthy, white, American family. She then forms a romantic relationship with a member of this family named Curt, moves to Baltimore and starts working for a PR firm. After the relationship breaks down, Ifemelu writes an email to a friend articulating the complications she experienced due to her blackness against Curt's white, male privilege. This email exchange inspires her to start her blog, humorously titled *Raceteenth, or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. Adichie uses the blog as a kind of meta-literary space where Ifemelu adopts an anonymous, witty persona to scathingly critique black migrant life in the US and its intersections with economic exclusion, racism and sexism. The blog sparks critical discussion and debate, and launches her career as a freelance cultural critic, diversity worker and writer. The novel culminates with the end of her next relationship with an African-American academic, Blaine, and her swift move back to Lagos. All the while, Ifemelu has been unable to forget her first love from her hometown, Obinze. Throughout the dual narrative, we learn that Obinze, who always idealised American life, was denied a US visa. Due to continued political unrest in President Buhari's Nigeria, his mother facilitates his visa for a 6-month stay in Britain. When the visa expires, Obinze becomes an illegal immigrant. He is soon deported back to Lagos and, now moving in affluent

circles, becomes a wealthy property developer. At the end of the novel a reunion ensues between the two former lovers back in Nigeria. Through Ifemelu's flawed yet honest characterisation, and the further layer of distance created between Ifemelu and her online identity as a blogger, Adichie creates a lens through which the reader can examine a specific gendered, raced and classed perspective of North American and Nigerian life.

The form of *Americanah* is not linear. The beginning of part one and part two return to the hair salon in Trenton, unfolding into lengthy mediations on Ifemelu's most transformative life experiences which lead to her present condition as an affluent, single, middle-class Nigerian woman living in the US. Part three is far more brief, switching suddenly to Obinze's perspective as a new arrival in London with his temporary visa, forced to take a job cleaning toilets. Part four returns unexpectedly to the US to continue the narrative of Ifemelu's relationship with Curt, moving seamlessly into her next relationship with Blaine and ending with the final scene set in the hair salon. In part five, which is again brief, we return to Obinze in London, who has received an unexpected email from Ifemelu and has been an illegal immigrant since the expiration of his visa. Part six is just a few pages long, as Ifemelu reflects on her nephew Dike's attempted suicide. Finally, part seven narrates Ifemelu's new life in Lagos. This form, I argue, frames the hair salon as one of the central spaces connecting together the disparate parts of the novel. It also highlights a contrast between Ifemelu's experience of upward social mobility in the US and Obinze's downward mobility in the UK. In the interests of brevity I do not consider Obinze's character in depth here. Nevertheless, form is important to how we think about the way class and race is contingent on the shifting dynamics of power, through Ifemelu's eyes.

Americanah was exceptionally well-received and has generated a vast range of critical material, becoming widely included in university syllabuses. Reviewers and scholars alike have found its race politics compelling, critiquing its exposure of the way blackness functions in contrasting ways in different cultural contexts.¹² Aretha Phiri, for example, positions *Americanah* as a text that complicates

¹² Additionally, see Mindi McMann, "'You're black': Transnational perceptions of race in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59 (2018), 200–12, and Subashini Navaratnam, 'Race-in-America Is a Central Character in "Americanah"', *Pop Matters*, 8 August 2013 <<https://www.popmatters.com/173884-americanah-by-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-2495737576.html>> [accessed 07/12/2017].

a previously African-American dominated narrative about blackness in the US, highlighting its ‘expansive vision of blackness’.¹³ Yemisi Ogbe’s review is more critical but equally valuable. She denounces the sheer quantity of concerns and locations the novel spans, leaving some aspects (for example, the nuances of Nigerian culture) falling short of sensitive consideration.¹⁴ Ogbe highlights the author’s presence in the novel, arguing that because Adichie has ‘swum the undercurrents’ of Ifemelu’s journey herself, the novel’s critical commentary is self-conscious, the narrative convoluted, and the protagonist’s judgements contradictory. On the contrary, I suggest that the novel’s broad span of locations makes the narrative mutable, seething with the possibilities and tensions of a transnational mingling of worlds. In my view, Adichie’s personal experience does not constrain the novel but allows her to hold a mirror up to our protagonist to scrutinise her most intimate flaws. Ifemelu’s position as a middle-class Nigerian migrating to pursue education allows her character’s perspective to expose the fault lines between what Shane McCoy refers to as the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ African diaspora — the former referring to African Americans. For McCoy, Adichie’s novel ‘disrupts the romanticism of racial solidarity that too often coalesces around a Pan-Africanist/Afrocentric/Black Power sensibility’.¹⁵ He suggests that exploring the difference between the way blackness is coded in different social locations is paramount to the text: ‘as an emergent “model minority,” the “new” African diaspora represents a foil to native black Americans. Such ideologies are politically fraught with assumptions that too often portray race and blackness as monolithic, static, and ahistorical categories of comparison.’¹⁶ Such critiques are useful in considering the multiplicitous way Adichie interrogates blackness. The use of digital spaces has also generated significant critical attention important to my consideration of black feminist solidarity.¹⁷ Camille Isaac’s focus on Ifemelu’s blog, *Raceteenth*, as an affective digital space pays attention to a critical lacuna: the transcultural communities that can be formed across the novel’s

¹³ Phiri, ‘Expanding black subjectivities’, p.137.

¹⁴ Yemisi Ogbe, ‘*Americanah* and other definitions of supple citizenships’, *The Chimurenga Chronic*, August 2013, pp.8–11.

¹⁵ Shane A. McCoy, ‘The “Outsider Within”: Counter-narratives of the “New” African Diaspora in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*’ *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 11 (2017), 279–94 (p.291).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Additionally, see Serena Guarracino, ‘Writing “So Raw and True”: Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*’, *Between*, 4 (2014), 1–27.

online spaces.¹⁸ Similarly focusing on digital spheres, Miriam Pahl suggests *Americanah* ‘express[es] a form of critical cosmopolitanism’ that adds ‘an ambivalence, a multi-layeredness of meanings to the public and online conversations about mobility, globalization and cosmopolitanism from a specifically Afro-centric perspective.’¹⁹ I revisit Isaac’s and Pahl’s perspectives later in part one of this chapter as I consider the beauty politics of the novel alongside its use of digital spaces. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez’ and Julie Iromuanya’s compelling readings of the novel through the prism of Afro hair will also be more thoroughly discussed.

As a cross-cultural exploration of relationships in a globalised world in which the push and pull of migration is necessary for survival and economic freedom, *Americanah*’s title is fitting, pointing towards cultural exchanges and transient identities across the diaspora. The novel figures neoliberalism at a crucial point during Nigeria’s development, traversing across the Global North and South through an assemblage of experiences specifically attentive to the race and power dynamics unique to a US context. Adichie implicitly calls Nigeria’s political history into question, exploring how it has shaped social life and migration. The presence of the austerity measures put in place by President Muhammadu Buhari’s ruling military regime shapes the novel’s narrative as the catalyst for Ifemelu’s migration to the US. She leaves Nigeria to finish her studies because the university strikes caused by its unstable economy make her future uncertain. The climate of political unrest was due to Buhari’s military rule, achieving power through a *coup d’état* that disbanded the democratic government. Buhari aimed to improve Nigeria’s economy by controlling the budget deficit, decreasing the demand for imports, and making capital expenditure cuts in the education sector.²⁰ In *Americanah* we sense these mounting tensions through Obinze’s mother, a professor at Nsukka University playing an active role in the strikes. The unrest created by domestic austerity affected Nigerian citizens because of the inequality it fuelled.⁶ In the novel Ifemelu’s father loses his job, putting pressure on her family as their comfortable lifestyle shifts into a struggle to make ends meet. However, it is important to note that economic capital is not

¹⁸ Camille Isaac, ‘Mediating Women’s Globalised Existence through Social Media in the work of Adichie and Bulawayo’ *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 17 (2016), 174–188.

¹⁹ Miriam Pahl, ‘Afropolitanism as critical consciousness: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s and Teju Cole’s internet presence’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28 (2016) 73–87 (p.74–5).

²⁰ Tom Forrest, *Politics and Economic Development in Nigeria* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), p.98.

the only form of capital that shapes the experiences of Adichie's characters. Pierre Bourdieu's scholarship on the forms of capital can help us to unravel how it plays out as power in *Americanah*. Bourdieu asserts that 'cultural' and 'social' capital are just as vital as economic capital in understanding the 'function of the social world'.²¹ Particularly useful is his three-fold definition of cultural capital; it may be 'embodied', an accumulation of labour that becomes 'objectified' (in object form) or 'institutionalised' (e.g. an academic qualification).²² Ifemelu is able to obtain social capital by entering into a number of friendship groups that are either connected to her studies (both in Nsukka and Philadelphia) or attained through her romantic relationships with Curt and Blaine. Additionally, the digital networks she becomes a part of online, particularly as a blogger, cause 'material' and 'symbolic' profits to occur.²³ Bourdieu's terms are useful in order to outline that my discussion of capital here refers to economic, cultural and social capital.

To critique *Americanah*'s geographically trilateral form (from Nigeria to the US and back), it is necessary to interrogate the narrative's transnational reach and how this may shape its racial politics. Therefore, my analysis in part one of this chapter is split into two parts. I first introduce Afropolitan debates and use this discourse as a way to interrogate Adichie's use of the hair and beauty politics of black womanhood in North America, in order to create what I term an Afropolitan feminism. Second, I explore how Ifemelu's return to the newly neoliberal city of Lagos is negotiated, and the way this morphs the novel's Afropolitanism and complicates the black feminist politics it engages with. The protagonist's experiences are enabled by a neoliberal world order that has implications for my analysis as I consider the ways that the novel attempts to grapple with class-based tensions. Teasing out these tensions is central to my consideration of *Americanah* as a potentially unifying transnational black feminist text.

Since Taiye Selasi published her infamously controversial blog post, 'Bye, Bye Babar' (2005), the critical debate surrounding Afropolitanism has flourished. For Selasi, Afropolitanism aptly captures the post-independence-born generation of Africans whose aesthetic conveys a 'Cultural Hybrid: kente

²¹ Pierre Bordieu, 'The Forms of Capital' in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by John Richardson (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1986), pp.241–58 (p.242).

²² Bordieu, 'The Forms of Capital', p.243.

²³ Bordieu, 'The Forms of Capital', p.248.

cloth worn over low-waisted jeans; “African Lady” over Ludacris bass lines; London meets Lagos meets Durban meets Dakar.²⁴ These Afropolitans are highly educated ‘cultural mutts’, upwardly mobile and ‘coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you’.²⁵ Selasi’s Afropolitans embody a specific kind of upper middle-class black diasporic cosmopolitan multiculturalism. She continues:

Were you to ask any of these beautiful, brown-skinned people that basic question – ‘where are you from?’ – you’d get no single answer from a single smiling dancer. [...] ‘Home’ for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year). Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many.

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants [...]. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes.²⁶

For Selasi, these African-origin peoples usually reside in diasporic locations and are culturally hybrid racially, linguistically and in terms of location and places they call ‘home’.²⁷ The Afropolitan’s sense of selfhood is transnational. ‘Home’ for them is a feeling, a connection to a place that could be as large as a nation-state or as small as a family member’s kitchen. The tone of the piece pivots upon affluence and social mobility; responses to her essay rightly emphasise her lack of engagement with politics and economics, and rebuke her elitist portrayal of the Afropolitans. Binyavanga Wainaina, for example, criticised the ‘culture commodification’ now associated with Afropolitanism at the 2012 African Studies Association Conference.²⁸ Referring to the Afropolitan aesthetic portrayed in ‘Bye, Bye Babar’, Emma Dabiri highlights Afropolitanism’s flaws as a descriptor: ‘in an era such as ours, characterized by the chilling commodification of all walks of life – including the commodification of dissent – we should be especially vigilant about any movement that embraces commodification to the extent that Afropolitanism does.’²⁹ Their critiques have leverage considering that under-privileged citizens are

²⁴ Taiye Selasi, ‘Bye-Bye Babar’, *The Lip*, 3 March 2005 <<https://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>> [accessed 10/10/2017]. The original correct title (as Selasi clarifies in an interview) is in fact ‘Bye, Bye Babar’.

²⁵ Selasi, ‘Bye, Bye Babar’.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Selasi, ‘Bye, Bye Babar’.

²⁸ Emma Dabiri, ‘Why I’m Not an Afropolitan’, *Africa is a Country*, 21 January 2014 <<http://africasacountry.com/2014/01/why-im-not-an-afropolitan/>> [accessed 12/10/2017].

²⁹ Emma Dabiri, ‘Why I’m (Still) Not an Afropolitan’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28 (2016) 104–8 (p.104).

clearly excluded from the description of a well-travelled, upper-middle-class elite in Selasi's essay. Class bias is palpable in this description of their aesthetic, but Selasi's use of Afropolitanism to reframe what it means to be African is, for my purposes here, more interesting. It is imperative to note that Selasi's Afropolitanism is seriously committed to concretising the multiplicity of what it means to be African. Her suggestion that Afropolitans are marked by their refusal to 'essentialise Africa'³⁰ and their willingness to engage with issues that affect African countries whilst celebrating the continent's contributions to the world is compelling. As we will see, Afropolitanism in fiction can become much more than a class descriptor.

Achille Mbembe's engagement with the term in his 2007 essay 'Afropolitanism' extends Selasi's notion of convivial cultural mixing whilst complicating the idea that Afropolitanism is elitist. For Mbembe, Afropolitanism holds the potential to meaningfully articulate 'our [African] way of belonging to the world, of being in the world' which has historically 'always been marked by, if not cultural mixing, then at least the interweaving of worlds.'³¹ He asserts that a new movement is needed, set apart from and more contemporary than Pan-Africanism and Négritude, which could revive intellectual life and art in Africa. Due to its global perspective, he advocates Afropolitanism's outward-facing sensitivity to the diaspora.³² Mbembe's conceptualisation of Afropolitanism harnesses the potential for its transnational and influential global reach. Despite the usefulness of his articulation of the concept, his engagement with politics also falls a little short, like Selasi's. Without a sustained engagement with politics and economics, his Afropolitanism may not do enough work as an encompassing descriptor for African and Afrodiasporic art and literatures that remain implicated with systematic neocolonialism. Whilst Mbembe positions Afropolitanism as a usefully broad, but nevertheless abstract discourse, it is useful to turn to Simon Gikandi's more carefully considered and inclusive ideas about Afropolitanism as praxis.

Gikandi suggests that Afropolitans may fall into two categories: the non-elites who *imagine* Afropolitanism through consuming media images (for example, taxi drivers with smart phones) and the

³⁰ Selasi, 'Bye, Bye Babar'.

³¹ Achille Mbembe, 'Afropolitanism' in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. by Simon Njami, (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2007), pp.26–9 (p.28).

³² Mbembe, 'Afropolitanism', p.29.

elites, educated in the West, that *live* Afropolitanism as an experience of ‘being born across boundaries.’³³ Gikandi admits the elite’s privileged position and simultaneously diagnoses their Afropolitan position as an ‘anxiety’ that may indeed be a response to ‘the incomplete project of transnationalism, or globalisation’.³⁴ The fractured form of Afropolitan novels may ‘rehearse’ this anxiety. In other words, Afropolitanism responds to both the failed utopian dream of post-independence Africa, and acts as a creative way of exploring the fluid, globalised sense of being African in the world. For Gikandi, Afropolitanism moves away from the celebratory to create a new space.³⁵

In their engagement with Gikandi’s ideas, Eva Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek posit in *In Search of the Afropolitan* (2016) that the ‘Afropolitan novel’ attempts to ‘stipulate human engagement across spatial and experiential divides.’³⁶ Although I would not necessarily pigeonhole the novel into this category, *Americanah* certainly exemplifies an Afropolitan experience. The novel’s seven parts span Nigeria, the US and Britain. Through face-to-face interactions, emails, phone calls and within the blogosphere, the novel is centrally concerned with human engagement within and across borders through communication. Knudsen and Rahbek contend that literature can offer a far more nuanced exploration of Afropolitanism than non-fictional cultural studies provide.³⁷ In other words, working through tensions and interactions laden with complex power dynamics is perhaps best explored through the mode of creative, exploratory fiction. Knudsen and Rahbek’s text includes a further essay by Taiye Selasi revisiting ‘Bye, Bye Babar’ in lieu of the reception it received, concluding that her intention was to ‘tell *a* truth’ (emphasis added) and ‘create a space’ for a particular but significant social experience.³⁸ Selasi’s suggestion that writing creates spaces for identities like Afropolitanism to take shape deserves further critical exploration. By interrogating the ways that Adichie’s engagement with Afropolitan identities and feminist politics interact with one another, we can unearth a kind of Afropolitan feminism. Amidst Selasi’s upwardly-mobile and clearly class-biased, yet identity-defining vision of

³³ Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), p.49.

³⁴ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, pp.49–50.

³⁵ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.51.

³⁶ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.21.

³⁷ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.42.

³⁸ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.290.

Afropolitanism, Mbembe's call for Afropolitanism to fuel an art movement which can uphold the potential for an aestheticization of Africa's influence on the world, and Gikandi's vision of a fluid and inclusive African world-view, *Americanah* certainly exposes some contradictions and fault lines amidst these Afropolitan debates.

Etymologically, the 'Afro' in 'Afropolitan' replaces the 'cosmo' in 'cosmopolitan'. 'Afro's meaning reaches beyond 'African', geographically connecting disparate peoples racialised as black across the diaspora. One of the differentiations between 'Afropolitan' and 'cosmopolitan' is the racialised black body. It is appropriate, then, to suggest there is a connection between Adichie's use of embodiment and the Afropolitanism of her novel. Protagonist Ifemelu's bodily materialism forms a necessary part of the narrative's Afropolitan imaginary. Specifically, Adichie uses the cultivation of Ifemelu's Afro hair as a figurative means to articulate and explore the possibilities of the literary spaces she creates. The Afropolitan experience that the novel elucidates brings together the people interacting in Ifemelu's world, and black women's hair serves as a contentious site where exterior social forces and interior conflict mingle. In an interview about *Americanah*, Adichie discloses the thematic importance of hair and race:

[*Americanah*] is about love. I wanted to write an unapologetically old-fashioned love story. But it is also about race and how we reinvent ourselves. It is about how, when we leave home, we become another version of ourselves. And it is also about hair...³⁹

Love, race, and home are central concerns and how they are mediated through hair is equally important. Although Adichie mentions it almost as a playful afterthought, hair is one of the most fruitful ways that Afropolitanism is expressed through black women's bodies in the novel.

Afro hair is, as Kobena Mercer asserts, socialised through cultural practices of grooming, a 'raw material' upon which 'meanings and value' are ascribed.⁴⁰ Mercer speaks to the long history of black women's exclusion from discourses of beauty which has consequences for the negotiation of

³⁹ Kate Kellaway, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'My new novel is about love, race... and hair'', *The Guardian*, 7 April 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2013/apr/07/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-americanah-interview>> [accessed 01/12/2017].

⁴⁰ Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.100–1.

beauty within the text.⁴¹ Janell Hobson recognises that working-class black women have historically used hair straightening and skin lightening as a way to align themselves with respectability ideals tied to white supremacy.⁴² The specific way that black women have been excluded from European perceptions of beauty has profound consequences for the institutionalised value of Afro hair. Historically, it has been excluded, erased, and reformed to be interpolated into dominant structures of power. bell hooks highlights the context of the coding of Afro hair in the US:

During the 1960s black people who actively worked to critique, challenge, and change white racism pointed to the way in which black people's obsession with straight hair reflected a colonized mentality. It was at this time that the natural hairdo, the 'afro', became fashionable as a sign of cultural resistance to racist oppression and as a celebration of blackness. Naturals were equated with political militancy. Many young black folks found just how much political value was placed on straightened hair as a sign of respectability and conformity to societal expectations when they ceased to straighten their hair.⁴³

hooks refers here to the Civil Rights Movement. The Afro during this time became an iconic symbol of Black Power. The cultural coding of Afro hair has shifted since this moment, yet it still often symbolises the radical rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards. Adichie challenges structural anti-blackness in *Americanah* during moments in which Ifemelu either conforms to European beauty standards or contests them, using several spaces in the text which are Afropolitan in nature. Through the lens of Afro hair, the next section endeavours to expose the ways Adichie uses the bodies of her black female characters to navigate through and across changing Afropolitan environments.

Adichie strategically changes Ifemelu's hair at significant moments throughout the narrative. In doing so, the author equips the protagonist with the embodied capital that changes the way she experiences the world. This embodied capital converts into social capital as she becomes part of certain groups, especially during her relationships with WASP Curt and African-American academic Blaine. Furthermore, the cultivation and transformation of Ifemelu's hair is relevant to the economies of beauty that the novel elucidates. My understanding of 'beauty' as an economy draws from Vanita Reddy's

⁴¹ For a full discussion of the historical and systematic exclusion of black women from Western notions of beauty and respectability, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (Routledge: New York, 2005) and Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (Routledge: New York, 2005).

⁴² Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, p.106.

⁴³ bell hooks, 'Straightening Our Hair', *Zeta Magazine*, September 1988
<<https://zcomm.org/zmagazine/straightening-our-hair-by-bell-hooks/>> [accessed 31/03/2020].

focus on the racialisation of beauty and the way it can transform into cultural capital.⁴⁴ To tease out Adichie's careful use of embodiment I focus on two moments in which the cultivation of Afro hair fuels interactions that highlight the innermost workings of power and how it creates divisions based on race, class and nationality. First, I turn to the novel's opening and the hair-braiding scene in the salon in Trenton. The salon is both a point of departure from which Adichie retrospectively narrates Ifemelu's past to build a picture of the events that led to her decision to return to Lagos, and a scene which is consistently returned to, forming a 'space' which the rest of the novel pivots around. Second, I discuss Adichie's portrayal of Ifemelu's decision to apply relaxer to her hair after Curt facilitates a new job for her at a PR firm, eventually leading to the emotional process of re-growing and learning to accept her natural Afro hair.

At the novel's opening, Ifemelu contemplates the fact that she must travel from Princeton, where she works as a university fellow, to Trenton to braid her hair. The Afro hair salon in Trenton is returned to consistently throughout the narrative, up until Ifemelu's move back to Lagos. Adichie's choice to frame the narrative around the protagonist's encounter in a hair salon prior to her move from Princeton back to Lagos is significant. The form of the narrative frames hair as a form of cultural capital and — more tentatively — empowerment. In the passage below Ifemelu stands on a train platform contemplating her impressions of the various cities she has lived in and visited:

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her [...]

But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton [...] and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair.⁴⁵

Princeton is serene, peaceful, and odourless, connoting an upper middle-class aesthetic which is synonymous with whiteness. Princeton's cleanliness differs from the distinctively smelling cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore that Ifemelu describes next. Adichie's sensory language lends Princeton an untouchable aura, defining it as a place where buildings and trees are seen from a distance, but not felt

⁴⁴ Vanita Reddy, 'Jhumpa Lahiri's Feminist Cosmopolitics and the Transnational Beauty Assemblage', *Meridians*, 11 (2013), 29–59.

⁴⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (London: Forth Estate, 2014), p.3.

or physically lived within. Trenton, on the other hand, is a city with shop windows adorned with signs that state ‘QUICK TAX REFUND’,⁴⁶ suggesting it is a poorer area with a larger migrant population. We note that to find an Afro hair salon, Ifemelu must travel away from wealthy, predominantly white Princeton, causing her palpable discomfort in the ‘blazing’ heat, to a place populated with run-down, migrant-owned businesses. Ifemelu’s blackness is implicitly excluded from the white middle-class neighbourhood in Princeton. Yet, she feels simultaneously repelled and engrossed by the social and racial politics of both places. This important paradox is enacted across the novel through the trope of hair. Adichie frames Ifemelu’s feelings of conflict as the distinctly Afropolitan predicaments of a Nigerian living a middle-class lifestyle in the US, carrying implications for her racialised body. Throughout, Adichie uses hair as both a means to acquire cultural capital *and* a way of challenging structural anti-blackness which ascribes more value to certain straighter hair textures and styles. In the words of Julie Iromuanya, ‘the Africentric hair aesthetic, and the movement associated with it, is used as both a vehicle and a formal frame to explore the most pressing concerns at the heart of *Americanah*.’⁴⁷ In sum, the novel’s opening invites questions about transcultural identity and belonging within a country structured by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and hair is a compelling metaphor through which to explore how these structures implicate black women like Ifemelu.

For Afropolitan predicaments, though, Adichie posits Afropolitan solutions. In part two of the novel, which is narrated retrospectively, Ifemelu has graduated from college with a Communications degree. Her vague interest in roles in the media industry quickly morphs into a desire to find any job to begin a career because her lack of American citizenship repels employers. When the well-connected Curt arranges an interview for her at a PR firm, Ifemelu is grateful but uneasy, feeling powerless in the shadow of his effortless navigation of the corporate world. When a friend suggests she applies chemical hair straightener to her natural, neatly braided hair for the interview, advising that ‘nobody says this kind of stuff but it matters’,⁴⁸ she decides to comply with the suggestion:

⁴⁶ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.16.

⁴⁷ Julie Iromuanya, ‘Are We All Feminists? The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*’ *Meridians*, 16 (2018), 163–83 (p.164).

⁴⁸ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.202.

Ifemelu felt only a slight burning, at first, but as the hairdresser rinsed out the relaxer [...] needles of stinging pain shot up from different parts of her scalp, down to different parts of her body, back up to her head.

‘Just a little burn,’ the hairdresser said. ‘But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl, you’ve got the white-girl swing!’

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognise herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. Curt looked uncertain when he saw her.⁴⁹

The pain that Ifemelu feels in her scalp sends ‘shooting pains’ to the rest of her body as Adichie connects changing the outward appearance of the body to the inward feelings of pain it has caused. By relaxing it, Ifemelu has traded her kinky natural hair for straight hair and the embodied cultural capital it represents. She feels this loss viscerally as she ‘mourns’ the ‘organic’ hair with its retrospectively more attractive, defiant ‘verve’ that should not have ‘died’; or, we could add, should not have *had* to die. Irreversibly transforming her natural hair to obtain ‘*the* white-girl swing’ (emphasis added) equates to gaining the embodied cultural capital that changes into social capital, which is exemplified when Ifemelu passes the interview and is accepted into the company. The moment stands in for the broader acceptance of a cultivated kind of blackness into white America’s respectability politics that codes unchanged Afro hair as both ‘bad hair’ and overtly ‘political’.⁵⁰ Thus, the matter of hair becomes a political one. Although Curt’s social capital creates a job opportunity for Ifemelu, as a black woman who is also a non-US citizen, she must gain embodied cultural capital to significantly increase her chances of acceptance, which then may equate to profit. In addition to her sense that a part of her body, and therefore her sense of self, has died, the job interview stirs other affective feelings. Ifemelu recalls her Nigerian friends who struggle to access money and visas and feels a ‘soberness’. In contrast, she is like a ‘pink balloon, weightless, floating to the top, propelled by things outside of herself.’⁵¹ The balloon is a metonym for Ifemelu’s newly acquired social status and upward mobility. A cloying sense of falseness clouds her enjoyment of the starkly different lifestyle of ‘contentment’ and ‘ease’⁵² she enjoys whilst with Curt. Her lack of control over her circumstances, which is effectively her lack of power due

⁴⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.203.

⁵⁰ Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, pp.100–10.

⁵¹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.202.

⁵² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.200.

to her own limited social capital, being a black, female migrant from the Global South, leads to a sense of alienation closely followed by a feeling of disembodiment. The way that Adichie ties agency, or the lack of it, so closely to Ifemelu's body emphasises the objectification and marginalisation of black women's bodies.

If the transformation of hair is linked to Ifemelu's upward mobility in corporate North America, then Adichie also uses the trope of hair to challenge those very same structures. Some months on, Ifemelu's Kenyan college friend Wambui offers her opinion, explaining that her relaxed hairstyle seems like a 'prison';⁵³ a constant battle to keep straight. Wambui convinces her to cut off the relaxed lengths of her hair and wear the short, natural regrowth as an Afro. Ifemelu is initially repelled by her new haircut, feeling 'ugly', and her self-esteem plummets further when she discovers that Curt has been having an online affair with a 'brassy' blonde. According to Ifemelu, the images the blonde sends Curt have an 'air of desperation'⁵⁴ and the brazen messages reflect her sense of entitlement to pursue him. Ifemelu notices the blonde's long hair and internalises the conventional American beauty she embodies, feeling a shrinking sense of self-worth. Although Curt's online messages serve to proliferate Ifemelu's blackness as undesirable, she regains agency through engaging with an entirely different online space: 'HAPPILYKINKYNAPPY.com'. This cyber community of black women trade haircare tips and criticise the beauty industry, validating their blackness and self-worth by sharing their 'natural hair journeys' and exchanging knowledge. They sculpt 'a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal.'⁵⁵ Residing in different locations but united by the internet, these diasporic black women cultivate solidarity to create an online space that rejects the insidious mainstream culture that proliferates whiteness as analogous with beauty. This sense of solidarity amongst black women created through hair grooming practices is not novel. bell hooks, describing her childhood memories, has spoken of 'hair pressing' as a 'ritual of black women's culture of intimacy' that created camaraderie, in spite of the broader structures of white supremacy that hair pressing symbolised.⁵⁶ Afro hair-care practices are an important source of culture and social bonding that can be traced back even further;

⁵³ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.208.

⁵⁴ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.210.

⁵⁵ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.212.

⁵⁶ hooks, 'Straightening Our Hair'.

Emma Dabiri, for instance, foregrounds the importance of hair braiding and grooming in expressing social status in West African Yoruba culture.⁵⁷ The use of a digital space, however, is a new way to create an alternative beauty standard that is Afrocentric. HappilyKinkyNappy.com is embedded in the broader cultural context of the natural hair movement of the 2010s. According to Tameka Ellington's study of African American women with natural hair engaging with social networking sites (SNS), 'communication through SNS offered emotional support via empathy, love, trust, and caring in order to help the participants conquer their natural hair fears and embarrassments'.⁵⁸ Hair, in the Afropolitan space of the website, does the transnational work of Afropolitan feminism, creating virtual solidarity through practices of bodily beautification. This communication crosses cultural boundaries between black women from various places who have different experiences of the world. The digital space facilitated by the website is created through black female exchanges and connections. It is a *black* space that challenges the diversity myths proliferated in neoliberal North America.

It is no coincidence that Adichie quickly follows Ifemelu's newfound confidence in her natural hair with her chance meeting with an old school friend from Lagos. After years of silence, she sends a hurried email to her ex-boyfriend, Obinze, apologising and admitting that she misses him. I suggest that Ifemelu's return to the 'roots' of her hair propels a longing for another sort of return, to the 'roots' of her romantic relationship with her Nigerian ex-lover. After all, the loss of Obinze meant the loss of a uniquely intimate connection to her home. Rather than framing Ifemelu's return to Nigeria as an attempt to claim a kind of 'authentic' blackness or to escape the way she is racialised in the US, though, Adichie suggests that the protagonist must return home to seek a less pretentious sense of self more closely tied to her Nigerian cultural heritage. Revealingly, Ifemelu's attempted reconciliation with Obinze is followed by her betrayal of Curt. She sabotages the relationship by having casual sex with another man. More than an act of revenge for his online flirtation with the blonde, Ifemelu seems to have rejected (at this particular moment) the privileged white American social world that she can never comfortably exist within. Although morally dubious, adultery is figured in the novel as an attempt to search for a more

⁵⁷ See Emma Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), chapter 'Ain't Got The Time' [on Audiobook].

⁵⁸ Tameka N. Ellington, 'Social networking sites: a support system for African-American women wearing natural hair', *International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education*, 8 (2015), 21–9 (p.26).

sincere and agential self. The feminist community HappilyKinkyNappy.com bolsters Ifemelu's empowerment, followed by her independent and impulsive decision to return to Nigeria. Taiye Selasi admits, in her reflection on 'Bye, Bye Babar', that her vision of Afropolitanism aimed to create a space that was far more difficult to access prior to the rise of social media and the blogosphere. Because Adichie's novel imagines the work that online communities do to connect Afropolitans across the African diaspora, realising black feminist empowerment and solidarity through expelling the white gaze from digital space and the sharing of hair practices that affirm the beauty and value of black women, it is possible to consider it an Afropolitan feminist space.

Afropolitan feminism is an emerging, slippery and tentative idea that few black feminist scholars have explored. Realised in this part of Adichie's novel, Afropolitan feminism generates agency through sparking empowering conversations, lending a transformative meaning to the connections between and across the African diaspora in digital space. For writer Minna Salami, one of the early advocates of the ideology known for her blog *MsAfropolitan*, Afropolitanism is partly a personal identity and a 'philosophical position about the world' that is in conversation with the concept of diaspora, but is heavily philosophical rather than physical.⁵⁹ Its philosophical elements seem suited, then, to the digital sphere, removed as it is from physical space. For Salami, Afropolitanism is inherently feminist because 'many of its theorists are feminists'; it is a serious 'twenty-first century idea' and so necessarily must be inclusive of feminist ideology.⁶⁰ She also tentatively asks what Afropolitan feminism might look like as an emerging, future-centred feminism in dialogue with African feminisms and black feminism, and, I would add, potentially able to extend theoretical positions in a globalised arena.⁶¹ On the contrary, my argument so far in this thesis has shown that a theory *in itself* cannot be inherently feminist; it must actively contribute to dismantling the structures that oppress women in the material world. Afropolitan spaces, therefore, must be critically examined in order to determine their potential to enact a *radical* black feminism. Afropolitan feminism in literature has been thoroughly

⁵⁹ Minna Salami, 'My Views on Afropolitanism' *MsAfropolitan*, date unknown
<<https://www.msafropolitan.com/my-views-on-afropolitanism>> [accessed 13/03/2020].

⁶⁰ Salami, 'My Views on Afropolitanism'.

⁶¹ Minna Salami, 'What is African Feminism, Actually?' *MsAfropolitan*, 6 December 2017
<<https://www.msafropolitan.com/2017/12/what-is-african-feminism-actually.html>> [accessed 13/03/2020].

considered by one scholar, Bridget Tetteh-Batsa, in an unpublished PhD thesis. Focusing on *Americanah*, she establishes that Afropolitan feminism offers ‘an Afropolitan way of knowing, a kind of critical consciousness trained on the politics of negotiating America’s racialized topography’ and remains ‘moored to an African sisterhood, or *transnational female kinships*’ (emphasis added).⁶² The potential for Afropolitan feminism to facilitate this kind of feminist kinship fits my purposes in this thesis. Building upon Salami’s argument in a specifically literary direction, Tetteh-Batsa’s view is convincing because it advocates for a strand of black feminism that functions in an empowering way (at least for the protagonist in the text). However, by uncritically adopting Selasi’s model of Afropolitanism, without considering the less privileged as legitimate Afropolitans also, the Afropolitan feminism Tetteh-Batsa uncovers is in danger of reinforcing class inequality rather than seeking to create solidarity between *all* black women.

It is important, then, to more carefully consider the kind of black feminist solidarity created through the digital spaces in *Americanah*. Miriam Pahl’s perspective argues that Adichie’s novel ‘implement[s] Afropolitanism in social media’ which cannot be reduced to its ‘commercial dimension’ and remains ‘critical and transformative’.⁶³ The Afropolitan social media space, argues Pahl, in part serves to ‘challeng[e] dominant ideologies of capitalism, cultural hierarchies and globalization’.⁶⁴ Whilst I concur that HappilyKinkyNappy.com is indeed a critical and transformative space in terms of its challenge to Eurocentric beauty ideals, I would not go as far to say it has the capacity to challenge capitalism; it is, after all, predicated on economies of beauty which involve product consumption. Further, not *all* black women have access to this digital space, particularly in parts of the Global South where access to internet may be intermittent or non-existent. Overall, this website is a feminist space for some, but does not quite become a *radical* feminist space because it does not critique capitalism nor create solidarity with the most disadvantaged black women. Indeed, as Julie Iromuanya argues, ‘the Natural Hair Movement is linked to a capitalist marketplace’ and therefore ‘working-class immigrant women, particularly those without computer training, English language skills, or access to the internet,

⁶² Bridget Tetteh-Batsa, ‘To “Own Yourself a Little More”: Afropolitan Feminism on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of North Dakota, 2018), pp.32–3.

⁶³ Pahl, ‘Afropolitanism as critical consciousness’, p.84.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

have difficulty marketing their services to a web-savvy generation'.⁶⁵ According to Iromuanya, this can create a rift between poorer immigrant women working in the hair industry and their customer base. One disadvantage of a space like HappilyKinkyNappy.com is that it may further compound such divides.

Whilst it is not applicable to *all* women, we have established that Afropolitan feminism exists digitally in *Americanah* in the form of the online Afro hair community. But there are other Afropolitan spaces in the novel that inhabit the material world and, I argue, are not as successful at creating feminist solidarity. Let us turn to consider the second crucial Afropolitan space in the novel: the Afro hair salon in Trenton. As the only space in the US part of the narrative setting that remains predominantly outside of whiteness (at least until later in the narrative, when a white American woman enters to enquire about hair braiding), the culturally coded and ritualistic nature of hair care creates a particularly intimate place where several African-diasporic and African-American women can interact. Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez similarly reads the salon space in *Americanah* as 'a contested terrain where beauty constructions blend and clash with the interchange of knowledge and experiences between Black women of different origins and social status'.⁶⁶ As we return to this space several times throughout the novel, the class divide between migrants becomes both a barrier and a facilitator for communication. The tension plays out most clearly through Ifemelu's various successes and failures as she interacts with her Senegalese hair braider, Aisha. Hair acts as the social and economic currency that enables a connection between the two. In the mind of our protagonist, the mutual African lineage that Aisha sees enables the expectation of a certain kind of conversational exchange, whilst accentuating other barriers between them. Throughout the scene, Ifemelu is irked by the heat, the dirt, and the smell of Chinese food in the salon. Aisha's demeanour deepens their tense conversations. As Aisha begins to braid Ifemelu's hair, she culturally stereotypes Nigerians in an essentialist manner, stating that she thought Ifemelu was Yoruba, not Igbo, because 'you dark and Igbo fair'.⁶⁷ Ifemelu is alienated by and estranged from Aisha, and their interactions reflect her discomfort with their encounter. When Aisha states that she dates two Igbo

⁶⁵ Iromuanya, 'The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in *Americanah*', p.168–71.

⁶⁶ Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez, 'Hair politics in the blogosphere: Safe spaces and the politics of self-representation in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55 (2019), 66–79 (p.69).

⁶⁷ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.14.

men, her sexually suggestive tone repels Ifemelu, who imagines the discolouration on Aisha's skin transforming into 'ghastly sores'.⁶⁸ Adichie holds Ifemelu up to scrutiny when her middle-class 'Americanah' lifestyle is disrupted by interactions with working-class migrants from different African countries. This interaction points towards Ifemelu's disconnection with the lives and experiences of poorer migrant women, now that she lives in Princeton. Later, when Aisha says her sister is from 'Africa' and Ifemelu asks for specifics, she is insulted by Aisha's response that Ifemelu does not 'know' America and the way Africa is routinely essentialised.⁶⁹ Aisha has attempted to create a competitive atmosphere between the two. Here, Ifemelu decides she does not like Aisha and curtails the conversation. Iromuanya reads this moment similarly, arguing that the usual 'comforts and privileges that are readily accessible to Ifemelu in her world (proximity to racial whiteness and its privileges, Western consumerism, cleanliness, English language, etc.) are stripped from her in this setting, and she is discomfited as a result.'⁷⁰ The barrier that has been created between the two characters exemplifies the class divides that feminist theorists attempt to overcome by advocating a politics of solidarity.

It is important to note that even in the Afro hair salon space, primarily outside of whiteness, Adichie consistently narrates failed interactions. These failures indicate that an Afropolitan space cannot in and of itself overcome class boundaries between black women. Aisha and Ifemelu's breakdown in communication signifies that the class bifurcation between them renders their interactions a failure during the early stages of their exchange, highlighting that it is no simple feat to construct solidarities between women. Several class and cultural boundaries are grappled with in the salon space, but few critics (bar Iromuanya) recognise the significance of class difference between black women.⁷¹ In chapter eighteen, for example, the salon owner Mariama's stoic tolerance of the patronising statements and stereotypes that both her African-American and white American customers direct towards her show that within the salon, interactions between women are structured by boundaries that

⁶⁸ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.15.

⁶⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.15.

⁷⁰ Iromuanya, 'The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in *Americanah*', p.171.

⁷¹ Another exception is Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez, who mentions in the article 'Hair politics in the blogosphere' that Ifemelu's middle-class status creates a barrier between the working-class migrant women in the salon. Her reading, however, mostly focuses on middle-class status as synonymous with aspirational whiteness and hair straightening rather than class difference between black women.

operate on the basis of economic power: more specifically, citizenship and successful assimilation into North American cultural values. The salon is an Afropolitan space in the sense that disparate black women meet here, and it is owned by working-class African migrants that dream of becoming fully-fledged ‘Americanahs’. The kind of Afropolitanism the salon facilitates has the *potential* to become an Afropolitan feminist space, like the digital one HappilyKinkyNappy.com creates. But these economic power barriers, exposed by the failed communication between Aisha and Ifemelu, are not possible to overcome in the salon. They are in reality exacerbated by the complex dynamics of beauty politics and the way they mediate social class and cultural capital. Returning to the notion of an Afropolitan feminism, I would add that an Afropolitan space that exposes the class and economic dynamics between black women, but is unable to spark solidarity in spite of them, cannot be a radically feminist one. In other words, not all kinds of Afropolitanism are entirely productive, and some may serve to prop up the uneven power dynamics of neoliberal capitalism.

The kind of Afropolitanism that Simon Gikandi, Achille Mbembe and Minna Salami advocate — a philosophy and African-centred way of being in the world — may carry the potential to critique class dynamics, but this potential is not fully realised in *Americanah*. In the final hair salon scene, Ifemelu dramatically changes her stance towards her braider, Aisha. When Aisha candidly asks, ‘how you get your papers?’, Ifemelu is ‘startled into silence’ and her irritation ‘dissolve[s]’.⁷² Instead of irritation, Ifemelu feels ‘a gossamer sense of kinship’, and sees in this ‘new bond’ an ‘augury of her return home.’⁷³ It takes this final interaction for Ifemelu to show empathy towards Aisha’s situation. She is, after all, a poor migrant struggling to gain American citizenship. There remains a ‘gossamer’ layer that stands between total understanding between the two women. Ifemelu recognises that the power dynamic is in her favour, offering to try to convince Aisha’s Igbo lover to marry her and help her gain her papers using her power as a woman who has attained middle-class status. By asking this taboo question which is usually kept private, Aisha triggers an emotional response and Ifemelu suddenly seems to recognise the solidarity she should attempt to build with a less fortunate migrant. Whereas earlier in the narrative, Ifemelu had dismissed Aisha’s desire to marry as a sign of mental instability as

⁷² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.363.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

her eyes ‘glittered’ with desperation,⁷⁴ she is now highly empathetic towards Aisha’s plight. Adichie places Ifemelu’s middle-class status into a precarious state by reminding the reader what it took for her to get there. The realisation means that for a moment, the narrative (albeit through Ifemelu’s lens) stops repressing the broader issues beyond Aisha’s desire to get married. Her story is indicative of the struggle that many poor African female migrants in North America face.

The next scene is comparatively jarring and serves to disrupt the solidarity beginning to form between Aisha and Ifemelu. As she leaves the salon still dwelling on Aisha’s inability to get a visa, her thoughts are interrupted by a phone call from her aunt. Aunt Uju delivers the news that her teenage son, Dike, has attempted suicide. The interruption is significant because Ifemelu’s promise to help Aisha get her papers subsequently does not come into fruition. The potential for solidarity is not quite fulfilled by Adichie in this scene; it lingers, interrupted by Aunt Uju’s shocking news. Adichie’s use of the terms ‘kinship’ and ‘bond’ to describe Ifemelu’s feelings for Aisha suggests a romantic sense of idealism which reflects the anxiety she feels about returning to Nigeria. Their kinship is ‘gossamer’, after all, and this fine layer between them is important in establishing their difference. Ifemelu must understand and empathise with this difference in order to understand Aisha. Instead, having acquired the kind of middle-class affluence in America that divides her from the lifestyle of people like Aisha, their bond represents a false attachment to ‘Africa’ as a place representative of home, a place where Ifemelu once belonged and can belong again.

It is imperative to note that the black feminist spaces that hair facilitates are full of tensions, and *Americanah* is at times able to use these tensions as a way to work through and reach an understanding of difference, but at others, it fails. Adichie’s depiction of multicultural interactions pivots primarily on African women’s experiences, and thus, Ifemelu’s initial rejection and later acceptance of an ‘African kinship’ shows that within the hair salon space, Adichie attempts to enact an Afropolitan feminism across class boundaries. This space clearly differs from Pan-Africanism due to its attention to migrant experience in the diaspora and its capacity to be a *feminist* kind of kinship. Here Adichie begins to build Mbembe’s kind of Afropolitanism, a renewed ‘transnational culture’ that people

⁷⁴ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.40.

who have experienced ‘several worlds’ may create.⁷⁵ Ifemelu and Aisha begin to find a way to consolidate their worldly experiences through their mutual Afropolitanism. Through this exploration of failed interactions and eventual display of empathy, Adichie shows that black feminist solidarity is not easily realised; particularly for those women deeply embedded in their own sense of class and wealth privilege. Through HappilyKinkyNappy.com and the hair salon in Trenton, *Americanah* tentatively explores the kinds of spaces that can possibly prompt solidarity between black women, and the potential connections they can spark. In sum, the transnational, Afropolitan spaces that Adichie creates through the hair salon and online are indeed empowering and feminist ones, but not quite radical enough to critique capitalism and ultimately espouse an aesthetic black feminist resistance. Differently to Ifemelu’s naive suggestion that the potential ‘cure’ for racial divides in the US is ‘real deep romantic love’,⁷⁶ productive camaraderie can *potentially* be created for culturally and economically disparate black women within intimate beauty salon spaces. But as we will soon see, this potential is not quite fulfilled. Instead of pursuing the feminist Afropolitan bridge that has been built across difference, Adichie steers the ‘Americanah’ Ifemelu in a different and far more individualistic direction.

It is tempting to conclude that Adichie’s choice to sabotage Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt and reunite her with Obinze in Lagos suggests a rejection of white American privilege, so that Ifemelu’s character serves to challenge white supremacist structures. But the class and wealth privilege Ifemelu has generated in the US permeates the narrative on a level that goes far beyond romance. Through the digital space of *Raceteenth*, which pivots on Ifemelu’s experiences of race in the US, she has gained access to an exclusive kind of economic privilege on her own terms. On a global level, the structures of North American hegemony continue to shape Ifemelu’s journey through the narrative. This begs the question: is Adichie able to keep a critique of privilege alive when the narrative is *not* focused on viewing the US through a Nigerian lens? To attempt to respond to this question, I now turn to focus on Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria, once again becoming a Lagos local. The Nigeria she returns to is much changed from the one she left.

⁷⁵ Mbembe, ‘Afropolitanism’, p.29.

⁷⁶ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.296.

At the beginning of part seven Ifemelu has returned to Lagos. As *Americanah*'s location changes, Adichie renders its Afropolitan imaginary in a state of flux. Ifemelu's characterisation throughout the narrative until this point has been significantly shaped by three specific aspects of her identity: her Nigerian heritage, her black womanhood, and her migrant status in America. This section will consider the ways that the novel's Afropolitanism changes in Lagos. I attempt to answer an important question: does Adichie maintain the transnational black feminist spaces created through Afropolitanism earlier in the novel? I focus on several important moments in part seven of the novel to consider Adichie's representation of Afropolitanism as Ifemelu navigates through Nigeria, and explore the ways that her characterisation may be complicit with, or resistant of, her neoliberal environment.

Part seven begins with our protagonist's first impressions of the dizzying, bustling city:

At first, Lagos assaulted her, the sun-dazed haste, the yellow buses full of squashed limbs, the sweating hawkers racing after cars, the advertisements on hulking billboards [...] Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence? [...] Now, her hair braider had a mobile phone, the plantain seller tending a blackened grill had a mobile phone.⁷⁷

The sheer velocity of the city creates a Lagos that is disorientating and unfamiliar through Ifemelu's lens. The distance created through space and time have clearly changed both Lagos and our protagonist. The 'hulking billboards' and the dissemination of technology, now affordable to the self-employed working-class, reflect a newly neoliberal Nigeria. Development appears in the form of corporate advertising and Blackberry phones, whilst government services, like buses and electricity, remain underdeveloped and temperamental. Nigeria's economy is now prosperous due to its primary export: oil. The return is disorientating for us as Ifemelu's sense of 'home' remains like a palimpsest in her imagination. Lagos has been transformed by the development of the oil industry; an example of the entrenchment of neoliberal governmental trade policies. During the mid-1960s, Nigeria began to rely on oil extraction from the Niger Delta and income from agricultural practices began to decline.⁷⁸ As the oil market attracted foreign investors, the drop in distribution to oil-producing states was dramatic, from fifty percent in 1966 to just three percent in the mid-1990s.⁷⁹ Foreign oil corporations clearly benefit

⁷⁷ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.385.

⁷⁸ Ed. by Cyril Obi and Siri A. Rustad, *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the complex politics of petro-violence* (London: Zed Books, 2011), p.5–6.

⁷⁹ Obi and Rustad, *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta*, p.2.

from these profits, and the reduction during this significant time period exemplifies the success of the neoliberal model of upwards distribution. By 2011, around the time of Ifemelu's return in the novel, oil produces around twenty five percent of Nigeria's gross national product, and Shell controls more than half of Nigeria's oil.⁸⁰ Lagos has become a 'transactional city', the financial centre of Nigeria.⁸¹ In turn, poverty has increased within the poorest sector of society, leading to the disempowerment and impoverishment of local people through land dispossession and pollution of the air, land and water. Shell and the Niger Delta controversy involving the 'Ogoni Nine' is one case study which evidences the global destruction that economically powerful corporations are wreaking.⁸² In the previous extract from the novel, the 'sun-dazed haste' mirrors the high-speed accumulation of capital, implying that a blindness infects the city's inhabitants, their 'squashed limbs' peripheral to the rhythms of capital. Whilst Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ reads this moment as the protagonist mimicking the exoticized perspective of European travel writers,⁸³ I suggest that Ifemelu's reaction to Lagos cements the class privilege and wealth she gained in the US. Neoliberal Nigeria and the influence of neo-colonialism shape Ifemelu's return, in the same vein as the volatile political conditions under President Buhari caused her departure.

Two critics do consider the impact of the economy on Ifemelu's return to Nigeria, but they do not fully think through its implications for the novel's black feminist politic. Katherine Hallemeier suggests that Adichie 'neither embraces nor rejects the pursuit of wealth' but does present 'an alternative, utopic vision of global power in which the United States stands as a foil to the promising future of late Nigerian capitalism.'⁸⁴ For Hallemeier, Ifemelu and Obinze are active agents who bely the stereotype that Africans cannot have control over global economic flows.⁸⁵ She critiques Adichie's fictional control of the flows of capital: 'even though much of the novel takes place in the lead-up to Obama's first election in 2008, the economic meltdown in the United States that became central to that

⁸⁰ Obi and Rustad, *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta*, p.3.

⁸¹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.430.

⁸² Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (London: HarperCollins, 1999) details the Ogoni people's protests against Shell's oil drilling in the Niger Delta due to the oil spills that caused irreparable environmental devastation. Activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the 'Ogoni nine' were charged with incitement to murder and then executed by the government in a controversial case where corruption was inferred; the prosecutors took their cut of Shell's oil money.

⁸³ Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ, "'Reverse Appropriations' and Transplantation in *Americanah*' in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. by Ernest N. Emenyonu (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), p.209.

⁸⁴ Katherine Hallemeier, "'To Be From The Country Of People Who Gave": National Allegory and the United States Of Adichie's *Americanah*' *Studies in the Novel*, 47 (2015), 231–45.

⁸⁵ Hallemeier, 'National Allegory and the United States Of Adichie's *Americanah*', p.233.

election (and the viability of freelance writing) is of little concern to the novel's heroine', adding that due to Ifemelu's privilege 'her writing career promises to be nothing but stellar for as long as she chooses to pursue it.'⁸⁶ Julie Iromuanya concurs, adding that in spite of the recession Ifemelu 'faces little economic stress and easily moves between popular culture and academic realms, securing commercial endorsements, speaking gigs, and academic fellowships that afford her a comfortable middle-class lifestyle and enable her to return to Nigeria on a whim.'⁸⁷ Indeed, the global economic turndown largely caused by a depreciation in the subprime mortgage market in the US due to irresponsible lending sparked an international banking crisis. Despite *Americanah*'s realist genre and commentary about Obama's 2008 election, the recession is not mentioned and does not affect her fate. Pushing these critiques forward, I suggest towards the end of part one of this chapter that Adichie's representation of Lagos cannot be utopic, as Hallemeier claims, because Ifemelu and Obinze become very much complicit in exploitative neoliberal capitalism. This contradicts the considerably more utopic radical black feminist position I have outlined in this thesis.

Despite Ifemelu's initial apprehension, her assimilation into an upper-middle-class lifestyle in Lagos is relatively seamless. As the protagonist's environment becomes more familiar, the Afropolitan lens of the novel shifts, to become embedded in an African context. Ifemelu quickly secures a job at a local women's lifestyle magazine, *Zoe*. She reignites old relationships, and the majority of her educated friends have become Nigeria's budding middle-class. Fascinatingly, Ifemelu soon slips into another new 'self':

The speedboat was gliding on foaming water, past beaches of ivory sand, and trees a bursting, well-fed green. Ifemelu was laughing. She caught herself in mid-laughter, and looked at her present, an orange life jacket strapped around her, a ship in the greying distance, her friends in their sunglasses, on their way to Priye's friend's beach house, where they would grill meat and race barefoot. She thought: I'm really home. I'm home.⁸⁸

The clean, fresh affluence of Princeton is evoked again, but this time in sunny, breezy Lagos. The vibrant yet serene scene suggests that Lagos has become a paradise in the mind of the protagonist, its flawless beauty surreal. Here, our protagonist is with friends with whom she does not have to overcome

⁸⁶ Hallemeier, 'National Allegory and the United States Of Adichie's *Americanah*', p.235.

⁸⁷ Iromuanya, 'The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in *Americanah*', p.169–70.

⁸⁸ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.411.

cultural boundaries. Their conversations are peppered with observations about the positives and negatives of North American and Nigerian life. The comfort she feels in this space pivots upon the wealth privileges that have created it. Unlike the ‘skin’⁸⁹ that felt false with Curt, slipping into this ‘self’ fits more comfortably. As Ifemelu pauses to reflect on her present, she feels she has truly returned ‘home’. Ifemelu has become a fully-fledged ‘Americanah’, and her concrete sense of ‘home’ has been built through her connections with her fellow ‘Americanahs’. Ifemelu’s easy laughter and glamorous surroundings mark the realisation that her time in the US has allowed her access to an elite Afropolitan group. Whilst in the US, Adichie used Afropolitanism to link Ifemelu to communities of similarly disparate black women, in Lagos, Afropolitanism stratifies her into a reified group, cut off from the working class and poor, subaltern rural citizens. The ‘home’ Ifemelu now inhabits is not the same Lagos she left, and importantly, the comfortable lifestyle she has found seems to erase the bleaker realities of the circumstances of her departure. The sunglasses that Ifemelu gazes over her ‘home’ through are suggestively rose-tinted. The illusion of ‘home’ that Adichie creates sits uncomfortably amongst the new tensions that Ifemelu now faces.

Disrupting Ifemelu’s ‘Americanah’ skin is the discomfort she feels in her role as the feature editor at *Zoe*. The magazine is aimed at middle-class Nigerian women, mimicking Western women’s magazines in a way that, through Ifemelu’s eyes, seems hollow and performative. Adichie uses *Zoe* to critique the elitism that Afropolitanism potentially breeds. Ifemelu continuously clashes with her colleagues, the self-identifying ‘Americanah’ Doris and Zemaye, who never left Lagos. Ifemelu is positioned uncomfortably between the two women. She is drawn in to Doris’ critiques of Lagos but repelled by her strong American accent and her need to constantly differentiate herself from non-‘Americanahs’. Zemaye treats Ifemelu coolly, suggesting a rift between them due to Ifemelu’s affiliation with North America. In the *Zoe* office, Adichie creates a space where Afropolitanism exists as an elitist and pretentious shrine to Western middle-class lifestyles. In this non-productive, non-collaborative space, the Afropolitan characters fail to build kinship or solidarity and instead clash competitively. As Ifemelu enters, critiques, and then leaves her role at the magazine, Adichie rejects

⁸⁹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.200.

the class-biased and elitist form of Afropolitanism that some returnees have created. Notably, Ifemelu's unhappiness at *Zoe* inspires her to start a new blog, ironically titled *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. The vision of the blog is to bring together a myriad of concerns relevant to Afropolitans living in Lagos, from development and home-grown enterprise, to networking events and accessible fashion. The blog is framed as an antidote to *Zoe*'s high-priced designer clothes, shallow interviews with affluent Lagos women, and European recipes with impossible-to-find ingredients.⁹⁰ *The Small Redemptions of Lagos* has the potential to create a useful Afropolitan space, the kind that enacts the multiplicity that Taiye Selasi advocates.

However, Adichie sacrifices a productive critique of Lagos elites through Ifemelu's blog due to the protagonist's own complicity. The narrative in part seven focuses on Ifemelu's frequent dining and socialising during her rekindled romance with Obinze. Adichie depicts Ifemelu as at times critical of the privileged Afropolitans who return to Lagos without the productive energy to change things, yet she is similarly complicit in this attitude, critiquing without action. Adichie could have used Ifemelu's position to critique 'from within' the position of the Lagos elites. Instead, the blog feels relatively undeveloped and hollow. In one post, she criticises her fellow 'Americanahs' for focusing on the negatives of living in Lagos and readily comparing it to New York without acting to create change. In another, she shares her concern for the agency of the mistresses of rich Lagos businessmen, who she claims disguise their unhappiness with new handbags and jewellery; yet, as we know, Obinze is a married, rich businessman.⁹¹ Ifemelu's luxurious lifestyle no longer sits comfortably with her critiques of race and class throughout the novel, and the nuanced and insightful analyses in her new blog feel artificial in contrast with her complicity with the very systems she challenges. The possibility that Adichie could create a *critical* Afropolitan space through Ifemelu's new blog does not quite come into fruition. Whereas *Raceteenth* incisively critiqued the nuances, contradictions, hypocrisies and violence of race politics in the US, *Small Redemptions* is comparatively shallow, lacking an analysis of the uneven power imbalances that operate in Lagos.

⁹⁰ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.417.

⁹¹ Adichie, *Americanah*, p.421–2.

The tensions thrown up within the moment Ifemelu finds herself at ‘home’ in Nigeria and her rejection of *Zoe*’s brand of Afropolitanism serve to paper over the cracks which the narrative does not interrogate; specifically, the vast inequality between the middle-class and the working-class. The juxtaposition that Adichie sets up between the private and privileged sphere that Obinze and Ifemelu inhabit and the public Nigeria creates fissures in Ifemelu’s mind that *Americanah* fails to reconcile. Another important moment to which I wish to draw attention takes place when the couple stop to buy fried plantain at a roadside on their way back from an Italian restaurant. The street hawker sells Ifemelu extra food even though they have just eaten, leading Obinze to question how easily she is persuaded to do so. She answers assertively: ‘because this is real enterprise. She’s selling what she makes. She’s not selling her location or the source of her oil or the name of the person that ground the beans. She’s simply selling what she makes.’⁹² Within this moment of insight, Adichie subtly hints that Ifemelu is aware of the way that neoliberal Nigeria operates, the influence of the oil industry, and the myriad ways that economic and social capital control exchange. But Ifemelu’s return to Lagos marks Adichie’s abandonment of the rigorous cultural critique attained whilst living in the US. Adichie does not use Ifemelu’s new blog to express resistance to such systems. Unlike the hair salon in Trenton, the side of the roadside in Lagos fails to create a space of communication between richer and poorer classes. The nameless female street hawker’s character is not developed and Adichie does not use the roadside scene to create a meaningful interaction between them. Instead, they drive away in Obinze’s BMW, and the narrative’s focus remains on the couple’s romance with Lagos now serving as backdrop. Adichie chooses a romantic ending that sidesteps the tensions the novel has created: Ifemelu’s fractured relationship with Nigeria due to her internalisation of North American culture; hers and Obinze’s newly acquired wealth and complicity with prosperity under neoliberalism; and even Ifemelu’s critique of the social spheres she inhabits, which is ironically the source of her economic success.

To conclude, several aspects of *Americanah* suggest the *possibility* of a unifying black feminism enacted through the narrative. Adichie holds Ifemelu up to scrutiny for us to critique the messiness of a character who embodies some of the contradictions of an emerging Afropolitan

⁹² Adichie, *Americanah*, p.444.

sensibility. The key moments I have highlighted exemplify how Adichie creates empowering Afropolitan spaces in the novel, first using hair as a mobilising body part that can create solidarity. As the tentative creation of two empowering Afropolitan spaces shows, the novel's contribution to a literary black feminist aesthetic is imbued with contradictions. The online Afro hair community creates a liberating space that reimagines beauty economies as Afrocentric. Although liberating for the black women navigating this digital space, it is important to also bear in mind it is predicated on internet access and literacy; therefore some women nonetheless remain excluded from it. In the hair salon in Trenton, Adichie highlights the tensions between black women of different class backgrounds and levels of economic privilege sharing an Afropolitan space, again using Afro hair-styling as a potentially unifying form of cultural and economic exchange and social communication. Ultimately, though, the empathy and solidarity generated between Aisha and Ifemelu in the salon is fleeting and does not continue outside of this space. Whilst Afropolitan feminism serves an empowering purpose in the novel, and *could* be a useful component of a wider transnational black feminism, it has its limitations and in *Americanah* it fails to be interpolated into a wider politics of radical black feminism. The kind of Afropolitan feminism Adichie creates is therefore not a radical one that seeks to dismantle the systems of oppression. Instead, Ifemelu returns to Nigeria and her sense of empathy for other less privileged black women dissipates as she enjoys her upper-middle class lifestyle in Lagos. Up to part six, Adichie's novel's critique of the US through the eyes of a female Nigerian migrant characterised as honest and astute in her observations, yet flawed and at times dislikeable, served to highlight the structures that oppress women racialised as black in a North American context. In my view, the beginning of part seven is where Adichie abandons these tentative attempts to link disparate black women through Afropolitan spaces, which indeed carry the potential to birth a radical transnational black feminism. *Americanah* ultimately fails to foster a sustained, radical transnational black feminism. Instead, the novel becomes complicit in the neoliberal myth of progress and happiness attained through wealth. Whilst Adichie's most globally situated novel does indeed expose the difficulty involved in creating spaces of black feminist solidarity across borders, rather than seriously attempting to grapple with this difficulty, the protagonist retreats into the comfort of her home. Adichie's commitment to write an 'unapologetic love story' means that the text's ending befits a romance genre novel and is therefore

unable to answer the complex questions concerning the way race and class operate under North American capitalism which the narrative raises. The novel's closing lines, as Ifemelu invites Obinze to 'come in', end the narrative in her domestic space. Although the novel has unfolded on a global stage, the couple's retreat into domesticity evidences a clear turn away from the inequality, racism and sexism both characters have experienced in the world and refuses to interrogate the relative privilege they are now the beneficiaries of. We can only assume that Obinze does enter Ifemelu's home, and the door is closed on many difficult questions.

Part Two

Touching Solidarity in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

Published in 2009, *The Thing Around Your Neck* preceded *Americanah*. The collection demonstrates Adichie's first sustained foray into narrating the experiences of her characters beyond a Nigerian setting. It explores a multitude of locations from the perspective of primarily Nigerian protagonists, expanding to Cape Town, Connecticut, New York, and various other places. These shifts in location facilitate Adichie's exploration of diasporic narratives of home and return, mapping the transnational perspective that shapes the experiences of her protagonists. Adichie's short stories in the collection are almost exclusively told through the eyes of Nigerians whose lives are influenced by the push-and-pull of migration under neoliberal globalisation. As I argue here in part two, the short story is particularly useful for exploring transnationalism through a black feminist lens. Adichie creates a myriad of glimpses into the lives of her characters using a strategically multiplicitous array of locations. The stories sit in tension with one another, illuminating her contribution to a literary transnational black feminism. We are called to consider moments of contact between characters whilst paying close attention to how personal particularities might speak to mutual solidarities. Adichie's use of the short story form is intertwined with her consistent attention to the materiality of black women's bodies throughout the two short stories I focus on: 'Imitation' and 'A Private Experience'.

The Thing Around Your Neck has received the least critical attention of all Adichie's texts, despite her consistent return to the short story form (she has published around forty-seven short stories to date).⁹³ Sierra-Leonian-Scottish writer Aminatta Forna's review in *The Guardian* notes Adichie's focus on middle-class Nigerian women characters, suggesting that the collection consists of 'melancholy stories, of disappointment and endurance rather than hope'⁹⁴ and paying attention to the specifically African, as well as migratory, settings. Jess Row's review in *The New York Times*, however, too readily compares Adichie to other writers from entirely different cultural contexts concerned with

⁹³ Adichie's total number of published short stories on the 12th April 2020.

⁹⁴ Aminatta Forna, 'Endurance tests', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2009

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/16/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-thing-around-your-neck>> [accessed 13/04/2020].

migration to the US. She is particularly critical of ‘Imitation’ and ‘The Arrangers of Marriage’, stating that ‘the narration reveals so little about the protagonists’ inner lives that we begin to feel, a little uncomfortably, that Adichie is delivering the “news” the West wants to hear about Africa: pitiful victims, incorrigible villains, inspirational survivors’.⁹⁵ Row’s severe misreading flattens out the aesthetic realism, nuances and subtleties evident in Adichie’s prose. Rose A. Sackeyfio offers a gloss of the short story collection’s contents in her chapter in *Writing Africa and the Short Story* (2013), but its brevity lacks depth of analysis.⁹⁶ Three critics offer readings of the collection’s diasporic aspects, considering the way it troubles established notions of cultural roots in a newly globalised world.⁹⁷ Elizabeth Jackson considers the possibility that the title of Adichie’s text is influenced by Salman Rushdie’s short story collection *East, West* (1994) which features a character in the story ‘The Courter’ who feels metaphorical ropes around their neck, like ‘nooses tightening, commanding *choose, choose*’.⁹⁸ But, perhaps surprisingly, Jackson concludes that ‘Adichie’s characters evidently feel no such pressure to wrestle with their national or cultural identity’, locating her main concern as class.⁹⁹ On the contrary, I suggest that Adichie offers a more subtle exploration of belonging and its diasporic and nationalist vectors, whilst *simultaneously* considering how belonging is influenced by class and economic privilege.

Aside from Daria Tunca’s article about the metafictional quality of ‘Jumping Monkey Hill’, Aretha Phiri’s reading of queer sexuality in ‘On Monday of Last Week’ and David Mikailu and Brendan Wattenberg’s co-authored article about cosmopolitanism and temporality in ‘The Headstrong Historian’,¹⁰⁰ few critics offer detailed and rigorous readings of the individual stories in *The Thing*

⁹⁵ Jess Row, ‘African/ American’ *The New York Times*, 27 August 2009

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/books/review/Row-t.html>> [accessed 13/04/2020].

⁹⁶ Rose A. Sackeyfio, ‘Diaspora Identities in Short Fiction by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie & Sefi Atta’ in *Writing Africa and the Short Story*, ed. by Ernest Emenyonu (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 102–114.

⁹⁷ See Elizabeth Jackson, ‘Transcending the Limitations of Diaspora as a Category of Cultural Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*’ in *Diaspora Choices*, ed. by Renata Seredynska-Abou Eid (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2013), 47–56, Eunice Ngongkum, ‘Transnationalism, home and identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*’, *Contemporary Journal of African Studies*, 2 (2014), 77–95 and Maitrayee Misra and Manish Shrivastava, ‘Dislocation, Cultural Memory and Transcultural Identity in Select Stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck*’ in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. by Emenyonu, pp.185–97.

⁹⁸ Jackson, ‘Transcending the Limitations of Diaspora’, p.51.

⁹⁹ Jackson, ‘Transcending the Limitations of Diaspora’, p.52–3.

¹⁰⁰ See Aretha Phiri, ‘Queer subjectivities in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘On Monday of Last Week’, *Agenda*, 29 (2015), 155–63, Daria Tunca, ‘The danger of a single short story: Reality,

Around Your Neck. Heba M. Sharobeem's reading offers some useful analysis, focusing on spatial theory (albeit slightly rigidly) in 'Cell One', 'Imitation' and 'A Private Experience'. Sharobeem's reading of the latter story is especially valuable, carefully considering the interactions between the two women protagonists.¹⁰¹ Finally, whilst there are at least two articles focusing on 'A Private Experience', they fall into the familiar trope of reading Adichie's stories as simply describing real-life situations or offering prescriptive solutions for complex political problems in Nigeria.¹⁰² Despite the limited critical conversation surrounding *The Thing Around Your Neck*, I propose that, partly due to its rich array of characters, the text is Adichie's most fruitful for considering difference and solidarity between black women in both transnational and local contexts.

Adichie uses the short story form to imagine the differing experiences of Nigerian women embodying states of precarity within the overlapping structures of patriarchy, capitalism and American citizenship. In contrast to *Americanah*'s focus on a sole female protagonist, the collection allows Adichie to explore multiple female subjects. The black female characters in the stories facilitate a comparatively nuanced and probing consideration of black womanhood across Nigeria and North American diasporas. The characters articulate a set of contradictions that allow Adichie to explore the tension between the different contexts without necessarily seeking to resolve them. Considering *Americanah*'s failure to reach a coherently radical black feminist standpoint as a catalyst, my looking back at Adichie's previous work may offer up alternatives. Therefore, my enquiry is twofold: in what ways does Adichie explore difference between her black female characters using the form of the short story? And how might these stories contribute to Adichie's literary vision of transnational black feminism?

fiction and metafiction in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Jumping Monkey Hill", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54 (2018), 69–82 and David Mikailu and Brendan Wattenberg, 'My Name Will Not Be Lost: Cosmopolitan Temporality and Reclaimed History in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Headstrong Historian"', *African Studies Quarterly*, 15 (2015), 45–58.

¹⁰¹ Heba M. Sharobeem, 'Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations in Chimamanda Adichie's "The Thing Around Your Neck"', *Rocky Mountain Review*, 69 (2015), 18–36.

¹⁰² See Yacoubou Alou, 'The Narrative of Chaos in Post-Independence African Fiction: Towards the Demystification Of Violence in Chimamanda N. Adichie's "A Private Experience"', *International Journal of English and Literature*, 9 (2019), 19–28 and Ogechukwu Ikediugwu, 'Wanton Killing in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "A Private Experience" and "The American Embassy" in *The Thing Around Your Neck*', *Ansu Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 1 (2016), 1–25.

‘Imitation’ and ‘A Private Experience’ offer responses to these questions. ‘Imitation’ is the second story in the collection, set in Philadelphia. It follows Nkem, a Nigerian woman married to ‘Big Man’¹⁰³ Obiora who sends her to the US to give birth to their children. Nkem lives a comfortable middle-class lifestyle in Philadelphia, but grows increasingly isolated as her husband’s visits become infrequent. The story continuously returns to an imitation of an original piece of art gifted to Nkem by her husband, a large wooden carved mask that the people of the ancient Nigerian Kingdom of Benin used to protect the king from evil. When Nkem discovers he has moved his mistress into their house in Nigeria, she finds small, subtle ways to regain agency. ‘A Private Experience’ is set in Lagos in a small abandoned shop in which the protagonist Chika seeks cover from violent riots sparked by religious tensions between Christians and Muslims in the local market. Chika is a young Igbo Christian woman, led to the safe place by a stranger, a Hausa Muslim woman. Narrated from Chika’s perspective, the women are forced to create a place of refuge, sharing their fear and grief through several moments of verbal and physical communication. The story is a reflection on class and religion in modern Nigeria, centralising the bonds that may be inadvertently created during conflict through a feminist lens. In both stories bodies are a key site of both subjugation and resistance, enacted through tropes of movement. The collection’s title points towards restricted movement, and the connotations of the ‘thing’ around the neck suggests a constraining feeling of suffocation. Adichie’s attention to bodies and movement allows us to question *who* is granted movement and reflect on the constraints that grip her characters figuratively by the neck. Bound up as it is with neoliberal globalisation, I explore whether mobility might be subverted in ‘Imitation’ and reclaimed as feminist resistance to capitalist patriarchy. In ‘A Private Experience’, I return to questions of empathy and solidarity that are explored through intimacy, focusing specifically on touch.

In ‘Imitation’ interactions between embodiment and objects are portrayed metaphorically through the central and most compelling images in the story: two works of art, the Benin mask and the Ife bronze head. Great Benin (also known as Edo) was an empire in southern Nigeria dating back to the eleventh century. According to historian Robin Walker, ‘in the fifteenth century it was an empire

¹⁰³ Colloquial name for businessmen in Nigeria who deal with government contracts.

distinguished by the sumptuousness and comfort of its capital, Benin City, and by the refinement of its royal art.¹⁰⁴ As Walter Rodney adds, ‘the remarkable 14th- and 15th-century artistic achievements of Oyo, of its parent state of Ife, and of the related state of Benin have been well studied, because of the preservation of ivory, terracotta and bronze sculptures.’¹⁰⁵ Art is therefore a crucial gateway into understanding this pre-colonial history. At the height of its power, Benin was well-known across Europe for its architecturally advanced layout and egalitarian economic system. In 1691 a Portuguese trader noted its lack of poverty or crime,¹⁰⁶ and similar claims were made by the Dutch.¹⁰⁷ In 1897, at the height of colonial conflict, Benin city was burned to the ground by British soldiers and the *Oba* (chief) was exiled.¹⁰⁸ Ife was a leading political, economic, spiritual and artistic centre in the lower Niger region between 1100 and 1400.¹⁰⁹ The Ife ‘bronze’ head (made of copper and brass) is one of sixteen originals excavated in 1938 thought to be a portrait of the legendary ruler of Ife named Ooni.

The opening sentence sets up the imitation Benin mask as a mirror reflecting the protagonist’s face: ‘Nkem is staring at the bulging, slanted eyes of the Benin mask on the living room mantel as she learns about her husband’s girlfriend.’¹¹⁰ As she stares at the mask and attempts to process her husband Obiora’s betrayal, the ‘bulging, slanted eyes’ and ‘too big’ features suggest an imposing glare, its copper-coloured presence regal on the mantel. The third-person pronoun maintains a gap between the protagonist and the reader, and the lack of detailed emotive description keeps the focus on the metaphorical meaning of the art pieces. The mask causes Nkem to imagine the Benin people ‘carving the original masks four hundred years ago’ which were placed either side of the king and used to ward off evil. Obiora had told her that the ‘proud young men, muscled, brown skin gleaming with palm kernel oil’ were the custodians of the masks, responsible for collecting fresh human heads to bury the *Oba*

¹⁰⁴ Robin Walker, *When We Ruled: the Ancient and Mediæval History of Black Civilisations* (London: Every Generation Media, 2006), p.330.

¹⁰⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972), p.177.

¹⁰⁶ Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair*, chapter ‘Ain't Got The Time’ [on Audiobook].

¹⁰⁷ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p.111.

¹⁰⁸ Walker, *When We Ruled*, p.341.

¹⁰⁹ Anon., ‘The Ife Head’, *The British Museum Online*, date unknown

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=618380&partId=1&place=10811&placA=10811-3-1&page=1> [accessed 09/04/2018].

¹¹⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p.22.

(king) if he was killed.¹¹¹ The narrative compression necessary to the short story form means that the two symbolic artefacts, the mask and the bronze head, function in various ways. I suggest that these artefacts do three things. First and perhaps most clearly, they symbolise colonial violence. Bound up with legacies of exploitation, the mask and the bronze head figure doubly as markers of violent historical erasure under colonial rule and emblems of the royal power that controlled the citizens of Benin.¹¹² The artefacts capture the repression of Nkem's agency in a tangible form, embodying the (past) tyranny of colonial plunder and the violence of hierarchal societies like Benin, and the (present) implicit violence that stifles Nkem's place in the world as a rural black woman from the Global South.

Secondly, the mask in particular represents Nkem's desire to imitate her husband's mistress. As an imitation of a human face, the mask serves as a metonymic expression of her repression. Nkem expresses her desire to imitate — to become something else — through her continuous engagement with the mask, looking at it and touching it at several points in the narrative. Adichie is not simply implying Nkem wants to imitate the mistress for superficial reasons. The obsession with the imitation mask reveals the insecurity that lies behind the economic privilege she benefits from as Obiora's wife. The mask embodies her reality: the wife of a Big Man shipped abroad like an object. It is a physical representation of the pretence she wears to perform the role assigned to her by her husband, and its materiality is suitably solid and unchanging.

The third layer I highlight considers the Benin mask and the Ife bronze head as diasporic objects. Scholarship about diasporic objects debates the value of them according to the social, cultural and use value we ascribe to them. Whilst Arjun Appadurai focuses on 'politics' as the 'mediating level between exchange and value',¹¹³ Zeynep Turan suggests that the materiality of objects themselves is equally important, for 'things' hold the power to 'enchant people.'¹¹⁴ Turan's study, focusing on the

¹¹¹ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.23.

¹¹² Evidence suggests the kingdom of Benin was oligarchical and patriarchal. Until 1897 the Oba (the divine King) controlled the trade of commodities and had power over the life and death of his subjects. See Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), p.3 and Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (Lagos: Ibadan University Press, 1960).

¹¹³ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press), p.6.

¹¹⁴ Zeynep Turan, 'Material Objects as Facilitating Environments: the Palestinian Diaspora', *Home Cultures*, 7 (2010), 43–56 (p.45).

most valued possessions of Palestinians displaced to the US, concludes that objects ‘transmit memory, foster identity, and galvanise individuals’ due to their material characteristics and social value.¹¹⁵ The artefacts in the story seem to possess an agency and mobility of their own, linked to their historical legacy. During Obiora’s final visit he brings with him the Ife bronze head. Adichie describes Nkem’s strong attraction to the artefacts, looking at and touching them almost compulsively:

After dinner, Nkem sits on the bed and examines the Ife bronze head, which Obiora has told her is actually made of brass. It is stained, life-size, turbaned. It is the first original Obiora has bought.

[...] ‘An original’, she says, surprised, running her hand over the parallel incisions on the face.¹¹⁶

Nkem ‘examines’ and touches the artefact, enchanted by it. It is important that this art piece is not an imitation, but an original. For Obiora, the Ife bronze head transmits the memory of Nigeria’s prosperous pre-colonial past and affirms a strong nationalist Nigerian identity that he feels deeply; he is close to tears when he talks to Nkem about the British plundering Nigeria for its art. Robin Walker elaborates on the significance of the Ife bronze head:

When a king of Benin died, it became customary to send his head or other symbolic parts to Ife for a royal burial. A Yoruba artist was then commissioned to make a metal portrait of the head. The portrait was returned to Benin where it was placed on an altar. This practise continued until the time of Oba Ogolua, in the late thirteenth century.¹¹⁷

It is noteworthy that, in Adichie’s story, Nkem quickly reminds Obiora of the oppression of the king’s subjects in such societies. She states: ‘I’m sure they did terrible things with this one, too. [...] like they did with the Benin masks.’¹¹⁸ In light of this context, the Ife bronze head represents the vexed mobility of things with a violent history of displacement. Shipped to the US from Lagos by Obiora, the piece of art is under his control. Although he frames his purchase of Nigerian ancient art as a form of reparations, he neglects to admit his own complicity with the legacy of colonial violence because his patriarchal control is the source of Nkem’s oppression. As a kind of antidote, Nkem repurposes the bronze head as a diasporic object which offers her an empowering sense of solidarity. Because the artefacts also symbolise Obiora’s wealth and control, here Nkem verbally confronts the violence that the bronze head

¹¹⁵ Turan, ‘Material Objects as Facilitating Environments’, p.45.

¹¹⁶ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.39.

¹¹⁷ Walker, *When We Ruled*, p.332.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

symbolises. Nkem manages to find within the art a sense of solidarity that reaches across time into the past of subjugated Nigerian peoples and across borders. The role of objects in the story is therefore in line with Turan's assertion that material objects hold the power to 'transmit memory, foster identity, and galvanise individuals'.

To summarise, Adichie figures the bronze head and the mask as fetish objects from the past that evoke the empowering memory of Nigeria's ancient history, and transnational objects in the present that travel across the borders (physical, and in Nkem's mind) that separate the US and Nigeria. In this way, Nkem's enchantment with the art is framed as empowering and propels her to action. Shortly after touching and examining the bronze head, Nkem tells Obiora she is moving back to Lagos as she soaps his back in the shower. As she turns him away from her, she has a steely assurance: 'there is nothing left to talk about, Nkem knows; it is done.'¹¹⁹ If we presume her request is fulfilled, contingent as it may be on Obiora's agreement, this small act of rebellion is the catalyst for Nkem's return to Nigeria. By shattering Obiora's control over his wife, who has coerced her into becoming an obedient 'Americanah' housewife, Adichie emphasises the sheer powerlessness felt by black women like Nkem married to powerful 'Big Men' in a patriarchal society, despite their relative privilege.

It is worth considering here that the second meaning of the mask I have mentioned, Nkem's imitation of the mistress, allows us to return to a consistent theme in Adichie's writing: the cultivation of Afro hair. Hair is a catalyst through which I will now explicitly consider the black feminist politic of 'Imitation'. During the story's opening, Nkem is told during a phone call with a friend in Nigeria that Obiora's mistress has moved into their home in Lagos. She also learns that the young woman's hair is 'short and curly — you know, those small, tight curls. Not a relaxer. A texturizer, I think.'¹²⁰ Adichie does not portray Nkem's emotional reaction to Obiora's adultery through displays of emotion. Instead, the trauma she feels is represented solely through actions enacted upon her body. She snips away at Obiora's favourite hairstyle, her chemically altered straight bob, in front of a mirror:

¹¹⁹ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.42.

¹²⁰ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.22.

She pulls up clumps of hair and cuts close to the scalp, leaving hair about the length of her thumbnail, just enough to tighten the curls with a texturiser. She watches the hair float down, like brown cotton wisps falling on the white sink.¹²¹

Similarly to *Americanah*, Adichie uses hair to reveal the vectors of power and powerlessness. Nkem severs the lengths of hair as a way of removing a part of her image that she has shaped according to Obiora's preferences. The scraggly ends of the hair float, suspended 'like brown cotton'. This image reflects Nkem's disconnection with her sense of self through a metonymic perception of her body as a different material. Nkem cutting her hair may seem like an attempt to become an 'imitation' shaped by her husband's desires, but within this moment there exists a potential route to self-empowerment. Cutting her hair leaves Nkem teetering between resisting Obiora's patriarchal control of her body and remaining complicit by mimicking his mistress' hairstyle. It is important that at this moment Nkem recalls a memory: a brief interaction with a Nigerian woman whose husband also sent her to the US, who had short natural Afro hair. The outspoken woman condemned both of their husbands for their addiction to power and status which is only legitimate within the confines of Nigeria, and cannot translate overseas 'because America does not recognise Big Men'.¹²² Nkem ponders this, but nevertheless she remains silent, and silenced. Her 'bloated, too heavy' tongue is unable to articulate her feelings of sheer powerlessness, unlike the outspoken woman she met.¹²³ Compounding her sense of powerlessness is her revelation to the reader that she too dated married men before her husband. As a poor, uneducated 'Bush Girl' from a struggling rural family, she was left with few options but to find a rich husband. The reality of sex as social capital means the inevitability of Obiora's adultery rings true. Lacking any connection with Nigeria that is not superficial, Nkem's severe alienation turns a potential act of rebellion into a hollow act of imitation when she decides to drive to the store to buy a texturizing lotion that should allow her to achieve the same curls as her husband's mistress. Since hair texturiser still involves a chemically damaging process in order to (in Nkem's case) mimic the beauty of another woman, this scene does not exemplify an act of self-love, as Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez reads it; nor can it

¹²¹ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.28.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.30.

be easily ‘associated with gaining authority and self-determination’.¹²⁴ Despite the opportunity for potential self-empowerment inferred by the haircut, Nkem’s patriarchal oppression eventually manifests itself in the cultivation of texturized Afro hair, which becomes a complicit act.

Nkem cutting the lengths of her chemically processed hair is a moment made doubly important because it prompts an interaction with her housegirl, Amaechi, who was sent to the US with Nkem at the age of sixteen. Deriving from a poor rural background, Amaechi’s lack of choice in this decision is inferred. Her reaction as she enters the room after Nkem’s impromptu haircut reveals the complex power dynamic of their relationship:

Nkem lays down the scissors and asks Amaechi to clean up the hair.
 ‘Madam!’ Amaechi screams. ‘*Chim o!* Why did you cut your hair? What happened?’
 ‘Does something have to happen before I cut my hair? Clean up the hair!’

[...] Nkem wishes she had not snapped. The madam/housegirl line has blurred in the years she has had Amaechi. It is what America does to you, she thinks. It forces egalitarianism on you. You have nobody to talk to, really, except for your toddlers, so you turn to your housegirl. And before you know it, she is your friend. Your equal.

‘I had a difficult day,’ Nkem says, after a while. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I know, madam, I see it in your face,’ Amaechi says, and smiles.¹²⁵

Adichie’s language reveals the slippage between the role Nkem plays as Amaechi’s upper middle-class employer and her human need for interaction; most importantly, compassion. Amaechi’s emotional concern, notably expressed in Igbo to emphasise their Nigerian cultural commonality, serves to rupture the emotionless façade the protagonist has maintained up to this point in the narrative and emphasises the bond between them. Her gentle smile suggests a sympathetic moment has passed between them, despite the still palpable uneven power dynamic. Nkem attempts to maintain hierarchy and control, yet her apology reveals that the egalitarianism which has formed between them is not a true source of regret because it stems from her loneliness. Attempting to hold on to the system of hierarchy that functioned in Nigeria seems fruitless, not because of the social codes of the US, but due to Nkem’s desire for the empathy of another woman.

Although I read Nkem texturizing her hair as a moment of complicity, it does prompt productive interactions with Amaechi which in turn births her feelings of defiance. As she sits at the kitchen table

¹²⁴ Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez, “‘Hairitage’ Matters: Transitioning and the Third Wave Hair Movement in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘Hair’, ‘Imitation’, and *Americanah*’ in *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*, ed. by Emenyonu, pp.245–61 (p.252).

¹²⁵ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.29.

whilst the texturiser activates, she ponders the similarities between them. Amaechi shares an anecdote about her childhood with Nkem as she watches her peel potatoes, prompting her to think to herself: ‘she has never told Amaechi how similar their childhoods were. Her mother may not have rubbed yam peels on her skin, but then there were hardly any yams.’¹²⁶ The childhood recollections revealed to the reader highlight the arbitrary nature of privilege and how easily the two’s roles could have been reversed. Rather than suggesting a universalising ‘sameness’ that erases difference between black women, though, Adichie’s story exposes how privilege is upheld because of the complicity of those with power. Nkem chooses not to share these childhood stories, and a moment later suggests she is conscious of her own collusion with hierarchy. When Amaechi asks Nkem how she would like the food prepared, she quietly wonders ‘why they go through the charade, who they are trying to fool; they both know that Amaechi is much better in the kitchen than she is’.¹²⁷ The layers of imitation in the story are beginning to further unravel. Class and gender shapes the interactions and behaviour of each character, and the social codes analogous with class are beginning to appear superficial in the mind of the protagonist. This probing of power, however, does not engender a sustained critique. Their conversation is cut short once Nkem tells Amaechi about Obiora’s adultery and asks for advice. Visibly uncomfortable, the housegirl suggests she should forgive Obiora, and Nkem responds by reasserting her power with a short command: ‘check the potatoes’.¹²⁸ Amaechi’s suggestion the protagonist should return to her role as an obedient wife is met with resolve as Nkem firmly reinstates the barrier that exists between them, remaining complicit in maintaining her own upper middle-class status. Nkem leaves the table to rinse away the hair texturiser, and like her hair, she too has been through a transformation. This complicated scene ends with an empowering moment for her, but a disempowering one for Amaechi. Their relationship seemingly can never be untethered from the structures of class and wealth that divide them. Although their friendship is evidence of the protagonist beginning to defy the role she performs as an ‘Americanah’ housewife and the start of her attempt to assert agency, we might also wonder who is *not* granted the right to assert their agency in the upper middle-class household we encounter in ‘Imitation’.

¹²⁶ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.32–3.

¹²⁷ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.33.

¹²⁸ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.35.

In conclusion, the Ife bronze head and the Benin mask are the transnational objects that become the catalyst for Nkem's small rebellion. Whilst Heba Sharobeem does not read any resistance to patriarchal power in 'Imitation', I see Nkem's decision to return to Nigeria as evidence of her establishing autonomy and agency; if not quite a radical enough act to be named resistance.¹²⁹ In other words, I do not wish to suggest that Nkem defying her husband is radical enough to enact resistance to the structures of patriarchy or capitalism, but it is a small step to challenge his authority and control. Adichie does not offer an entirely hopeful ending, and although the protagonist's wish may be granted, she remains constrained as Obiora's wife. Like the artefacts, Nkem's migration ultimately remains contingent on the global flows of mobility shaped by patriarchal neoliberal capitalism. Julie Iromuanya similarly critiques the predicament middle-class black women often experience in a patriarchal society that I see Adichie's fiction as exposing. Referring to *Americanah*, she highlights that 'the post-national emergent African middle class of [the novel] must contend directly and daily with patriarchy in order to advance socioeconomically [...] even social class and educational background do not shield middle-class women from these prospects.'¹³⁰ Patriarchy is therefore so ubiquitous, even for middle-class black women, that the ways to dislodge its power may not always be overt and rebellious; instead they may be small and subtle. Furthermore, Nkem's relationship with the housegirl Amaechi complicates the predicament middle-class women face by highlighting the protagonist's awareness of her own complicity. Through their friendship, Adichie opened up the possibility to rigorously interrogate and challenge how inequality is sustained through class. Yet, Nkem does not actively attempt to build a sustained sense of feminist solidarity between herself and Amaechi, and due to her lack of agency and economic power, the housegirl can only encourage her to continue playing the role of an obedient wife. Again, the difficulty of building solidarity between black women of different classes is emphasised, despite the parallels between the two, ultimately suggesting that in addition to being tangible and material, class privilege is at the same time fleeting and arbitrary.

In reading Adichie's fiction, it has become clear that she is interested in portraying tense relationships between proximate people of different backgrounds. Nowhere is a relationship represented

¹²⁹ Sharobeem, 'Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations', p.31.

¹³⁰ Iromuanya, 'The Global Black Hair Industry and Marketplace in *Americanah*', p.177.

as more fragile than in the next short story I focus on, ‘A Private Experience’, set in Nigeria. But remarkably, this story offers the most potential for *radical* black feminist solidarity, across barriers that demarcate difference. ‘A Private Experience’ imagines a space where boundaries may be overcome. The story’s opening follows Chika and an unnamed woman into the window of an abandoned store to hide from the riot outbreak in the market. The store is both a private space hidden from the violence outside, and an intimate site which Adichie uses to work through forms of difference — hence the title of the story. The woman, whose name we never learn, has saved Chika’s life by calling out to her to hide in the safe place. The act creates a connection between the two that serves to temporarily remove the boundaries that would otherwise separate them; their respective class, religious, and regional differences. Adichie narrates the story from Chika’s perspective, but due to the intimacy of their interactions the Hausa woman retains her autonomous role in the story. The choice not to name the woman does not silence or degrade her role. Combined with her dedication to her religion, she appears prophet-like and mythic, a character who allows Adichie to explore the possibilities of connection between women when class, religious and regional differences temporarily dissolve.

Chika’s first impressions of the Hausa woman are expressed through material bodily signifiers which form the initial basis of their relationship:

The woman sighs and Chika imagines she is thinking of her necklace, probably plastic beads threaded on a piece of string. Even without the woman’s strong Hausa accent, Chika can tell she is a Northerner, from the narrowness of her face, the unfamiliar rise of her cheekbones; and that she is Muslim, because of the scarf. [...] Chika wonders if the woman is looking at her as well, if the woman can tell, from her light complexion and the silver finger rosary her mother insists she wear, that she is Igbo and Christian.¹³¹

The necklace motif suggests an alternative way of reading the collection’s title. Contrasting the feeling of suffocation made clear in the story that titles the collection that is also subtly present in ‘Imitation’, the ‘thing’ around the neck here represents a necklace: an heirloom that carries intergenerational emotive significance. Their difference is made all the more palpable by the reality of the violence happening outside, which they later discover is between Hausa and Igbo people. The necklace is made of materials not considered valuable by Chika, but the Hausa woman’s ascribed meaning onto the absent

¹³¹ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.43–4.

necklace suggests loss. Loss is carried throughout most of the short stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, but here it serves as the catalyst for an affective bond that attempts to bridge difference.

Here it is useful to turn to Sara Ahmed to unravel the meanings embedded within and beyond Adichie's language to consider the corporeal communication that takes place between the women. Chika reads the woman's face as 'unfamiliar', using her features to locate the regional origins her accent suggests. The women read one another's religion through the scarf and the jewellery that each respectively wears. These are symbolic objects bound up with cultural meanings. A recognition of difference passes between the characters as they take in these material details. Ahmed reads 'encounters', meaning the affective communication that takes place between human beings, as 'bodily' in nature, asserting that 'the marking out of the boundary lines between bodies, through the assumption of a bodily image, involves practices and techniques of differentiation'.¹³² It is crucial to note that Ahmed is referring to encounters with the Other (in the Lacanian sense) as racial encounters, and draws upon Audre Lorde's essay 'Eye to Eye' from *Sister Outsider* (1984). The subject (in Ahmed's example, an unnamed white woman) constructs the object (Audre Lorde, as a young black girl) through a process of abjection taking place during the 'strange encounter' on the New York subway. The boundaries drawn through practices of differentiation of the black subject constructs both subject and object. Although Ahmed's ideas are clearly predicated on the construction of anti-black racism, she creates a particularly productive dichotomy of difference that can be stretched to think through difference between two women *both* racialised as black. I use Ahmed's ideas differently to the racialised binary she sets up to think through another dichotomy: black subject, black object, rather than white subject, black object.¹³³ In the story, Chika is the subject because she is the narrator.

For Ahmed, 'skin' functions as a 'mechanism for social differentiation'.¹³⁴ This idea is an interesting one to reconsider in terms of difference based on other boundaries: religious, educational, and economic. In 'A Private Experience', Adichie depicts a scene in which touching skin forms an

¹³² Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p.44.

¹³³ Although I am wary of the dangers of using a theory predicated on distinctly different racial categories, repurposing Ahmed's work is a necessary endeavour here because of the findings set out in my introduction which concluded that difference between black women remains considerably under-theorised.

¹³⁴ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p.45.

affective bond between two black women. Chika and the Hausa woman sit together on the wrapper, discussing their work, Chika's sister, and the woman's daughter who are both lost in the riots. Chika is in medical school and the woman sells onions at a market stall. The woman denounces the riots as acts of 'evil', leading Chika to feel a 'prick of guilt' as she wonders if the woman's mind is large enough to grasp the political and colonial reasons behind the religious tensions.¹³⁵ Disrupting this educational barrier between them, the woman unexpectedly leads Chika to medically examine her:

‘My nipple is burning like pepper.’

Before Chika can swallow the bubble of surprise in her throat and say anything, the woman pulls up her blouse and unhooks the front clasp of a worn black bra. She brings out the money, ten- and twenty-naira notes, folded inside her bra, before freeing her full breasts.¹³⁶

The woman's breasts, painful due to breastfeeding, are here implicated with the dual economy of mother-labour and economic-labour often synonymous in the lives of poorer, rural women. The sheer intimacy of this moment destabilises the class barriers that Chika has recognised which separate her from the woman. Her examination is clinical, but emotional, too. Chika discerns that the woman has recently had a baby, reaching an understanding that their verbal communication has so far been unable to do. To convince the woman to use ointment as a remedy, Chika fabricates a story that the same thing happened to her mother after her sixth child, although the truth is her mother had only two children and a family-friend doctor to consult. She subsumes her class privilege, erasing it in order to build a commonality between them and reach a mutual understanding that overcomes their different experiences and ways of thinking. The fabrication seems to work, as ‘the woman watches Chika for a while, as if this disclosure has created a bond.’¹³⁷ Seeing and touching are affective modes of communication which do the work that language cannot, bound as it is by the politics of education and class which consistently create barriers between Adichie's women characters throughout *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah*. ‘A Private Experience’ demonstrates Adichie exploring moments that move beyond these boundaries and towards black feminist solidarities.

¹³⁵ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.48.

¹³⁶ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.49.

¹³⁷ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.50.

Adichie uses corporeal lenses in confluence with religious imagery to create further tentative forms of solidarity between Chika and the Hausa woman. After the woman asks Chika to close the window, she unties her green wrapper, spreads it on the floor and invites her to sit with her. Adichie's narration shows us that both women create a physically and emotionally safe space through the affective proximity between their bodies. The wrapper covers the dusty floor of the store, causing Chika to sit 'much closer to the woman than she ordinarily would have'¹³⁸ to 'rest' her 'entire body' on the wrapper. The image of both women resting on the wrapper suggests a prayer-like, ritualistic moment. Through the closeness of their bodies they create a relationship beyond verbal communication. Later, the Hausa woman privately carries out her evening prayer. As she rises, Chika feels 'strangely energised'.¹³⁹ The moment suggests a galvanising transfer of energy between the two women's bodies within a corporeal space. Although they follow two different religions, Adichie attempts to unite them in their grief and fear by narrating small moments of solace found within the closeness of sharing a traumatic experience. Here affective empathy takes place through the aesthetic of the short story as Adichie imagines the possibilities within the more quotidian moments that happen during episodes of violent conflict. Narrating the private experience between two women caught up in conflict allows for a careful consideration of possibility. Violent conflict has here opened up an intimate space wherein women usually divided by class, dialect, region and religion find and express emotional commonalities, and bodily language becomes more crucial than oral communication, which remains heavily loaded with the weight of these differences.

However, it is important to note that the (physical and affective) space created in 'A Private Experience', much like the Afro hair salon in *Americanah*, is fleeting and unstable. The abandoned shop is small and neglected, a makeshift place of refuge that is in no sense permanent. Adichie imagines overcoming difference as a difficult but possible act within this unstable environment. By making use of such spaces in her fiction, Adichie touches on the impossibilities of *sustaining* solidarities between black women and, more broadly, a sustainable black feminism that is transnational in its reach. At the story's close, Chika and the Hausa woman leave the shop early the next morning after the conflict is

¹³⁸ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.48.

¹³⁹ Adichie, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, p.52.

over. It is melancholic that they will probably never meet again, and the bond between them seems curtailed. But the effects of their meeting remain in Chika's mind and, importantly, their connection is concretised in a more material sense. As they are about to part, she asks the Hausa woman if she can keep her scarf. Earlier, Chika had attempted to leave the refuge and became startled by the charred bodies outside, cutting herself whilst running back into the safe place. The woman used her scarf to stem Chika's bleeding leg. This is the moment which finally breaks down the boundaries of differentiation between black subject and black object, to repurpose Ahmed's words. Chika's blood stain on the Hausa woman's scarf represents the syncretic religious meaning of blood in Muslim, Christian and Vodou faiths. Furthering the ritualistic moment whilst they sat together on the wrapper, the scarf remains after their verbal communication is cut off and they return to their respective regions of Nigeria to look for lost loved ones whom they never find. Heba Sharobeem's reading of the story similarly registers the difficulty of overcoming difference, suggesting that 'a co-existence of different religions and ideologies may sound difficult, almost impossible or as unreal as a Utopia in a hostile space, but Adichie makes it a reality through these two women whose different paths converge briefly.'¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the relationship between these different women does not remain concretely sustainable, but through the emotive, spiritual connection contained bloodily within the material of the scarf, the trace of solidarity remains.

In part one of this chapter I established *Americanah* as a novel with a 'global' aesthetic exploring migration, immigrant citizenship, class privilege, black womanhood, Afropolitanism and the politics of hair. *The Thing Around Your Neck* shares similarities with the novel that followed it, in its use of both localised and globalised spaces that form a kaleidoscopic perspective on the themes to which Adichie consistently returns. This attention to different ways of being in the world through the eyes of Nigerian women from differing social classes, religions and regions makes the short story collection particularly useful for exploring how these differences interact and the possibilities for connections which can form solidarities across them. In both short stories Adichie's depictions of her characters' bodies offer alternative ways of representing resistance. In 'Imitation', Adichie repurposes works of

¹⁴⁰ Sharobeem, 'Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations', p.34.

ancient Nigerian art to express the way these objects are bound up with violent colonial histories that transgress into the diaspora to embody Nkem's repression, allowing her to gain a form of agency. The story highlights the impossibility of autonomous existence for middle-class Nigerian women living in the diaspora because the structures of capitalist patriarchy permit only a very small act of defiance to slip through. Nkem's challenge to patriarchy is thrown into question and made more complicated through her relationship with her housegirl, and the class boundaries between the two are palpable, but not rigorously interrogated. Even though 'A Private Experience' takes place during a violent massacre which killed many innocent Hausa and Igbo people, its suggestion that such moments can foster black feminist solidarity offers some hope. Although the encounter takes place by chance, and the relationship between Chika and the Hausa woman is not likely to be sustained in the material world, their meeting carries the possibility of productive solidarity represented through the strategic use of the exchanged scarf. Throughout the short stories I focus on here, and in several other published short stories from Adichie's archive, she almost never chooses to construct a long-standing moment for equality.¹⁴¹ Whilst connections between black female characters in Edwidge Danticat's fiction are comparatively solid, in Adichie's, they are significantly more fleeting and difficult to sustain. When chance moments break down the class barriers between women — whether during hair braiding in a salon, in a domestic kitchen, or whilst taking cover from a riot — we can glimpse black feminism operating in Adichie's fiction within transnational spaces. When we read the experiences of 'elite' and 'underclass' Afropolitans (to again borrow Simon Gikandi's words) during these encounters, we build a nuanced picture of Adichie's contribution to a black feminist aesthetic. Within these fleeting moments, Adichie emphasises the sheer difficulty for class and economic difference between black women to be interrogated, challenged, and begin to breakdown in order to maintain a sustained sense of solidarity which must do productive work to resist the structures that certainly manifest to different degrees, yet mutually oppress black women.

¹⁴¹ Adichie's short stories 'Apollo' (*New Yorker*, 13 April 2015, pp.64–9), 'Birdsong' (*New Yorker*, 20 September 2010, pp.96–103) and 'Transition to Glory' (*One Story*, 30 September 2003, pp.1–19) are three further examples that explore imbalanced relationships in which boundaries cannot be overcome and end in tragedy.

Chapter Three

Part One

Towards Translocal Kinship in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*

Taiye Selasi's TED talk, 'Don't ask me where I'm from, ask where I'm a local' (2013), opens with an anecdote describing her recent book tour. The host's introduction stated she was from 'Ghana and Nigeria', whilst others introduce her as from 'England and the States'. To Selasi, being pinned to a particular nation seems false. It implies countries are 'eternal, singular, naturally occurring things' rather than fluctuating, fictional entities that can be 'born, die, expand or contract'.¹ Rejecting the corporate-sounding 'multi-national' label, Selasi positions herself as 'multi-local', suggesting personal and local experiences shape identity far more accurately than nation labels. For her, personal identifications are idiosyncratic and too particular to be pinned onto an continent-wide identity like 'African' or a racially-based one like 'black'. Multi-locality takes ideas like diaspora and transnationalism beyond two-directional travel between two nations and allows for an infinite number of localities, some of which may be smaller, more personalised places than a country; the 'auntie's kitchen' Selasi refers to in her essay 'Bye, Bye Babar', for example.² In this chapter, in which I focus upon Selasi's debut novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013), I continue to explore how to build a transnational black feminism through the lens of Selasi's novel. As I argue, the terms 'black' and 'African' need not indicate fixed identities. Rather, they can allow room for multiplicity whilst leaving space for commonalities that accentuate the power of collective unity. *Ghana* further probes these categories, which I suggest have the potential to forge useful collectivity, despite Selasi's fear they can divide. I contend mutable categories like 'black' and 'African' are essential for creating anti-capitalist black feminist resistance. In order to keep these terms useful, rather than reductive, it is worth unpacking their

¹ Taiye Selasi, 'Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm a local', *TEDXGlobal*, October 2014 <https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local?language=en> [accessed 18/06/2018].

² Taiye Selasi, 'Bye-Bye Babar', *The Lip*, 3 March 2005 <<https://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>> [accessed 10/10/2017].

implications through the lens of her novel. I anchor my discussion to three central axes – transnationalism, blackness and feminism — to pursue three questions that push further the ideas about diaspora, cultural identity, and black feminist solidarity and resistance in the previous two chapters. The first, explored in part one, asks: how might transnationalism work with, or against, multi-locality? Part two is concerned, second, with how Selasi figures blackness, and third, with the mode of feminism she depicts through her characters.

Selasi's TED talk draws upon her experiences and is reflected in the way *Ghana Must Go*'s protagonists are represented in the novel. She depicts the Sai family engaging with the world as Afropolitans living in and across multiple localities. Differently to Selasi, her characters find it difficult to feel they belong simultaneously to every locality; at times, they belong to none. This identity crisis appears in different ways for the Sais. *Ghana* troubles personal identity and belonging, further complicating the modes of conceptualising home and diaspora I established in my readings of Danticat's and Adichie's fiction. If Danticat ultimately contributes to a productive, feminist identification with the nation, and Adichie explores the ways class shapes the politics of migration and the return 'home', Selasi asks what becomes of those for whom 'home' remains elusive. Similarly concerned with class and privilege, but in a different vein to Adichie, Selasi refuses to fit her narrative into a reconciliatory trope in which the return home equates to finding the place where one belongs and a sense of identity. She instead foregrounds the deeply fractured, distorted and liminal sense of belonging experienced by her 'multi-local' characters.

Ghana Must Go opens dramatically. Kweku Sai, an accomplished surgeon, slowly dies of a heart attack in the garden of his self-built property in suburban Accra. He is estranged from his family; ex-wife Folasadé, eldest son Olu, twins Kehinde and Taiwo, and youngest daughter Sadé (known colloquially as Sadie). An accomplished surgeon practising in Boston where their children were born, Kweku was suddenly wrongfully dismissed following performing a risky surgical procedure on a member of a wealthy North American family. He went bankrupt secretly pursuing a legal battle that he lost and abandoned his family, ashamed, exiling himself to Ghana. Tellingly, Sadie describes her family

as ‘without gravity, completely unbound’.³ Her words point to a darker side of being multi-local. Lacking a distinct sense of place that secures them, the Sai family become scattered across North America, Europe and Africa. The novel’s non-linear, slightly fragmented form reflects these disparate lives. Kweku’s death acts as a catalyst, bringing the Sai family back together for his funeral in Accra.

Afropolitanism has been the focus of the majority of published scholarship about *Ghana Must Go*.⁴ For Selasi, Afropolitanism is a self-expression of a transnationalism that is multi-local. I read multilocality as building upon the vision of Afropolitanism she puts forth in her short essay discussed in my previous chapter, ‘Bye, Bye Babar’. In light of my discussion of Adichie’s *Americanah*, which highlighted Afropolitanism’s usefulness and shortfalls in providing a radical, anti-capitalist black feminist critique, I attempt to reframe it here as an important part of Selasi’s vision of multi-locality. Rather than a fixed and clearly defined identity, being Afropolitan might be better understood as a kinship affiliation that is multi-faceted and conflicting. *Ghana* attempts to work through this complexity. The novel imagines Afropolitanism more subtly and tentatively than ‘Bye, Bye Babar’, as critics Aretha Phiri and Miriam Pahl concur. Phiri reiterates Mbembe’s suggestion that it is ‘an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world’⁵ to argue *Ghana* ‘domesticates and reinterprets an abstract phenomenology through its pointed focus on the intimacies of family life and the intricacies of Afrodiasporic experiences’.⁶ Pahl suggests Afropolitan novels develop ‘a form of critical cosmopolitanism which demonstrates that some articulations of the concept can also be politically transformative.’⁷ Phiri and Pahl argue that *Ghana* is an Afropolitan novel, part of a progressive and intellectually exciting emerging genre.

Rather than slipping *Ghana Must Go* into a neat category, though, Eva Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek’s *In Search of the Afropolitan* takes into account the novel’s complexities (for example, the

³ Taiye Selasi, *Ghana Must Go* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p.146.

⁴ In addition, see Susanne Gehrmann ‘Cosmopolitanism with African roots: Afropolitanism's ambivalent mobilities’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28 (2016), 61–72 and Emelda Ucham, ‘African Hybrids: Exploring Afropolitanism in *Ghana Must Go*’, *Journal of Language & Communication*, 8 (2014), 63–75.

⁵ Achille Mbembe, ‘Afropolitanism’ in Simon Njami, *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2007), pp.26–9, p.28.

⁶ Aretha Phiri, ‘Lost in translation: re-reading the contemporary Afrodiasporic condition in Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*’ *European Journal of English Studies*, 21 (2017), 144–58 (p.146).

⁷ Miriam Pahl, ‘Afropolitanism as critical consciousness: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's and Teju Cole's internet presence’ *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28 (2016), 73–87 (p.74).

elliptical narrative style and use of free indirect discourse to create depth of character) and refuses to pigeonhole it as an Afropolitan novel. Following their suggestion that literature offers more nuance than non-fiction can, their chapter about *Ghana* opens with a less definitive consideration of Afropolitanism. They highlight the layered meanings behind the protagonist of the first chapter Kweku Sai's 'emblematic slippers', which reflect his desires to 'succeed and create stability in a homely family setting' and 'cover up and forget the sticky history of poverty and bare feet'.⁸ Kweku's slippers, significantly handed to ex-wife Folasadé Savage from his new wife Ama in a plastic 'Ghana Must Go' bag, represent for Knudsen and Rahbek 'ambivalent metaphors of (troublesome) travel and (unsettled) home'.⁹ The metonymic power of the bag and the slippers, when considered together, generates a complex web that encapsulates the sense of transnationalism the novel portrays, however elusively. Ambivalent and unsettled, to use their terms, and fragmented, to use mine, transnationalism is reflected in images like the travelling slippers and through form. Furthermore, Knudsen and Rahbek do not pay attention to how the exchange of the slippers is enabled through moments of empathy between Ama and Fola. Ama is a seemingly peripheral character but she facilitates this pivotal exchange in the novel which I explore further at the end of part two of this chapter. Moreover, the transnationalism reflected by the slippers and the Ghana Must Go bag is unevenly shaped by Nigeria's and Ghana's neoliberal economic history and complex relationship with one another.

Ghana Must Go's title suggests flight, making reference to the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983 during Shehu Shagari's presidency. Nigeria's economy became prosperous when oil prices climbed during the 1970s, but in Ghana the economy was in disarray due to the crash in the price of cocoa and the 1966 *coup d'état* which caused revolutionary leader Kwame Nkrumah's expulsion from power.¹⁰ Ghanaians migrated to Nigeria for employment opportunities. However, when oil prices dropped in 1982 and Nigeria's economy began to struggle, Shagari wrongly blamed 'illegal' Ghanaian immigrants for the failing economy and increased crime rates and expelled approximately a million

⁸ Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan: Encounters, Conversations, and Contemporary Diasporic African Literature* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), p.128.

⁹ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.116.

¹⁰ Shola Lawal, 'Ghana Must Go: The Ugly History of Africa's Most Famous Bag', *Mail & Guardian*, 4 April 2019 <<http://atavist.mg.co.za/ghana-must-go-the-ugly-history-of-africas-most-famous-bag>> [accessed 20/06/2019].

Ghanaians from Nigeria. Shagari's political move echoed Ghanaian Prime Minister Kofi Busia's expulsion of Nigerians in 1969,¹¹ although in this earlier incidence the scale was smaller and the Nigerians were more financially stable, consisting predominantly of entrepreneurial businessmen and women.¹² Ghanaians were ordered to leave with just two weeks' notice, hurriedly packing up belongings commonly using cheap, plastic chequered bags that became colloquially named 'Ghana Must Go' bags. When Ghana and Togo closed their borders due to the dangerously high numbers of returnee immigrants, Ghanaians were left temporarily stateless.¹³ The upheaval caused by the Ghana Must Go campaign is mentioned only briefly in Selasi's novel, when Fola's uncle Sena is expelled from Nigeria. The history of shrinking and booming economies under global capitalism, made further volatile by post-independence instability in West African countries, informs the meaning of Selasi's title. However, its meaning is multi-layered. Although the Ghana Must Go campaign only impacts the experience of a marginal character in the novel, the commanding combination of the verbs 'go' and 'must' in the title suggests the characters are simultaneously pulled towards Ghana and repelled by it. Selasi reconfigures the title phrase, which carries the weight of its previous meaning (the violent upheaval of expulsion by political means) yet takes on a new one that highlights the difficulty of finding stability anywhere for Global South migrants racialised as black, even if migration is voluntary. The phrase 'Ghana Must Go' hints at a calling. Selasi sets part of the novel in Ghana because the Sais must *go* there, not to play into the clichéd trope of 'rediscovering their roots' but to rebuild their fractured relationships and sense of identity. Although it is important to make the distinction that the Sai family become middle-class and wealthy, unlike many of the Ghanaians expelled from Nigeria who were working class or rural, poorer people, the stateless position the Ghana Must Go bags indicate echoes the metaphorical liminality the Sais experience. Furthermore, the context behind the title foregrounds the tense history between Ghana and Nigeria, suggesting Africa is figured realistically (rather than romantically) as a complex continent with some volatile relationships within it. *Ghana Must Go's* title is simultaneously suggestive of the impossibility of forming coherent African identities without

¹¹ Tom Forrest, *Politics and Economic Development in Nigeria* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), p.175.

¹² Lawal, 'Ghana Must Go: The Ugly History of Africa's Most Famous Bag'.

¹³ *Ibid.*

addressing the tension between different geographical sites and the multiplicity of Africa, and the journey the Sai family make to Ghana which prompts them to reconsider their identities and relationships with one another.

Formally, the novel is split into three parts, ‘Gone’, ‘Going’ and ‘Go’. The narrative jumps back and forth in time and switches between each family member’s perspectives. Selasi recollects her characters’ memories, revealing the Sais’ deepest insecurities, often in free indirect discourse. Folasadé supports her children single-handedly as a florist, while eldest son Olu follows in his father’s footsteps to pursue a surgical career in Boston. Twins Kehinde and Taiwo find themselves in New York after pursuing education and careers in Europe. Kehinde becomes an international artist and Taiwo a law-school prodigy turned dropout following an affair with the college dean. Youngest daughter Sadie is a Yale student and dancer suffering from bulimia. Kweku’s fate epitomises one of the novel’s central concerns: the insecure position faced by middle-class migrants racialised as black. Their father’s death forces the Sai siblings to confront their feelings of isolation that took root after he left and are further deepened by their insecure position in North American society where racial, gender and class dynamics mean they often struggle to belong. I recognise Selasi has much to contribute to literary representations of black masculinity, fatherhood and patriarchy’s intersection with race as damaging to black men.¹⁴ Therefore this chapter deploys a more expansive feminist perspective than my previous ones. Rather than focusing solely on Selasi’s female protagonists, Fola, Taiwo and Sadie, I must also focus on Kweku. The representation of these characters is important to my engagement with Selasi’s specific model of transnational black feminism.

This chapter takes my sites of investigation in turn, focusing first on *Ghana Must Go*’s reconceptualization of transnationalism in part one. I explore form differently to the previous novels and short stories discussed in this thesis because Selasi’s writing expresses a condition more fragmented, fragile, elusive, and less material than Danticat’s or Adichie’s. I further unpack the novel’s fragmented form in relation to transnationalism and consider Selasi’s term ‘multi-local’ in light of my

¹⁴ bell hooks has written extensively about the damage white supremacist capitalist patriarchy does to black men. See hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (Washington: Washington Square Press, 2004).

advocacy of transnationalism. It is important to first dwell on Selasi's positioning of her characters, in terms of their (cultural) identities and the tensions and contradictions they expose, in order to fully understand the way blackness is figured; which in turn influences the black feminist politic of the novel. In part two, I focus on how blackness is represented and challenged through the bodily representations of Fola, Sadie, Taiwo and Kweku. Selasi's compelling formal choices shape the novel's interrogations of blackness and belonging. Importantly, the male protagonists in this novel are rarely complicit in patriarchal control and also experience constraint, albeit differently. In this light it is useful to unpack a feminism that recognises racialised male oppression because, of course, race complicates privilege, and not all men are the equally beneficiaries of patriarchal dominance under neoliberal capitalism.

Ghana Must Go's protagonists are bound up with their environments and localities. Particularly at the beginning of the novel, Selasi moves between specific places in the US and Africa, forming a complex web of affective identifications with places. Returning to Selasi's compelling term 'multi-locality', *Ghana* creates what I name a *translocality* of form. I argue that translocality, moving a step beyond multi-locality, is expressed in the novel because of the way transformations take place within and across different localities. If 'multi' simply implies 'many' local identifications which coexist neatly alongside one another without conflict, then 'trans' suggests mobile kinds of localities and identities merging into one another, creating tensions and potentially something new. Like multi-locality, translocality is also predicated on an affective bond to a place. Translocality is reflected in the novel's split and disparate chapters which skip between each Sai family member's local environments, from Kweku in Accra to Olu in Boston, from Taiwo in New York to Sadie in New Haven. The constant switching back and forth to environments in the US and West Africa creates a multi-local setting. The novel's three parts are split into short chapters which glimpse into one of the Sais' present, everyday living and recollects their memories. Each chapter, which usually begins and ends abruptly, causes the reader to re-orientate themselves within a different location and narrative perspective. In part two, 'Going', the chapters move panoramically to show the impact of the moment of Kweku's death from different perspectives. We travel from Fola waking up in Ghana feeling the impact of the news she is

yet to hear, ‘breathless’ and ‘dreaming of drowning, a roaring like waves’ in chapter one,¹⁵ to a silently devastated Olu stepping outside the hospital into the Boston snow in the second. In the third, Taiwo takes Olu’s phone call in a taxi across New York to see her lover and the fourth chapter pans to Sadie evading Taiwo’s call whilst hiding from her own birthday party in a bathroom at Yale. Selasi’s style exemplifies a translocality of form, creating a sense of liminality which manifests in the Sais’ personal insecurities and emotional states. This fragmented narrative form, splitting each character apart from one another, reflects the Sais’ shattered sense of selves and scattered locality. The chapters are movable and interchangeable, mirroring a changing locality. In sum, *Ghana*’s form reflects fragmentation, instability, and multiplicity.

Madhu Krishnan prompts an important question in her overview of African literature in the contemporary moment: what work does ‘Africa’ do in a *transnational* African novel? Furthermore, how do we begin to articulate a relationship with places that are connected to our sense of who we are, but do not wholly define us? In order to locate the way Selasi positions places in Africa in her novel, it is useful to engage with Krishnan’s work and Selasi’s theoretical ideas about the literary grouping ‘African literature’. For Krishnan, ‘African literature’ is as mutable a definition as the idea of ‘Africa’ the continent, influenced by ‘inequities and constant shifts’.¹⁶ Whilst Krishnan troubles the category African literature, Selasi argued it should be dismantled entirely in her provocative keynote at the 2013 Berlin Literature Festival entitled ‘African Literature Doesn’t Exist’. Criticising the term’s broadness (there is no ‘European Literature’, for example), she argued it disregards ‘the complexity of African cultures and the creativity of African authors’¹⁷ and leaves little room for nuance. She believes the problem lies in the vagueness of an ‘African’ setting, which could mean ‘the snow-capped mountains of Cape Town’ or ‘the cacophonous chaos of Lagos’.¹⁸ The rich and sensual imagery in this speech reveals a distinct sense of the specific and personal detail which Selasi allocates to place. Locality — more specifically multi-locality — is crucial to understanding this novel. Its specific African sites are Ghana and Nigeria. For Selasi’s Afropolitan characters, these places exist in the imagination as well as

¹⁵ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.97.

¹⁶ Madhu Krishnan, ‘Negotiating Africa Now’, *Transition*, 113 (2014), 11–24 (p.15).

¹⁷ Taiye Selasi, ‘African Literature Doesn’t Exist’, *The Savannah Review*, 2 (2013), 53–66 (p.53).

¹⁸ Selasi, ‘African Literature Doesn’t Exist’, p.58.

in memory (excluding Sadie whose first visit to Africa is her father's funeral). Krishnan suggests 'Africa' is a conflicting space of 'refuge' and 'degeneration' in Selasi's novel.¹⁹ However, this view risks a certain conflation as each member of the Sai family has an entirely different relationship to the continent, and local sites in Ghana and Nigeria are figured in contrasting ways. For Kweku, his self-built property in the suburbs in Accra forms a refuge of sorts because it reflects his economic success outside the confines of anti-blackness in the US, yet his retreat to Ghana also marks his failure to keep his family together. His poverty-stricken childhood in Kokrobité, however, leads to the telling line 'lush Ghana, soft Ghana, verdant Ghana, where fragile things die', a contradiction which haunts him throughout his life.²⁰ To Fola, the orphan of upper-middle class parents (lawyer Kayode Savage and Somanyina Nwaneri, the mixed-raced daughter of an Igbo colonial administrator), Nigeria is a place of loss and pain where a sense of security can be shattered overnight. However, Accra provides refuge during Fola's teenage years and an escape after her children leave Boston. Taiwo's and Kehinde's sole experience of Nigeria is violent, but in Ghana they begin to heal psychologically. Sadie has never physically been anywhere in Africa, yet it is on the beach in Kokrobité where she first feels validated in her body. The places to which the Sais feel connected, then, are multi-local and idiosyncratic. Africa is figured more complexly than Krishnan's brief gloss of the novel allows. Ultimately, Ghana (and not Africa more generally), differently conceived, becomes the crucial common site enabling the Sai family reunion. Selasi moves away from the national in favour of the particular and the local, leaving room for a multi-local transnational perspective which, true to Afropolitanism, places a less homogenised notion of Africa at the centre.

Ghana Must Go's striking opening scene reveals Selasi's linguistic and formal choices. Selasi uses language to build upon this translocality of form I have identified. *Ghana* begins with very short chapters, some just a few pages long, in which an interior monologue consisting of Kweku's memories is shown to the reader. As the narrative unfolds we are invited to forge connections between the events he recollects just before he dies and the other Sai family members' experiences. To reiterate, Kweku's character follows the trajectory of a successful African migrant until the affluence he achieves is cut

¹⁹ Krishnan, 'Negotiating Africa Now', p.21.

²⁰ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.27.

short by his refusal to accept the structures of racism in the US which costs him his surgical career. His retreat to Ghana signals a new beginning for him, but without his family he feels incomplete. Kweku's death scene is an epic tale returned to across ninety pages which forms a crucial part of the novel. His heart attack is described as a series of 'breaks', and the scene reflects the shattered pieces of his broken heart. Although this imagery admittedly carries cliché romanticised connotations, heartbreak actually functions as a metaphor in the novel. The reasons for Kweku's internal ruptures causing his early death are shaped by systematic neoliberal underdevelopment in the Ghanaian context and anti-blackness and anti-migrant sentiment in the North American context. As Kweku gazes at the house he designed and built with the beginnings of stabbing pains in his chest, the detailed description builds a picture of a house situated in Accra but betraying a longing for places and people *not* local:

His house.

His beautiful, functional, elegant house, which appeared to him whole, the whole ethos, in an instant, like a fertilized zygote spinning inexplicably out of darkness in possession of an entire genetic code. An entire logic. The four quadrants: a nod to symmetry, to his training days, to graph paper, to the compass, perpetual journey/perpetual return, etc., etc., a gray courtyard, not green, polished rock, slabs of slate, treated concrete, a kind of rebuttal to the tropics, to home: so a homeland reimaged, all the lines clean and straight, nothing lush, soft, or verdant.²¹

Visually, the short first line 'his house' appears like a fragment on the page, an imposing sentence suggesting unquestionable ownership. The measured cadence in the first few lines suggests order and control. The alliterative, symmetrical syllables describing the building ('slabs of slate, treated concrete') mimic its symmetrical structure. Mirroring Kweku's house, the orderly sentences battle against the disorderly and the shorter contrast with the longer. Colons cause pauses, showing controlled thoughts, but the commas suggest rambling ones, threatening a loss of control. Kweku's house is described as being primarily influenced by his desire for order and, by extension, control and agency. The muted palette of greys, stone and concrete reflects need for structure, rebelling against the tropical natural Ghanaian landscape which enclosed him as a child growing up in Kokrobité. However, several details disrupt the façade of order.

The design of Kweku's house is described biologically ('like a fertilized zygote'), disrupting the structured and unnatural construction of the building. Furthermore, the 'four quadrants' which at

²¹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.5.

first seem indebted to the grandeur of Romanesque architecture, are more likely a veiled reference to his four original creations: his children. The symmetry and clean lines of the building belie its true purpose, built as a family home for the Sais who will never live in it. The imposing architectural structure sits uncomfortably between his desire for order and his psychological state. Throughout the novel Selasi's language moves between a sparse, minimal style of description and dense detail in long, tumbling paragraphs. This mirrors the disordered anxiety of her characters, the emotional effect of the Afropolitan condition touched upon by Simon Gikandi and mentioned in my second chapter. The house is a realised dream of prosperity, but the empty rooms evidence Kweku's failure as a father and husband. The building lacks any of the affective feeling associated with multilocality. Going against the sense of order and 'symmetry' he intended to craft, the lines 'perpetual journey/ perpetual return' are telling, reflecting a continuous state of transit despite the solid parameters of the house. Strangely, the structure is a 'rebuttal to the tropics, to home'. Here Kweku admits that the house is not a home at all and rebels against the idea of 'home' as a physical, fixed place one can live in. His house, therefore, is initially presented to us as a local place which unsettles the very environment it is built in, but lacks the sense of affect associated with translocality. Selasi's description of the house points towards the impossibility of forming home. Home remains something elusive for which her characters search, not a material place that can be concretely established. In sum, the above extract shows how form captures this particular rendition of translocality through a representation of home as unsteady and elusive.

Working against the novel's fragmented chapters and short, stark sentences is a sense of continuity in Selasi's language. It is significant that Kweku's death scene takes place in his garden. He originally designed the property with no garden, refusing anything 'verdant'. But the local builder (the spiritual carpenter-turned-gardener Mr. Lamptey) insisted, creating a garden based around the mango tree already growing on the land. Continuing the death scene began in chapter one, in chapter three the garden is described in lush, poetic detail:

Now the whole garden glittering [...] glittering mango tree, monarch, teeming being at center with her thick bright green leaves and her bright yellow eggs; glittering fountain full of cracks now and weeds with white blossoms, but the statue still standing, the 'mother of twins', *iya-ibeji*, once a gift for his ex-wife Folasadé, now abandoned in the fountain with her hand-carved stone twins; glittering flowers Folasadé could name by their faces [...]

Glittering garden.

Glittering wet.

Kweku stops on the threshold and stares at this, breathless, his shoulder against the sliding door, halfway slid open. He thinks to himself, with a pang in his chest, that the world is too beautiful sometimes. That there's simply no *weight* to it, no way to accept it [...]²²

The alliterative sentences are constructed with sibilance and repetition, creating a measured cadence in these lines which positions Ghana as both home and not home, compelling and repellent. The style reflects the complex, conflicting emotions Afropolitans experience without a fixed place in the world. The detailed and lush description of Kweku's garden suggests an Afropolitan trying to 'root' himself and feel he belongs to this environment. Selasi proves the difficulty of tying identity to a particular place or nation, especially for Afropolitans. Kweku's sense of alienation from his environment in the novel does not necessarily reflect the position of privilege for which Afropolitanism has been widely criticised.²³ Selasi later clarified in an interview that 'Bye, Bye Babar' was not intended to create a utopian or elitist kind of Afropolitanism and explained that she wrote the essay from a deeply personal 'stranded place' of 'pain'.²⁴ The 'stranded place' Selasi articulates in *Ghana* manifests in Kweku's failed attempts to assimilate in both Ghana and the US in the novel. There are further layers of tension here because his character is repelled by 'natural' things, privileging 'clean lines' and using concrete and slate to build his house, which contrasts starkly with the garden. The presence of the richly described plants creates a material environment which acts as a refuge away from feelings of isolation. The flora and fauna in the garden function as translocal things because whilst they remain indigenous to particular places and climates, they travel through the novel, creating consistent imagery which bonds together an otherwise fragmented recollection of memories, disparate settings and changing narrative perspectives.

Contrasting Kweku's character, Fola is a florist who harbours an appreciation for beauty, arranging the flowers and plants appearing in gardens across the text. In Boston and Accra, Fola's

²² Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.9.

²³ See, for example, Emma Dabiri's critique of Afropolitanism mentioned in chapter two of this thesis and Binyavanga Wainaina's infamous keynote, 'I am a Pan-Africanist, Not an Afropolitan', delivered at the African Studies Association UK 2012 conference. Stephanie Bosch Santana, 'Exorcizing Afropolitanism: Binyavanga Wainaina Explains Why "I Am a Pan-Africanist, Not an Afropolitan" at ASAUK 2012', *Africanwords.com*, 8 February 2013 <<http://africanwords.com/2013/02/08/exorcizing-afropolitanism-binyavanga-wainaina-explains-why-i-am-a-pan-africanist-not-an-afropolitan-at-asauk-2012/>> [accessed 10/05/2020].

²⁴ Aaron Bady, 'From That Stranded Place', *Transition*, 117 (2015), 148–65 (pp.158–60).

flower arranging offers more than financial stability and independence; it becomes a marker of translocality. A particularly clear example takes place at the novel's end as Fola offers her condolences to Kweku's widow Ama at his house in Accra. A character who often expresses his appreciation for the natural environment, Mr. Lamptey, remains unnoticed in this scene as he smokes marijuana at the back of the garden. An omniscient narrator observes Fola from Mr. Lamptey's perspective:

The river-woman enters, her arms full of flowers. Mr. Lamptey laughs softly again, with surprise: they are the very same flowers he chose for his garden, a raucous arrangement, bright pinks and deep reds. Her appearance is arresting, the effect beyond 'striking'.²⁵

Mr. Lamptey's description of the vibrant flowers that mirror those in Kweku's garden reveals an affective connection between Fola and Kweku which transcends their separation and his death. Multi-locality means personal identifications are formed with places, people and objects that feel familiar. Translocality makes this familiarity 'travel', appearing in other places, people and objects and placing them within close proximity to one another in the mind of the person (or character) experiencing it. Notice the way Mr. Lamptey metaphorically imagines Fola's voice as like 'the bottom of a river, an echo, a tide'.²⁶ The water imagery suggests a liquidity joining land masses together. Closely tied to Fola's presence, water is figured as a channel linking disparate places and people. This is fitting because Fola's character serves as a key instrument of reconciliation and healing for each Sai family member, and here even for Ama. At the end of this final garden scene, Fola notices the *iya-ibeji* statue and laughs. Her amusement, merged with grief, shows that despite being separated by borders for many years, Fola and Kweku remain connected through the objects and affective emotions they share. The translocal connections the Sais have to places, people and objects are recurring and cyclical, like the novel's form, returning to Kweku's garden at the end.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the meaning behind the *iya-ibeji* statue. We are introduced to Fola's character through this statue gifted to her by Kweku, described as 'still standing' yet 'abandoned' like Fola herself in the US. In Yoruba custom *ibeji* (twins) are considered a divine

²⁵ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.312.

²⁶ Ibid.

blessing.²⁷ According to an oral history account published by Timothy Mobolade,²⁸ *ibeji* statues are traditionally made of wood and represent the figures of one or both of the twins in the afterlife. *Ibeji* are believed to bring material wealth to their families and their statues protect the house from evil. Combined with the image of *Ìyá*, which according to Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí is genderless and cannot be translated simply into ‘mother’ because *Ìyá* does not fit the Western gender roles associated with mother figures,²⁹ the statue possesses a multi-faceted meaning. *Ìyá* has what Oyèwùmí describes as a ‘matripotent’ socio-political role endowed with spiritual and material powers.³⁰ Yoruba followers believe if *ibeji* are neglected or harmed then their parents are cursed with suffering; a fate that comes into fruition in *Ghana Must Go*.³¹ The image of the *iya-ibeji* statue appears briefly four times: in Kweku’s garden, from Taiwo’s childhood perspective, from Olu’s when he secretly visits Kweku in Ghana, and from Fola’s in Kweku’s garden after his death. Taiwo’s description is the most fascinating: ‘there, gazing back at her, alarming in moonlight, was the statue of the mother with the hand-carved stone twins. It looked like a child between the silhouetted fir trees, a four-foot-tall alien-child, glowing pale gray.’³² The statue is made of stone, unlike the natural wood used traditionally. It appears cold and eerie and, out of place in the garden in Boston, it becomes a relic of their West African heritage. The statue’s geographical disconnectedness from its Nigerian Yoruba origins seems to suggest it fails at its purpose to bring wealth, prosperity and protect the family. This translocal object has no transformative purpose or meaning in Boston, emulating how the Sais feel about themselves.

Contrasting the *iya-ibeji* statue’s alien appearance and alienated context, Selasi’s alignment of the statue with Fola’s character is an act of feminist empowerment that resists Western gender roles and suggests powerful spirituality which pre-dates colonialism. Being aligned with the matripotent *Ìyá* could not protect Fola or her children from trauma, but it does suggest a resilience necessary for the

²⁷ A conversation with my colleague and friend Opemiposi Adegbulu, a Nigerian Yoruba and sibling to twins, initially enlightened me about the meaning of *ibeji*.

²⁸ Timothy Mobolade highlights the importance of recording oral histories and establishes their importance in historical work. For this reason, I treat this oral history account as factual whilst acknowledging the potential discontinuity and unreliability of oral histories. Timothy Mobolade, ‘Ibeji Custom in Yorubaland’, *African Arts*, 4 (1971), 14–5.

²⁹ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideas of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016), p.57–8.

³⁰ Oyèwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood?*, p.58.

³¹ Mobolade, ‘Ibeji Custom in Yorubaland’, p.15.

³² Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.43.

healing that begins at the novel's end. Although the statue is said to represent Fola, it also seems emblematic of Kweku's metaphorical journey. The statue appears before some significant shifts in our perception of his character. Taiwo turns away from looking at the statue in the garden to find her father fast asleep on the sofa, bathed in moonlight and exposed without his slippers, revealing heavily bruised feet and with them the 'sticky history' of poverty he tried to conceal. Similarly destabilising the persona Kweku attempts to keep up, Olu sees the statue just before he leaves Ghana, furious his father is now living with another woman. The statue thus functions as more than a representation of *Ìyá* motherhood. It also reflects Kweku's failed attempt to keep their lives constant and solid, like the statue, and its presence in the garden in Accra serves as a reminder of his abandonment. At the end of the novel, however, the statue represents something much more positive. Fola is amused by its presence in Kweku's garden and its function suggests an unexpected sense of closure. The statue has stood the test of time and geographical location, embodying Kweku's dedication to Fola as the protector and source of their true wealth: their children. Embodied in the form of the *iya-ibeji* statue, the centre piece of the garden, is a complex web of affect and translocal connections.

Part one has argued that in *Ghana Must Go* the state of being in-between is figured as an identity in itself, as Selasi articulates in her vision of Afropolitanism. More than suggesting only privilege, multi-locality in the novel reflects existential anxiety: a darker side to being Afropolitan. The novel demonstrates a translocality that not only reflects the instability the Sai family experience and the multiplicity of their experiences within and between different localities through its form. Furthermore, through the translocal objects the protagonists are affectively attached to, Selasi connects them sometimes to places (gardens), occasionally to objects (the statue), and most clearly, to one another, to remedy their identity crises.

Part Two

Going to *Ghana*: The Healing Power of Black Feminist Empathy

At the beginning of part two of *Ghana Must Go* (entitled ‘Going’), Taiwo drifts into a taxi at past-midnight in snowy New York, en route to her former lover’s apartment. She is collected by a cab driver she knows is Ghanaian due to his accent. Taiwo and the driver develop a strained intimacy because along the journey she receives a phone call and finds out about her father’s death. The driver’s gestures of solidarity are sometimes jarring to her and the conversation between them is significant for two reasons. First, it shows how two Afropolitans of different classes relate to one another and opens up the complexities within their transnational identifications. Second, several scenes taking place in her memory, removed from the present as her mind wanders along the journey, reveal how she navigates her blackness. In turn, the scene begins to build a picture of Selasi’s portrayal of transnational blackness. Aside from Fola’s alignment with the *iya-ibeji* statue discussed in part one, there are several more important representations of women’s bodies and their connections to blackness and environments in the novel. Part two of this chapter pays attention to some of these moments in detail.

We are first alerted to the driver’s presence when he interrupts Taiwo’s thoughts because he hears her air them aloud, whispering ‘*we missed our father*’ [emphasis original].³³ He begins with small talk by asking her where she is from, to which she responds ‘I don’t know.’³⁴ Her answer is a clear indication of the rootlessness she feels as an Afropolitan, reflecting her disconnection from the Boston of her upbringing and the Nigeria and Ghana rarely discussed by her parents. Taiwo reveals she is part Nigerian, concealing her father’s heritage, prompting the driver to respond ‘*Bella naija!*’³⁵ Unlike the hair-braiding scene in Adichie’s *Americanah*, the ease of their conversation is not stunted by their different social classes and they slip into colloquialisms which build the beginnings of Pan-African affinity. However, Olu’s missed call disrupts their conversation. The driver abandons his attempt to build a connection between them and no profound connection is established between Taiwo, a middle-class Afropolitan, and this character whom Rahbek and Knudsen would classify as a ‘less-fortunate

³³ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.126.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. ‘Bella naija’ is a patriotic phrase meaning ‘beautiful Nigeria’.

Afropolitan'.³⁶ Selasi takes the opportunity to present to us a complex, revealing moment in the taxi driver scene. I will look at this scene more closely, but first I dwell on Taiwo's introspection during the journey and what it tells us about how she sees herself, her body and her blackness.

On the journey Taiwo recalls several memories, thinking about her personal failure to continue playing the role of 'Darling Daughter'³⁷ by dropping out of law school after her affair with Dean Rudd and consequently falling from the 'carousel'³⁸ of academic excellence. Taiwo's recollection of her affair reveals her entanglement in the anxiety of Afropolitanism pertaining specifically to black womanhood. During her first meeting with Rudd (Selasi omits his first name), the pair discover an instant sexual attraction. Taiwo's clothing is described in detail as an eclectic Afropolitan blend of blue velvet blazer, 'dress-cum-dashiki' and an 'upsweep of locks dripping tendrils'.³⁹ She lists her accomplishments to Rudd without any 'feeling', hiding the truth behind 'bare skin', as Rudd suggests, to be 'accessed at some other time'.⁴⁰ Beyond the sexual suggestion here, Taiwo is portrayed as merely performing the role of a young, successful, attractive woman of African descent. Selasi suggests the 'skin' underneath is where Taiwo's deeper self lies, raw and complex, but hidden behind the façade acted out by simplified versions of herself so that she can dutifully play the role assigned to her in the creation of a 'A Successful [African] Family'.⁴¹

When Rudd physically (and the reader, metaphorically) later accesses Taiwo's bare skin, she becomes more vulnerable. Standing in the dark, naked, her indifference and lack of connection to what others call her '*good body*' is palpable.⁴² We later learn that her bodily alienation is partly due to her experience of sexual abuse, but this is not the sole reason: her relationship with her body is also shaped by the contours of racialisation and gender specific to her North American environment. Selasi is interested in the social function of skin as theorised by Sara Ahmed, which I discuss in detail later in this chapter. Here Selasi suggests beneath Taiwo's characters' black skin is 'bare skin' that cannot be

³⁶ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.265.

³⁷ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.123.

³⁸ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.127.

³⁹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.130.

⁴⁰ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.132.

⁴¹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.123.

⁴² Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.136.

reached whilst surrounded by the constraints of white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism in the US. These structures simultaneously demand and negate migrant success and are the reason for Kweku's downfall, which ultimately leads to her own. Taiwo's defence mechanisms (her academic prowess, beauty and cutting wit) function to protect her from the reality that blackness is more than skin deep. It is reflected in the instability of trying to succeed in a (Western) society predicated on denying black humanity. Furthermore, Taiwo's is a body damaged by the abuse she faced when she returned to her mother's place of origin, Nigeria. Selasi does not present us with an easily reconcilable storyline because Nigeria is also implicated in her oppression. Taiwo's (and Kweku's) desire to 'be seen as human' within the systems of racism, patriarchy and economics is figured as unreachable.⁴³ I concur with Knudsen and Rahbek when they suggest 'such a desire can transmute into deep psycho-somatic ailments and an infectious anxiety about one's place in the world'⁴⁴ which readily manifests in the Sais' range of characterisation. They all fail, arguably until the novel's end, to find an environment where they can belong. For Taiwo this sense of anxiety results in her 'long[ing] to touch and be touched',⁴⁵ a desire for intimacy and affect betraying a need to be genuinely loved and protected. This longing is left unfulfilled until an interaction with her mother on the beach in Accra at the end of the novel.

Chapter three closes with a fascinating image. Taiwo's thoughts about the affair are suddenly interrupted by the driver telling her 'your baby is crying'⁴⁶ (another Ghanaian colloquialism), alerting her to a second phone call from Olu. The instant she learns her father has died of a heart attack, 'a forcefield of grief'⁴⁷ envelops her, manifesting in anger through her silent tears. Taiwo leaves the taxi and the driver watches her safe return to her empty apartment which is, notably, not once referred to as her home. A striking tableau is described in one long, rhythmic sentence:

They are angels in a snow globe, both silent and smiling, two African strangers alone in the snow: kindly man in a cab in a bulky beige coat waving back as he pulls from the curb and honks once and a girl on her steps in a short white fur coat crying quietly watching him go.⁴⁸

⁴³ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.123.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.126.

⁴⁶ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.138.

⁴⁷ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.139.

⁴⁸ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.141.

The frozen image of the taxi driver and Taiwo, brown-skinned against the snowy white backdrop, suggests they are not necessarily strangers to one another but to the locality in which they find themselves. New York appears unforgiving to both the Ghanaian migrant and the US-born Afropolitan, portrayed as cold and uninviting. Taiwo is portrayed as ‘silent’ yet smiling through tears in glamorous high heels and a white fur coat, looking particularly vulnerable and out of place; akin to a one-dimensional portrait of a woman rather than a feeling and thinking human being. Knudsen and Rahbek read this scene compellingly. They state the ‘extraordinary’ and ‘upwardly-mobile’ Sais are looked at, by Selasi and the reader, through a ‘snow-globe’ with ‘shining stylised human figures’ inside.⁴⁹ The recurring snow imagery creates an ‘idyllic setting’ and functions to obscure the ‘anguish’ of their fragmented family and sense of belonging.⁵⁰ Indeed, Selasi’s use of free indirect discourse often creates the suffocating feeling of her characters’ minds’ racing, creating a tone of anxiousness and irresolution. The snow-globe image suggests we should look beyond the shiny surface of those racialised as black who achieve middle-class affluence, the comfort of which is an illusion. Appearances are deceptive. Therefore, Selasi moves beyond a skin-deep conceptualisation of blackness. Blackness exists both as an external skin pigmentation with social meaning ascribed onto it and *underneath* the skin as the untouchable and indescribable social structures which manifest in this striking snow-globe image. As I referred to in chapter two, *Ghana Must Go* echoes the sense of privilege Margo Jefferson’s highlights in *Negroland*; for people of African descent, belonging to the privileged is far more difficult and complex than class and wealth status may show.

Sadie’s body is similarly fraught with anxieties bound up with black middle-class privilege. For her, they manifest differently, culminating in an eating disorder: bulimia. We are introduced to her in a jarring scene as she seeks refuge from her own birthday party in a bathroom: ‘[Sadie] is kneeling at the toilet bowl, fingers down throat. Out comes the alcohol, followed by the birthday cake, followed by a thimble of thin, burning bile.’⁵¹ The mental illness that Sadie hides reflects her insecurities despite her character being a high-achieving Afropolitan who appears put together on the surface. The origins

⁴⁹ Knudsen and Rahbek, *In Search of the Afropolitan*, p.128–9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.141–2.

of her bulimia are bound up with Eurocentric body image pressures, and we later learn she always wanted her sister's slim body. However, what is more compelling for my argument than the more obvious internalisation of Eurocentric beauty standards is the way bulimia manifests, and how it relates to whiteness in ways set somewhat apart from body image.

Importantly, Sadie rejects Taiwo's criticism that because of her deep admiration for her WASP best friend, Philae, she wants to *be* white. Sadie is surrounded by 'ethnically heterogeneous and culturally homogenous [...] Ivy League strivers' who identify with North American society; she does not view middle-class affluence as exclusively synonymous with whiteness.⁵² Yet, Sadie does indeed want to *be* Philae because 'Philae's family is *heavy*, a solid thing, weighted, perhaps by the money, an anchor of sorts?'⁵³ Betraying her insistence that she does not wish to embody whiteness, Selasi's language describes her as wanting to live *inside* Philae's skin, knowing it is not enough to simply *like* her because of her blackness. The historical lineage belonging to white North Americans within middle and upper classes is evidently linked to economics, race, and a sense of belonging that is difficult to describe and name, hence the question mark at the end of Sadie's wandering thoughts. Her character wants to become someone who belongs, which in North America is synonymous with whiteness and wealth.

Sadie's bulimia plays out against the backdrop of bathrooms, and it is worth paying attention to the meaning behind her peculiar attachment to them. Bathroom space, more specifically the bathrooms of friends and acquaintances, allows Sadie to briefly and intimately access the atypical life of the North American family for which she covertly longs. Again, Selasi ties the Sai's identities to idiosyncratic connections with small, personal places. Bathrooms are Sadie's escape from her performance as the 'Good Influence' with 'good grades and good manners'.⁵⁴ She 'slips off' into 'a world of concealment. A chamber of secrets, insecurities, scents, crystal bottles', smelling used towels 'which smelled of defenselessness, skin [...] false tropical fruit'.⁵⁵ Bathrooms work against the insecurity of belonging nowhere because they exist everywhere. Their ordinariness and domesticity

⁵² Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.146.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.143.

⁵⁵ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.143.

provides a calming sense of normality for Sadie. But, offsetting bathroom environments as a place of refuge is the damage Sadie does to her body whilst in them. Leaning over the toilet bowl, her bile represents her rejection of the stifling, perfect, perfumed lives of her white North American friends. Beyond the desire to physically change the body and make it smaller, bulimia can also be read metaphorically, linked to over-consumption closely followed by a rejection of said consumption. Aretha Phiri likens Sadie's bulimia to the 'purging of colonialism' expressed through the character Nyasha's anorexia in Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions*.⁵⁶ Rather than positioning Sadie's bulimia as a 'protest against the "experience of not being seen" as a legitimate subject in and of the world',⁵⁷ I read it less optimistically. Bulimia purges the suffocating presence of the white North American upper middle-class environment surrounding Sadie at Yale, closing in on her in a claustrophobic way much like the walls of a bathroom. Whilst she remains in the US, she cannot escape the alienating and destructive psychological state which causes her to purge her own body.

Selasi suggests that the cure for Sadie's bulimia could lie in Ghana. During part three, 'Go', the Sais reunite in Ghana. Being in Accra facilitates the space that opens up to create intimacy, understanding and solidarity between the family members. Kokrobité in particular is transformed into an empowering site initially realised through Sadie's bodily awakening. When the Sais arrive in Ghana for Kweku's funeral they travel to his birthplace, a fishing village in Kokrobité. Sadie meets her aunt, Naa, for the first time. Naa looks exactly like her. She greets Sadie using her Ghanaian middle name, Ekuia, and says 'welcome back'⁵⁸ despite it being her first time there. The Sais are greeted traditionally with dancing and one of the girls from the village begins a solo. Sadie notices the girl's body shares similarities with her own, recognising the 'thick arms, thighs, high buttocks, broad shoulders, small bosom, the same solid body that she has'.⁵⁹ Sadie thinks to herself '*an ugly body can't dance*'.⁶⁰ Within her psyche she carries Eurocentric beauty standards which, again, perpetuate negative body image. However, trying to apply these beauty standards in an African context does not quite work. Instead her

⁵⁶ Phiri, 'Lost in translation', p.151.

⁵⁷ Phiri, 'Lost in translation', p.152.

⁵⁸ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.266.

⁵⁹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.267.

⁶⁰ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.268.

assumptions about bodies are contested. When the Ghanaian girl's body dances, a shocked Sadie sees its beauty clearly: '[it is] incomprehensible, indescribable how this girl moves her body. Virtuosoic, without effort, without edges, without angles'.⁶¹ The girl invites Sadie to dance and she picks up the moves with equal ease:

When they speak of it later they'll say that a girl came to Sadie and pulled her up off their bench, gave a little demonstration of the base two-step footwork, which Sadie repeated a few times herself, that the drummers, encouraged, started drumming a little faster, that Sadie kept pace, to the delight of the crowd, and that before they all knew it, she was dancing in the clearing as if she'd been born doing traditional Ga dance. [...] (*I am dancing*, she thinks, disbelieving, unable to stop), stomach taut, thighs on fire, lids slack, hips in circles, shoulder up shoulder down, around, foot out foot in, she is outside her body or *in* it, inside it, unaware of the exterior, unaware of the skin, unaware of the eyes, unaware of the onlookers, aware of the pounding, aware of the drum.⁶²

Selasi switches to a third-person onlooker's perspective to convey the dance as a bodily, yet simultaneously out-of-body experience. Euphoric, rhythmic movement is palpable within the velocity and rhythm of the sentences. When Sadie dances her movement is instinctive, mirroring the local girl's moves exactly. The scene serves to viscerally connect her character to her Ghanaian lineage. Selasi's description makes Ga dance seem like a natural movement encoded into Sadie's DNA. She is 'unable to stop' with 'thighs on fire' as she moves fluidly and powerfully. Here dance functions similarly to the way it does in Edwidge Danticat's short story 'Caroline's Wedding'; as a way of imagining the black female body free of constraints.⁶³ The key difference here is that Sadie is physically, rather than imaginatively, moving. Selasi therefore creates an undoubtedly affirming moment for her character's agency. For the first time in the novel she is completely in tune with her body and no longer battling with it. She is 'unaware of the exterior' and 'skin' and, for a fleeting moment, she transcends the constraints of being in a black, female body she experiences in the US. Aretha Phiri, who puts forth a 'cosmofeminist' (cosmopolitan feminist) approach to reading this moment, suggests through this scene 'where the pain and trauma typically associated with [Sadie's] body is translated into inexplicable euphoria', 'the novel's vision of home' is located 'as residing in the embodied, moving self'.⁶⁴ Selasi's

⁶¹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.268.

⁶² Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.269–70.

⁶³ Here I refer again to Saidiya Hartman's conceptualisation of dance as a form of 'redress' mentioned in chapter one.

⁶⁴ Phiri, 'Lost in Translation', pp.153–55.

novel suggests home lies within close bonds with others and within bodies able to feel at peace in their environments. Ultimately, in this moment Sadie's dancing is empowering and she feels a sense of belonging in the circle dancing with the Ghanaian girl. She seems completely at home.

However empowering Sadie's dancing scene may be on the surface, it is not a moment I see as radically feminist. Although US-born Sadie finds kinship with local Ghanaian women through the body politic, there are some problems with this kinship. For one, it is predicated on a kind of biologism, suggesting that because Sadie is part-Ghanaian the ability to dance traditionally is mystically in her blood. As I have outlined in my thesis introduction, we should be wary of claims to an 'authentic' blackness because of its heterogeneity and remain vigilant towards the power dynamics between black women in the Global North and South. Dancing to African drums is an obvious cliché, suggesting a predictable 'coming home to Africa' moment in the narrative. Amy Rushton reads Sadie's dancing scene as troubling due to the way it establishes 'a notion of biocentric lineage and connection to Africa' because 'Sadie's co-option into the local "seestah"-hood and newfound sense of belonging is clearly meant to be celebratory'.⁶⁵ The reconciliatory potential of Sadie's dancing extends beyond her personal healing and reconciliation because the moment is also the catalyst for the Sai family to begin to rebuild their familial relationships. Rushton argues that 'Selasi's novel arguably *reduces* the political potential of Afropolitanism to an individualistic way of viewing one's place in a biogenetic lineage' [emphasis original].⁶⁶ I am similarly sceptical about Selasi's positioning of Africa as a place where an unproblematic return to one's 'roots' can elicit a visceral reaction which solves body image issues and identity crises. I believe, however, there are more layers to the role of Africa in the novel. *Ghana Must Go* as a whole, and the Afropolitan lens Selasi establishes, contests the notion there is a fixed home to which one can 'return'. *Ghana* is conscious of stereotypical tropes of African homecoming and purposefully sets up a cliché in order to swiftly destabilise it. Both Phiri and Rushton neglect to consider carefully the feminist *potential* of the space created by the dancing scene, which is more fully realised in Selasi's disruption of it.

⁶⁵ Amy Rushton, 'No Place Like Home: the Anxiety of Return in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*', *Études Anglaises*, 70 (2017), 45–62 (p.56).

⁶⁶ Rushton, 'No Place Like Home', p.57.

Let us note that the narrative perspective switches to Taiwo's just as the Sais jump to their feet in support of Sadie, embracing one another. The sight of Sadie hugging their mother sends her elder sister spiralling into uncontrollable anger:

But to see Sadie now in her moment of triumph, enfolded by Fola as she was at the airport (all smiles-through-the-tears, face to breast, and the rest of it) Taiwo feels something rather startlingly like rage. [...]

Her mother doesn't hug her, it occurs to her, jarringly. [...]

Rage, out of nowhere. [...] her body begins trembling, then moving, without bidding: first quivering, then burning, then standing, then walking: without thinking, without speaking, she is walking away.⁶⁷

The reaction is sparked by Sadie's and Fola's close mother-daughter bond, portrayed through maternal intimacy signalled by the 'face to breast' image. Taiwo's body moves, too; not joyfully in time with an essentialist beating of an African drum, but rebelliously away from the family festivities as she physically exiles herself. Like Sadie's, Taiwo's body is vulnerable, 'trembling' and 'burning' with rage at the secret she and her twin Kehinde have buried. An abused body does not fit the scene and is forced to move to the margins. Kokrobité in Ghana becomes the site of both the empowered and the violated black female body. Taiwo's pain manifests as a physical bodily reaction and becomes difficult to put into words. Using Elaine Scarry's work to probe into why and how pain resists language and communication, Sara Ahmed insists pain is not just 'bodily damage'; pain 'burns through us'.⁶⁸ The pain caused by childhood trauma is difficult for Taiwo's character to voice and challenging for Selasi to express in writing.

However, this pain is also the crucial agent which begins to redeem Taiwo's and Fola's relationship. Taiwo runs to the beach and, sitting on the shoreline, realises the source of her rage. When they were teenagers Fola sent the twins to a private high school in Nigeria because after Kweku left, her half-brother Femi was the only person able to afford their school fees. Unbeknown to Fola, Femi is a violent brothel owner rumoured to be involved in arms sale and human trafficking. Femi threatens and forces Taiwo and Kehinde into carrying out sexual acts with one another. This shocking revelation sits jarringly alongside the homecoming cliché Selasi creates in the previous scene. Africa is depicted as a complex site of abuse and violence (in Nigeria) and loss, redemption and healing (in Ghana).

⁶⁷ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.270–1.

⁶⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.23.

Taiwo's confession makes the possibility of reconciliation with her mother possible and results in a feminist space opening up, crucially, through embodiment. Taiwo asks herself, 'and what happens to daughters whose mothers betray them? They don't become huggable like Sadie [...] They grow shells. Become hardened.'⁶⁹ She collapses in grief, almost falling into the ocean which causes Fola to grab her instinctively. Their skin touches 'for the first time in years',⁷⁰ breaking Taiwo's defensive shell:

Taiwo is silent, her arms around Fola, her chest quivering palpably against Fola's breasts. Fola pulls back, just enough to see Taiwo, to hold the girl's face with her fingers. 'I'm sorry.' [...] She wants to make Taiwo stop crying. But can't. All she can do is stand weeping with Taiwo alone on this beach in the bearing down heat, knowing someone has damaged her children irreparably, unable to fix it. Able only to hold.⁷¹

Here Selasi creates a nurturing maternal image where mother's and daughter's skin touches, satisfying Taiwo's previously expressed desire to 'touch and be touched' in a way more emotionally nourishing than her previous interactions with men.⁷² Returning to Sara Ahmed's work on bodies and affect discussed in chapter two of this thesis, Ahmed suggests skin is '*a border that feels*' [emphasis own].⁷³ Ahmed states: 'while the skin appears to be the matter which separates the body, it rather allows us to think of how the materialisation of bodies involves, not containment, but an affective opening out of bodies to other bodies, in the sense that the skin registers how bodies are *touched* by others' [emphasis own].⁷⁴ Above, Selasi's short sentences and the even cadence creates a comforting, measured tone. Fola holds Taiwo, seeing her vulnerability and unable to stop her pain, but able to weep alongside her. This emotional moment, in which Fola is 'able only to hold' her daughter, suggests this affective contact is feminist praxis.

Touch and empathy work against the fragmented form of the novel to create a sense of reconciliation at the end. I draw parallels with my reading of Adichie's short story 'Imitation' in suggesting touch is a crucial part of the empathy forming *Ghana Must Go*'s feminist work. Ahmed suggests when we try to know another's pain it can manifest in empathy and when we touch others to

⁶⁹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.274.

⁷⁰ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.290.

⁷¹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.291.

⁷² Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.126.

⁷³ Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p.45.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

provide comfort, we empathise with their pain.⁷⁵ The solidarity created between the mother and daughter avoids implying a romanticised and exclusionary kind of feminism privileging motherhood. Selasi instead confronts the difficulty of mother-daughter relationships, and the only option for both women is to try to heal from the damage. Whilst mother-daughter bonding alone is not enough to suggest a *radical* feminism, the difficult circumstances under which it is achieved, and the representation of an imperfect, ultimately fully human mother does create a form of feminist resistance. We know Fola's character is described as an 'empath' who touches her stomach intuitively to 'feel' for her disparate children's wellbeing. Yet at the same time, Ahmed argues there are limits to empathy and there is something unknowable about our own and another's pain:

Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel. [...] The call of such pain, as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitation. It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one.⁷⁶

As Ahmed suggests, pain has feminist potential as a feeling and communication that is not simply a passive cause for empathy but an active 'demand' for a 'collective politics'. Selasi highlights the futility of Fola's empathy for her daughter, but at the same time we might read something productive in this seemingly hopeless moment in the novel. The finality of Selasi's line 'able only to hold' emphasises the empowering force of feminist solidarity through a repaired maternal relationship which is forged rather than a biological given, as both women face the 'impossibility of reconciliation' together on the beach in Kokrobité.

In sum, feminist solidarity allows Taiwo and Sadie to overcome the existential crisis that being Afropolitan can create. Feminist empowerment is found through dance and connecting with Ghanaian locals and family members for Sadie. For Taiwo and Fola, feminist solidarity takes place through mother-daughter bonding and the acknowledgement of the presence of pain and the possibility of healing. The final redemptive moment in the novel, Fola's reconciliation with Kweku, is similarly made possible by an exchange between two women. By way of concluding part two of this chapter I turn to

⁷⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.30.

⁷⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.39.

a crucial moment which brings together the threads of translocality, blackness and feminism in Selasi's novel.

The introduction to part one of this chapter foregrounded Knudsen's and Rahbek's reading of the meaning behind Kweku's slippers, and I now draw attention to the feminist potential of this moment in conjunction with the transnational meaning they ascribe to it. In *Ghana Must Go*'s penultimate closing scene, Kweku's second wife Ama briefly visits the house Fola inherited in Ghana. As Fola greets her warmly in her garden, Ama hands her 'a plastic Ghana Must Go bag'⁷⁷ containing Kweku's slippers and politely leaves. He wore the slippers always in Boston but when he is found in his garden in Accra they are inexplicably absent, causing Olu and Taiwo to each wonder why he died barefoot without his slippers. Before Fola reaches into the bag to find the slippers she glances to the floor and sees the portrait previously drawn in the dirt by Kehinde: 'Kweku, however gestural'.⁷⁸ In an unexpectedly fantastical scene, the object (slippers) and the image (Kweku's face) conjures up Kweku's presence. Fola humorously tells him 'your wife's a bloody genius... slippers.'⁷⁹ An imaginative reconciliation between them ensues. They are reunited as the boundaries of the physical material realm are blurred in an emotive scene where they forgive one another and accept their past pain and mutual failures. This moment of magical realism is surprising in an otherwise realist novel. Kweku's and Fola's reunion is made possible in the imaginative world of the novel, and for Selasi this is part of the power of fiction; it facilitates access to emotional closure that can be more difficult to achieve in the material world. It is significant this reunion can only happen due to the genuine empathy between Kweku's two wives, and Fola's and Kweku's empathy for one another. Once again, feminist empathy and solidarity, despite the acknowledgement of difference, offer a way of beginning to heal from the novel's fractured and broken relationships.

The slippers themselves are a key object facilitating this reconciliation. Kweku's slippers are not just transnational objects which travel from Boston to Accra. They are translocal because of the affective feeling they create, which remains constant regardless of location. When Fola holds his

⁷⁷ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.316.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

slippers close to her face she feels proximity to him and the domestic life they once shared together. The travelling slippers move to different locations but Fola's affective connection to them remains beyond a specific place. The sense of belonging which Fola and Kweku feel at this moment is not tied to the US or Africa; it is a distinctly local feeling that moves beyond material reality. The slippers serve a similar function to the *iya-ibeji* statue which for Kweku is a constant reminder of Fola. The statue and the slippers are both closely related to the bodies of those they signify. Through the inclusion of these objects, Selasi's novel suggests that home is ultimately located in proximity to the bodies of loved ones, which are mobile and not always connected to a particular place.⁸⁰ *Ghana Must Go* creates a strong sense of translocal identity for the Sais which is tied to the affective relationships between them and resists the constraints of borders. Translocality is figured *through* their racialisation, an essential part of the way they see themselves and navigate the world. Affect, touch and intimacy are crucial to Selasi's feminist work in this novel. Loving one another, in the face of tragedy and separation, becomes a collective act that resists neoliberal individualism, despite the novel's recognition of how difficult it is to enable and sustain collectivity between the family members due to the structures of capitalism and racism that caused their bifurcation.

To conclude this chapter, *Ghana Must Go* advocates for a multi-local approach to identity politics that goes beyond Afrocentric notions of belonging and the structures and security of the nation as home. At the same time, it reveals how deeply ingrained the contours of anti-blackness are in the US. The novel represents, and attempts to reconcile, the fractured identities of a middle-class Ghanaian-Nigerian-American family (and this hyphenated, nation-based description does not adequately reflect the family's complexity). Through form and structure, Selasi accentuates the way her characters are scattered geographically and psychologically damaged. Translocal environments and mobile objects offer a sense of affect in which her characters find their sense of belonging. To offer a way to heal from the trauma caused by the structures of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, Selasi shapes affective bonds between the protagonists which form a crucial part of the novel's black feminist politic. The novel creates, to my mind, a kind of feminist empathy which is powerful source of connection that

⁸⁰ Aretha Phiri similarly argues that *Ghana Must Go*'s 'vision of home' resides 'in the embodied, moving self'. Phiri, 'Lost in translation', p.155.

allows the protagonists eventually to anchor themselves to one another. I highlighted specific moments I read as feminist – Sadie’s Ga dance, Taiwo’s revelation to her mother, and Fola’s and Kweku’s reunion – to argue Selasi presents a multiplicitous, and at times contradictory, expression of migratory experience. Sadie’s dance is viscerally empowering, yet dangerously close to a simplistic biogenetic connection to ‘Africa’; all of which is disrupted by Taiwo’s revelation of the sexual abuse she experienced in Nigeria. These contrasting scenes allow a more difficult reconciliation to be forged, based on empathy, with Kweku’s childhood beach in Kokrobité figured as an important translocal backdrop. Fola’s and Kweku’s reunion is similarly a moment of resolution based on the acceptance of emotional pain and the determination to move forward. Yet, this empathy is aware of its limitations and is unable to protect the characters from, or dismantle, the structures that threaten their happiness and even their existence. In Fola’s words, this kind of empathy is ‘able only to hold’.⁸¹ Taking place in the final part of the narrative named ‘Go’, these moments suggest that *Ghana* expresses a particular experience relevant to a black migrant family who are part of a privileged class but are, of course, not immune to suffering. The novel gestures towards a future identity politics which, although admittedly not clear or distinct, stresses heterogeneity and refuses to abandon those who do not fit into nation-states by addressing a specific sense of existential crisis. Selasi calls for a more complex way to understand the experiences of Afropolitans.

Afropolitans are, nevertheless, firmly situated amongst the middle classes. This begs the question: can a black feminist politics focused on the middle class be radical? Selasi’s upper-middle class status and glamorous aesthetic place her firmly next to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in a new generation of African writers interested in the lives of this particular class. Indeed, her essay ‘Bye, Bye Babar’ is one of the earliest examples of Afropolitanism’s’ close alignment with an African aesthetic which embraces the upward mobility capitalism affords. My reading of her novel, however, reveals a deep-rooted anxiety within the liminal existence Afropolitans inhabit and highlights subtle forms of resistance to the alienation capitalism causes, even when it is lived through by the relatively privileged middle class. Although the Sais benefit economically from capitalism, anti-blackness overrides their

⁸¹ Selasi, *Ghana Must Go*, p.291.

wealth and leads to an early grave (in Kweku's case) and severe mental illnesses (Taiwo's breakdown, Kehinde's suicide attempt and Sadie's bulimia). Whilst *Americanah's* Ifemelu and Obinze return to Nigeria to pursue a wealthy lifestyle relatively unscathed by the ways they were coded as other in the US and the UK, the Sai family's time in Africa is not figured as an unproblematic return, but a chance to heal from the ways they were broken and split apart by the racist structures of North American capitalism. Indeed, in the US nor in Africa, their class cannot protect them. The ways they benefit from capitalism is nuanced and calls for careful consideration in order for us to understand how they might fit a transnational black feminist politics.

Although *Ghana Must Go* is a compelling representation of the precarity of black, diasporic, middle-class livelihoods, I agree with Amy Rushton's assertion that the novel is centrally concerned with the reconciliation of the Sai family's individual relationships,⁸² in lieu of what I believe could have become a more sustained, politically inclined critique. Cedric Robinson's overview of the black radical tradition argues that the black middle classes must maintain a connection with the black working classes in order to keep themselves rooted in a progressive politics that is radical. *Ghana's* closing pages retreat from public space into Fola's garden, and the potential for a more thorough critique of their class position in society remains unfulfilled. The novel's focus on the black middle-class is just that, and this leaves little room for connections with less privileged racialised people to be forged. Nevertheless, its exposure of how class privilege functions (and fails) alongside race is profoundly important, and could make a case for the dismantling of the middle-class.

This chapter reads *Ghana Must Go* as a call to pay further attention to the particular experiences of the black middle classes. Some of the other fiction explored in this thesis maintains a focus on the urgent concerns of less privileged women. In order to build bridges between these bifurcated existences, we must consider them both alongside one another. Selasi's novel suggests the experiences of middle-class migrants racialised as black cannot be dismissed, even if they may be a less urgent concern of a radical feminist politics. This idea is key to understanding the black feminist politics she engages with through her fiction. I advocate that black feminist resistance should be a bottom-up, grassroots, anti-

⁸² Rushton, 'No Place Like Home', p.47.

capitalist political movement, but it is important to recognise that the black middle-class, precarious and liminal as this group is, can and must play their part in revolutionary politics. Although Selasi's narrative is focused on a family saga – an individualist story– and does not portray an overtly revolutionary politics, it does profoundly and intimately expose how the black middle classes are not protected from racist structural violence. The argument that the bourgeoisie must contribute to their own dismantling is central to Marxist political thought. We do not know what this kind of revolutionary dismantling may look like, but it could begin with the kind of introspection the novel encourages. *Ghana* tentatively shows us there are grounds for the black middle class to want to dismantle itself because being complicit with capitalism often leads to personal demise. A revolutionary politics which denounces capitalism needs, in Cedric Robinson's words, the oratorical and linguistic tools of radical members of the black middle class — like Selasi herself.⁸³ As I have argued, black feminist resistance begins with the poorest and most marginalised black women, but requires the participation, and not the complicity, of the racialised middle classes in order to fully realise revolutionary potential.

⁸³ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983), p.259.

Chapter Four

Part One

Searching for Agency in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*

My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day.

— Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

The final instalment of Tsitsi Dangarembga's trilogy, *This Mournable Body*, includes a harrowing scene of violence against a black woman's body in chapter two. The narrator, Tambu, is complicit in the act. Returning from Borrowdale (an affluent white minority area in north Harare), she boards a 'combi' bus and notices a fellow resident of the women's hostel where she is living, a young woman named Gertrude. She is wearing 'sky-high heels', swaying her shopping bags in time with her voluptuous body, and her 'lips, hips, breasts and buttocks' noticeably 'protrude'.¹ Gertrude's femininity, sexuality, and display of relative wealth attracts attention, and the crowd begins to jeer when she attempts to board the bus but is refused by the conductor due to her revealing clothes. The onlookers become violent, and an assault unfolds which we witness through Tambu's second person narration:

Hands lift Gertrude from the combi's running board. They throw her onto the ground where she sags with shock. The crowd draws in a preparatory breath. The sight of your beautiful hostelmate fills you with an emptiness that hurts. You do not shrink back as one mind in your head wishes. Instead you obey the other, push forward. You want to see the shape of pain, to trace out its arteries and veins, to rip out the pattern of its capillaries from the body. The mass of people moves forward. You reach for a stone. It is in your hand. Your arm rises in slow motion.²

The chapter ends with an almost naked, beaten and bloody Gertrude scrambling to cover herself. In this moment her sexualised and objectified body is stripped of agency. It is important to note the way the commodity consumption she displays deepens the crowd's hatred. Gertrude's social capital is attained through beauty and sexuality, accentuated by the purchases she carries and the commodities adorning her body. Paradoxically, the social capital she exhibits through commodities is a source of aspiration within capitalism, but is rejected by society when it is combined with an overtly sexualised and

¹ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2018), p.18.

² Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.21.

racialised body. The crowd's complicity with patriarchal contempt for women's sexuality alongside their lack of empathy, despite also being racialised as black, reaches a climax as their anger manifests in a spectacle of violence against Gertrude's black female body. The palpable sense of collective unity is weaponised as the participants unanimously decide that this body is less than human. Collective unity, at its most empowering, becomes solidarity — one of the primary concerns of this thesis. This scene, however, exemplifies collectivity turned ugly.

In the extract above Tambu watches Gertrude's violation and feels a painful 'emptiness' that is difficult to articulate. She reaches the conclusion that the feeling might be alleviated by participating in the cruel act. The emphasis placed on visceral imagery in the longer sentence 'you want to see the shape of pain, to trace out its arteries and veins, to rip out the pattern of its capillaries from the body' accentuates the messy materiality of this body which has been, to once again echo Hortense Spillers' words, cast out of society. This body is simultaneously othered, repulsive, and compelling, from Tambu's perspective. The second person pronoun in the line 'you reach for the stone' distances her from her own complicity, whilst the short sentences emphasise the moment's significance. Witnessing violence against women becomes quotidian throughout the novel. Despite Tambu's veneer of indifference, Dangarembga's language magnifies the sheer brutality of such violence. In the aftermath, Gertrude's face is described by Tambu in an objective manner and likened to a 'relief map' of 'deepening lacerations' with the 'imprints of feet, some bare, some shod' across it.³ This description strategically aligns Gertrude's body with the violated and exploited postcolonial nation. The degraded black woman's body pays for the failure of the capitalist system to bring economic prosperity to Zimbabwe after independence. When the crowd cast her out of society, she becomes collateral damage. Further supporting this interpretation is the stone in the narrator's hand. The stone acts as a metaphor for Zimbabwe, the nation renamed with the Shona phrase for 'large houses of stone' after independence in 1980 to refer to stone's usage in traditional Shona architecture and aesthetics.⁴ The stone represents the simultaneous mechanisms of colonial white minority rule which repressed the culture of dark-

³ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.23.

⁴ Alois S. Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.1.

skinned Shona-speaking people, and President Robert Mugabe's failed post-independence national project. As my analysis will show, Dangarembga seeks to problematise this conflation of black women's bodies with the nation. In the extract above the author exposes the specific way black women's bodies bear the brunt of poverty-inflicted frustration and highlights the thematisation of the body. The visceral and messy materiality of bodies, the blood they leak, and severed body parts are images that express the way oppression and exploitation is enacted onto women's bodies in the novel's representation of postcolonial Zimbabwe.

Bodies are central to Dangarembga's novel. Its title is, according to Michael Friedrich, inspired by Teju Cole's 2015 essay 'Unmournable Bodies'.⁵ Cole explores the imperialist, racial politics of why certain bodies are mourned more than others in Western media, using the 2015 mass murder in Paris fuelled by French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*'s Islamophobic satirical illustrations as one example. Parallel to the public mourning of such events, powers like the US and Israel commit atrocities on a much larger scale, showing that certain (white, Western) bodies are 'mournable' yet others are subjected to 'unmournability'.⁶ *This Mournable Body* takes Cole's essay as one of its points of departure in order to demand that bodies located in marginalised positionalities not only be mourned, but find their own agency. The scene with which I opened this chapter is important for a further reason. It acutely exposes how black women's bodies are implicated within neoliberal capitalist regimes of consumption: a focal point from which my enquiry in this chapter unfolds, and one reason for my inclusion of this particular novel. Dangarembga's engagement, through Tambu's experiences, with the neoliberal economy of the late 2000s and 2010s (comparatively more recently than several of the other texts explored in this thesis) allows me to map how capitalist expansion continues to impact black women's representation in literary texts. As I turn to discuss several key moments in *This Mournable Body*, in part one of this chapter I unpack how Tambu's bodily representation expresses a distinctly individualist sense of alienation which cuts her off from society and denies her access to an empowering form of solidarity. Solidarity,

⁵ Michael Friedrich, 'Suffering Visible: The Ravages of Postcolonial Capitalism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 September 2018 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/suffering-visible-the-ravages-of-postcolonial-capitalism-in-tsitsi-dangarembgas-this-mournable-body/>> [accessed 14/02/2020].

⁶ Teju Cole, 'Unmournable Bodies', *The New Yorker*, 9 January 2015 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies>> [accessed 14/02/2020].

I argue, becomes tangible only through the novel's peripheral characters. Part two of this chapter considers the impact of neoliberalism more directly, first briefly contextualising the way it has unfolded in Zimbabwe, to argue that both complicity with and resistance to neoliberalism is evident within the form, setting, language and characterisation of the novel.

Dangarembga's trilogy began in 1988 with *Nervous Conditions*, the first English-language novel written by a black Zimbabwean woman. Tambudzai Siguake's childhood is staged in a rural Rhodesian village during the 1960s, and she is increasingly desperate to escape her domestic role to pursue an education. The novel opens with her indifferent reaction to her brother's sudden death. Her uncle Babamukuru, the dean of the missionary school, suggests that Tambu take her brother's place at school. After moving in with Babamukuru, she develops a close bond with her cousin Nyasha. Nyasha is educated in England and returns with a deep sense of anxiety that manifests in an eating disorder. Tambu and Nyasha often contrast with one another. The former refuses to engage in the politics and history that shapes her environment, choosing instead to focus single-mindedly on her own advancement; the latter refuses to accept racism and misogyny, yet feels powerless to change her conditions. *Nervous Conditions* ends with Tambu winning a scholarship to attend the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart and Nyasha's nervous breakdown. Its sequel, *The Book of Not* (2006), continues Tambu's journey through Catholic boarding school. There are clear racial divisions between the pupils which she internalises, damaging her sense of self-worth. Disrupting her focus on her education is the second 'chimurenga', or liberation war. In Bhakti Shringarpure's words, the boarding school serves as a 'microcosm for the wars raging outside.'⁷ Tambu's strange compulsion to record pain, also detailed in the extract with which I opened this chapter, can be traced back to the moment she witnesses her sister Netsai lose her leg in a landmine explosion. Netsai's severed leg haunts Tambu throughout *The Book of Not* and *This Mournable Body*. This event causes her deep psychological trauma which is not always expressed through emotive language, but can be glimpsed through Dangarembga's use of form and descriptions of the narrator's introspective hallucinations. According to Lily Saint, the

⁷ Bhakti Shringarpure, 'The decolonial gesture in Tsitsi Dangarembga's trilogy', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/13696815.2019.1704697 (p.2).

trilogy is ‘an extended meditation on how colonial and postcolonial worlds affect the existential life of the colonized subject’ because ‘each novel dwells with Tambudzai’s destabilized psychic and emotional states – her nervous conditions – detailing the deep layers of internal effects produced by the unjust but dominant external institutions and structures of relations.’⁸ Whilst it is useful to read the trilogy together, *This Mournable Body* is the most useful novel for my purposes for three reasons: its attention to post-independence life for Zimbabwean women; its acute focus on bodies; and its setting in the 2000s and 2010s, during which time the consequences of new neoliberal economic policies in Zimbabwe unfold.

This Mournable Body is split into three parts. In part one, ‘Ebbing’, Tambu is living in a women’s hostel, unemployed, impoverished and experiencing the onset of depression. She lies about her employment status to lodge with Mai Manyanga, a widowed owner of a large but decrepit estate. When Mai Manyanga is attacked by her own sons over a property dispute, a war veteran and mutual family friend named Christine moves in. She brings a bag of mealie meal sent from Tambu’s mother, but despite being close to starvation, Tambu refuses it. The rotting mealie meal becomes a metaphor for the abandonment of her family and homestead. After a strange incident in a nightclub involving Tambu aggressively confronting a white woman resembling her former colleague and classmate, Tracey Stevenson, her sanity disintegrates and she begins to hallucinate, imagining ants crawling across the surface of her skin. In a turn of fortune, she finds employment as a teacher and her wellbeing appears to improve. But a sudden manic episode ensues. She commits a horrific act, bludgeoning one of her female pupils with a T square. Dangarembga temporarily abandons realism as Tambu ebbs away from sanity.

In part two, ‘Suspended’, Tambu’s psychological distress (referred to as ‘the hyena’ in her mind) leads to a lengthy hospital stay. Without a formal diagnosis, her recovery is slow. Nyasha has returned to Zimbabwe with her German husband, Leon, and their children. She offers her cousin a comfortable room of her own (a thinly veiled reference to Virginia Woolf’s work), but Tambu’s recovery becomes focused on an entitled and individualistic pursuit of leisure. In a chance meeting,

⁸ Lily Saint, “‘My Quest for Recognition’: Existentialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not*”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (2020), DOI:10.1080/13696815.2019.1704696 (p.1).

Tracey Stevenson offers Tambu a job at her new business venture, an eco-retreat called Green Jacaranda Getaways. Part three, 'Arriving', begins as she is driven to her on-site lodgings in an apartment, finally feeling she has reached her full potential as an administrator and tour guide for the safari on Tracey's inherited farmland. However, they are forced to change their business structure when war veterans begin to encroach on this land. Tracey pressures Tambu into leading a new venture they name the Village Eco Transit, involving a tour of her village for European travellers. In the novel's climactic scene, the women of Tambu's village arrange a welcome performance led by her mother, Mai. Tracey requests they dance topless, which Tambu enforces. The women dramatically strip mid-performance, much to the horror of the village residents and tourists. Tambu quits her job and returns to her homestead, ashamed. In the novel's closing pages, Christine agrees to employ her as an intern at her security company and she is slowly reintegrated into family life.

Dangarembga's use of the introspective Bildungsroman form, language and tone evokes and subverts its nineteenth century European origins in a Zimbabwean context. The formal writing style lacks emotion, reflecting Tambu's characterisation as an apolitical narrator committed to social mobility and the pursuit of economic success. Zimbabwean politics and history are rarely overtly discussed, with the exception of independence, which is raised by peripheral characters. Tambu's individualistic obsession with career advancement is mediated through a distinct sense of bodily alienation, which Dangarembga represents through descriptions of the protagonist's body and her interactions with other characters. Tambu's refusal to engage neither in the social politics of her nation and specific locality, nor to acknowledge that personal experiences are politically connected, creates a compelling lens through which the novel's events unfold. She is an unreliable narrator who becomes emotionally paralysed when she witnesses, or is complicit in, violence against women. Her apolitical nature, I argue, is due to her obsession with the myths of neoliberal educational and economic 'progress'. But her representation also more broadly reflects the realities of being a citizen in postcolonial Zimbabwe. As Chipso Dendere states, 'in Mugabe's Zimbabwe there was freedom before speech but not after; therefore [the born-free] generation was brought up not to speak or think politics.'⁹ Whilst the protagonist is not

⁹ Chipso Dendere, 'Finding Women in the Zimbabwean Transition', *Meridians*, 17 (2018), 376–81 (p.376).

part of this generation, the state-sanctioned silence surrounding opposing political parties, the liberation war, and colonialism serves to strip citizens of their agency. Tambu's character occupies a unique position in this thesis, as an educated yet impoverished black woman from a rural background in a newly independent postcolonial African nation with a dominant white settler population. Differently to almost all of the other protagonists I have discussed so far, she is not granted the privilege of mobility. Further, Tambu's position in Harare means that white supremacy and racism encroach upon her experiences more overtly than in the settings of, for example, Lagos or rural Haiti. Whilst the white Zimbabwean writer Alexandra Fuller's review of Dangarembga's novel positioned it as a 'story of triumph; not despair', I read the text more pessimistically; but its pessimistic realism is not necessarily unproductive.¹⁰ In this chapter I explore how Dangarembga conceives black feminist resistance in *This Mournable Body* centrally through exploring the representation of black women character's bodies. Dangarembga limits us to Tambu's singular perspective, but if we look beyond it, moments of rebellion and resistance are carved out through the peripheral characters, who are almost exclusively women. Therefore, Nyasha, Christine and Mainini (Tambu's mother) are also important to my enquiry in this chapter. I argue that bodies, as thematised in the novel's title, are key to exposing women's oppression in Zimbabwe and, at the same time, potential vehicles for resistance to the globally-reaching conditions wrought under neoliberal capitalism.

The protagonist's extreme alienation from her body is expressed through Dangarembga's use of form and language. I opened this chapter with a compelling line from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that encapsulates the experience of black racialisation in the context of whiteness, in order to situate my sense of Tambu's dislocation from her body. The relevance of Fanon's work to Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* has been discussed at length in early critiques of this novel,¹¹

¹⁰ Alexandra Fuller also erroneously refers to *This Mournable Body* as the sequel to *Nervous Conditions*. See Fuller, '30 Years After Her Acclaimed Debut, a Zimbabwean Novelist Returns to Her Heroine in a Sequel' *The New York Times*, 30 August 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/30/books/review/tsitsi-dangarembga-this-mournable-body.html>> [accessed 20/05/2020].

¹¹ See Charles Sugnet, 'Nervous Conditions: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Feminist Reinvention of Fanon' in *The Politics Of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Obioma Nnaemeka (Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997), pp.33–49 and Carl Plasa, 'Reading "The Geography of Hunger" in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*: From Frantz Fanon to Charlotte Brontë', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 33 (1998), 35–45.

which makes sense considering its title references the phrase ‘nervous condition’ taken from Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Fanon’s text. But if we consider, for a moment, *This Mournable Body* alongside Fanon’s earlier pioneering text *Black Skin, White Masks*, we can more deeply understand the portrayal of literary bodies in the former. In Fanon’s text, his response to a white child’s exclamation ‘Look, a Negro!’ is to become ‘sealed into that crushing objecthood’.¹² Fanon expresses the suffocating experience of being *othered* with abstract language and declarative sentences: ‘the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there [...] I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.’¹³ Fanon’s words acknowledge acutely the progressively strange, devastating, then infuriating embodied experience of encountering racism. Black and white ontologies are constructed against one another in a deeply affecting hierarchy. The experience is described abstractly because, for Fanon, it defies rationality. A similarly abstract metaphor is used in Dangarembga’s text. The context in which we find Tambu, an unemployed black woman in postcolonial Zimbabwe, is steeped in anti-blackness. *This Mournable Body*’s opening lines reveal how central embodiment is to the narrative:

There is a fish in the mirror. The mirror is above the washbasin in the corner of your hostel room. The tap, cold only in the rooms, is dripping. Still in bed, you roll onto your back and stare at the ceiling. Realizing your arm has gone to sleep, you move it back and forth with your working hand until pain bursts through in a blitz of pins and needles. [...]

There, the fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping, cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales. You cannot look at yourself.¹⁴

Tambu’s psychological state is expressed through her interactions with her body. The second person pronoun creates distance from the self, a mechanism which means we learn much about how she desires to be perceived and little about her interior thought process or emotions. Limiting the blood supply to one of her limbs with no recognition, it is clear she is unaware of her body’s physical parameters. Her lack of emotion and self-disgust conveys a deep sense of depression and lethargic disappointment with her position in life. In spite of her high level of education gained at missionary schools and university, she remains impoverished. The dream of capitalist advancement through education and economic

¹² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p.82.

¹³ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.82.

¹⁴ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.5.

attainment has shattered, like the mirror that breaks moments later. In a compelling reading of *This Mournable Body*, Amy Rushton highlights Dangarembga's treatment of mental health, which 'unleashes a specific mental distress that has been building within Tambu since *Nervous Conditions*; a severe, chronic depression cultivated by ongoing colonial oppression within "free" Zimbabwe and its intersecting racial, gender, and economic inequalities'.¹⁵ Tambu's depression is tied to the notion that, under capitalism and neocolonialism, an unproductive body is rendered worthless. But most importantly, these aspirations have led to Tambu being cut off from her family and community. This loneliness is figured as menacing. The surreal metamorphosis of her reflection into a monstrous fish shows her lack of connection with her personhood and lack of belief in her own value.

Both Fanon's and Dangarembga's texts use metaphor to portray the experience of black racialisation. Fanon's intervention in philosophy and postcolonial theory, whilst profoundly important, is misogynistic, as Gwen Bergner¹⁶ and Anne McClintock concur.¹⁷ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon conflates 'man' with 'human'¹⁸ and claims to know 'nothing' of 'the Negro woman'.¹⁹ Contradictorily, as Bergner points out, his chapter 'The Woman of Color and the White Man' partly illustrates 'his own desire to circumscribe black women's sexuality and economic autonomy in order to ensure the patriarchal authority of black men.'²⁰ In doing so, black women are not afforded agency within his framing of racism. In contrast to Fanon's work, Dangarembga presents us with a distinctly gendered fictional character's perspective that renders black women visible.²¹ But her gendered perspective may not be as productive as it first appears. In contrast to the texts previously discussed in this thesis, *This*

¹⁵ Amy Rushton, 'On the Back of a Hyena: Depression and the (Post-)Colonial Context in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*', *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, 12 (2019), 21–36 (p.21).

¹⁶ For a rigorous analysis of Fanon's misogyny (particularly towards black women), see Gwen Bergner, 'Who Is That Masked Woman? Or, the Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*', *PMLA*, 110 (1995), 75–88.

¹⁷ Anne McClintock writes that although Fanon did not entirely ignore women's role in nationalism, 'for Fanon, both colonizer and colonized are here unthinkingly male'. See eds. McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.90.

¹⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.82–7.

¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p.138.

²⁰ Bergner, 'Who Is That Masked Woman?', p.81.

²¹ Sue Thomas and Michelle Vizzard similarly argue that Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* addresses Fanon's gender bias. See Thomas, 'Killing the Hysteric in the Colonized's House: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 27 (1992), 26–36 and Vizzard, "'Of Mimicry and Woman": Hysteria and Anticolonial Feminism in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*' *SPAN*, 36 (1993) <<https://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/litserv/SPAN/36/Vizzard.html>> [accessed 22/05/2020].

Mournable Body's protagonist's representation is not an empowering one. Tambu's lack of economic power and social capital causes her self-worth to disintegrate and drives her to mimic some of the traits of her (white and/or male) oppressors. The deplorable protagonist is held up to us to critique and attempt to understand. This is where our search for a transnational black feminism becomes more complex, as some black women characters may become complicit in the very structures that subjugate them.

Just as Tambu's blackness is constructed against whiteness, in large part due to the influence of her colonial education, her womanhood is constructed negatively, against other women. The stone she raises to throw at Gertrude's body in chapter two marks a disturbing process of othering. Her character's identity is here constructed by way of *not-being*, and her actions are indicative of a thought process of othering (meaning, this body is a thing I despise; everything this body is, I am not). As Sara Ahmed argues, referring to the racialised construction of the other against whiteness, 'bodies materialise in a complex set of temporal and spatial relations to other bodies'.²² Tambu's complex characterisation therefore exposes the importance of blackness being imagined as a *politicised* ontological category. Throughout the text the protagonist is unable to construct her identity outside of whiteness. Turned against itself, rather than against structures of oppression, the black body becomes alienated and self-destructive; in Fanon's words, its fragments 'burst apart' to be 'put together by another self', that of the (white) other. This is a dangerous identity to inhabit. Tambu's self-esteem is ultimately constructed as a consequence of the degradation and exploitation of others throughout the novel. Mimicking the colonial identity of the white settler population, it is a fragile kind of identity based on othering, bound to collapse.

A significant part of Tambu's trauma that shapes the way she perceives herself and the bodies of others is an event taking place in *The Book of Not*. As I mentioned above, during a school vacation she witnesses her sister Netsai, who has become a freedom fighter, lose her leg in a landmine explosion. The scene is recalled differently at various points in both novels in the trilogy, suggesting it is unnarratable in a linear fashion. Similarly to the body part that is shattered, the memory itself is difficult to piece together. It is necessary to return to this scene for a moment because it significantly shapes *This*

²² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.40.

Mournable Body. *The Book of Not* opens with the following words, completely void of context: ‘Up, up, up, the leg spun. A piece of person, up there in the sky. Earth and acrid vapours coated my tongue.’²³ Later we learn that during a pro-liberation war rally, Netsai had attempted to ambush an aggressor threatening to kill her uncle Babamukuru. She was ‘loping with a joyful stride, her gun belt rolling around her hip like a string of beads’²⁴ when suddenly ‘the earth beneath her exploded’:

Netsai moaned softly on the ground. Her throat knotted as Mai’s had. Sweat glistened pale on her upper lip in the slivers of moonlight that came through the trees, and in one drop hung the reflection of the limb in the branches. She dragged in too little air to keep her alive, but too much to allow her to die.²⁵

The image of Netsai’s disembodied limb leaves an imprint on Tambu’s mind, becoming a metaphor for her alienation from her own body and fragmented state of mind. Consequently, she finds it difficult to imagine embodiment without connecting it to trauma or violence.

The significance of this event is part of the reason the protagonist’s mind and body are consistently portrayed as binary opposites. In the introduction to this thesis I drew upon Anjana Raghavan’s scholarship to suggest that feminist embodiment greatly differs from Cartesian dualism. Tambu’s colonial education, which privileges European concepts of truth and objective ways of knowing, is deeply embedded in her psyche, leaving her relationship with her physical body neglected. The way she has been socialised severs her from the tactile ‘knowing, feeling and experience’²⁶ that Raghavan associates with radical feminist embodiment. Tambu is unable to heal from the trauma caused by witnessing Netsai’s accident because she is alienated from her own body and emotions. Here I refer to alienation in the Fanonian sense; as Amy Rushton puts it, ‘Fanon’s observations of the alienated and dissociative psychological condition of the colonized subject’ elucidated in *The Wretched of the Earth*.²⁷ The violence of colonialism manifests in the psyche of the colonized subject, causing dissociative behaviour and, in Tambu’s case, a disconnection with her body. Interestingly, Tambu is simultaneously repulsed by and drawn to bodily excess. This compulsion is evident throughout the novel at several

²³ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *The Book of Not* (London: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2006), p.3.

²⁴ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.15.

²⁵ Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p.17.

²⁶ Anjana Raghavan, *Towards Corporeal Cosmopolitanism: Performing Decolonial Solidarities* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), p.66.

²⁷ Rushton, ‘On the Back of a Hyena’, p.23.

moments. We see it, for example, in her desire to witness Gertrude's body ripped apart to expose the 'pattern of its capillaries', and during her first meeting with war veteran Christine. The mention of the war elicits a reaction in Tambu, opening up 'a void, out of which troop your own wounded and dead. You regard your memories from afar, and finally turn away from them.'²⁸ These disturbing, brutal images are buried in her subconscious. The silence surrounding the bloody independence war is part of the rhetoric that Zimbabwe is a 'peace-loving nation' and therefore 'you do not talk about how citizens dissented and how their ghastly crushing bodies into disused mine shafts and swept them into railway carriages like debris dropped by a whirlwind'.²⁹ The repressed memories of this grisly violence, alongside the emotional objectivity reinforced by Eurocentric epistemology, merge to disrupt Tambu's psychological relationship to bodies. Bodies are portrayed here as stripped of their humanity and easily discarded, their materiality disconnected from feeling.

Tambu clearly associates embodiment with violence, but hers is not the only perspective offered in the novel. Embodiment is, at other points in the narrative, linked to nationalist agendas and another more locally sourced sense of identity. Through Tambu's eyes, war veteran Christine is represented as harbouring an 'affection for her home – buried as deep in her heart as both of your umbilical cords are interred in the earth of your villages'.³⁰ It is not clear whether the 'home' Tambu refers to is Mai Manyanga's home or home in a broader, nationalist sense of the term. I read both senses of home as beckoned by this moment. Home refers to her sense of locality and the feeling of being tethered to the earth of the country in which she was born, which carries connotations of motherhood. Dangarembga describes Tambu and Christine as metaphorically 'interred in the earth of [their] villages' in order to subtly embed their identities in a more localised, personal and intimate place. Dependent upon Tambu's perception of her at particular moments, Christine is likened to either a 'sun giving off warmth and strange, invisible sustenance' or 'too brilliant and strong, a bolt of lightning waiting to strike'.³¹ Either way, she is represented as agential and empowered in a natural, divine and feminine sense of the word. Tambu closely watches her hands tend the plants and crops in the garden with expert

²⁸ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.57.

³¹ *Ibid.*

efficiency, moving with a ‘fluid quietness’.³² Her connection to and gentle shaping of the land belonging to Mai Manyanga is protective and appears to ‘ground’ her. Christine’s embodiment is an alternative to Tambu’s, more aligned with the feminist kind of embodiment that Raghavan advocates because it is closely linked to the land she attempts to sustain and nurture. Tambu perceives Christine as possessing a stronger sense of identity connected to the land, and by extension Mai Manyanga’s home and Zimbabwe more broadly as ‘homeland’, in comparison with herself. Dangarembga, however, problematises Tambu’s perception of the potentially nationalist affiliation that fuels the connection she cultivates with the land by turning our attention to another aspect of Christine’s characterisation.

Women participated as soldiers in Zimbabwe’s liberation struggles. Whilst some fought on the frontlines, others assumed the inglorious role of defending rear attacks to training camps.³³ These women have been systematically excluded from Zimbabwe’s national image. In her study of women war veterans (derogatorily known as ‘guerrilla girls’), Tanya Lyons draws upon Anne McClintock’s work to unravel the association between women’s bodies and nationalism in the Zimbabwean context. For McClintock, ‘all nationalisms are gendered’ and ‘cannot be understood without a theory of gender power’.³⁴ Lyons argues that ‘as symbols of the nation Zimbabwean women (here we conflate ex-combatant women with civilian women) have not escaped the tedious and ambiguous location of themselves as metaphors for masculine citizenship’.³⁵ This conflation between civilian women and ex-combatants, who were all intended to occupy ‘traditionally feminine’ roles post-independence — notwithstanding the colonial connotations attached to femininity this implies — served to silence women war veterans, Lyons asserts. She highlights the subsequent consequences for women:

In independent Zimbabwe, women and men have had different access to the resources of the nation in terms of political representation, legal rights, land acquisition and income. Despite the calls for women to participate equally in the nationalist struggles for independence, and despite calls for *unity*, the nation-state has legitimized inequality based on gendered differences.³⁶

³² Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.57.

³³ Tanya Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Front* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), p.287.

³⁴ Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls*, p.214.

³⁵ Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls*, p.215.

³⁶ Lyons, *Guns and Guerrilla Girls*, p.214.

The nation-state's reinforcement of gender inequality renders the association of women's bodies with the nation an exploitive ideology that merely serves to support chauvinist nationalism. Christine's representation is further complicated in the following passage. Her status as a war veteran, the violence she witnessed, and her participation in the fight for an alternative society — for all Zimbabweans regardless of gender — complicates her association with the embodied nationalism inherent to the hegemonic discourse of womanhood. Tambu describes Christine as:

too calm at every task as though her core has fled to a distant place disconnected from her body [...] she stares down the shaft of her gaze as though when the time comes she will weave herself into it to slide away to a place where vision coincides with a deep wanting.³⁷

Christine's calm demeanour, which was earlier figured as gentle femininity, now has menacing undertones. The control over her hands as they cultivate the plants gives way to a different kind of embodiment which is revealed in her facial expression. She has a material connection with the earth. Christine's representation highlights the trauma she experienced as a female war veteran, scarred by enduring and perpetrating violence. Dangarembga uses Christine's character to show that women war veterans have not materially benefitted from Zimbabwean independence and find no place in the nation's story apart from performing femininity in the service of male-centric nationalism. Christine's gaze suggests she desires an alternative to her current reality. Her agency, however, is not entirely lost in Tambu's perception of this vacant gaze. At this point in the narrative her self-possession is ultimately located in tending to the land; not because it ties her to the earth to legitimise her place as part of the Zimbabwean nation, but because it reveals a different kind of feminine agency which is primed to nurture the land, receive sustenance from it, and find sustainable equilibrium between the land and bodily labour practices. Christine's character ultimately depicts a nuanced sense of black feminist agency by challenging the hegemonic association of black women's bodies with the nation and cultivating a localised relationship with the land that allows space for a different kind of femininity. In doing so, her character reclaims the narrative surrounding women war veterans as overly masculine and brutal.

³⁷ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.57.

In sum, Tambu reads Christine as inherently linked to a nationalist agenda due to her status as a war veteran, but this simplistic interpretation fails to take into account the way her gender complicates her claim to nationalism. Tambu's suggestion that an authentic way to be Zimbabwean exists is troubled by the author. Dangarembga suggests there is another way of viewing Christine outside of Tambu's limited perspective. Similar to the sense of translocality articulated in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, the importance of a *local* affiliation and belonging is privileged in this novel, albeit made more complex by the narrator's conflicting affiliation to her colonial education and neoliberal sense of ambition. Tambu's and Christine's bodies are problematically linked to a nationalist agenda because such an affiliation is neither productive nor empowering for either women. Their bodily representations are instead oriented to their specific places of birth. This is a potentially more productive way they can find agency, but a connection to one's locality is also not as simple as the author's phrasing (through Tambu's eyes) makes it seem. When Tambu decides later in the narrative to exploit the village in which she was born by turning it into a tourist destination, Dangarembga calls into question this clear-cut assumption of natal filiation with one's birthplace. An authentic sense of identity, therefore, cannot be found in nationalism nor a simplistic connection to one's place of birth.

The most important space where agency can be articulated in *This Mournable Body* belongs to Nyasha's character. Nyasha partly serves to offset the neoliberal individualism Tambu displays. For her, black womanhood is a potentially unifying political identity. Let us look more closely at the way her feminism is represented. At the end of chapter ten we witness her attempts to inspire political consciousness in the minds of other young Zimbabwean women through the feminist workshop she has curated in her garden, revealed to us at two moments in the narrative:

Beyond the window, about a dozen young women pore over papers and folders [...]. As she stands there, viewing her work, your cousin inhales, exhales, and relaxes. She turns back to announce that she is returning to her workshop. [...] [Leon] outlines briefly how the purpose of Nyasha's workshop is to give not only a voice, but an analytical one, to the youth, and he offers to introduce you to some of your cousin's young women.³⁸

Nyasha brings women together into the intimate sphere of the domestic space to pursue a project concerning the telling of another woman's story. Her tentative hope for a better future is evident in her

³⁸ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.129.

body language. Her decision to instil in other women a sense of empathy for one another marks the early stages of her attempt to take on the large task of forming organised black feminist solidarity in a Zimbabwean context. Nyasha's time in Europe has radicalised her and fuelled a desire to build a sense of agency for Zimbabwean women. It is important to note that the cultivation of solidarity is not figured as a natural process, and the collective race and gender of the women does not create an automatic sense of kinship. Nyasha's workshop is small, local and grassroots. Because of this she appears exasperated by her efforts, but the author's inclusion of this more intimate and domestic black feminist space suggests that radical acts do not have to be large in scale. In a recent interview Dangarembga expressed her concern for what she sees as a lack of agential engagement with politics, suggesting that 'in Zimbabwe everyone seems to have adopted the each-human-for-themselves way of life.'³⁹ The author recognises that colonisation and authoritarian rule are part of the issue: 'decades of trauma, despair, and ongoing brutalization have eroded people's belief in their own agency. We do not have a visible, credible group that calls for a different way of being.'⁴⁰ In both the interview and the novel, Dangarembga highlights the urgency and importance of group collectivity, solidarity and political activism to create change. Through Nyasha's characterisation she suggests that small acts of feminist activism are enough to create social and cultural shifts. Furthermore, it is telling that Tambu does not engage with these workshops willingly. She is forced to take care of the cooking on a day when Nyasha's housekeeper is badly beaten by her husband. Despite the acts of black feminist empathy and solidarity between the women around her, Tambu's mindset remains committed to individualistic 'upward mobility' (in her words) and this soon becomes her downfall.⁴¹ The positive representation of solidarity in which the protagonist refuses to engage is a source of empowerment in the novel. Empathy between women is not romanticised, however, as Nyasha frequently refers to the financial and political difficulties of sustaining the workshop. It is a radical space because, within it, she encourages other young women to expand their thinking, envision another possible society, and work towards it. Nyasha's characterisation suggests that such a colossal task may feel difficult and at times fruitless, but

³⁹ Bhakti Shringarpure, 'A Crisis of Personhood: Tsitsi Dangarembga' *Bomb Magazine*, 27 September 2019 <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tsitsi-dangarembga/>> [accessed 14/02/2020].

⁴⁰ Shringarpure, 'A Crisis of Personhood'.

⁴¹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.76.

in the moment depicted above, the importance of working towards building a black feminist politic of solidarity through a collective analysis of material conditions is emphasised.

In part one of this chapter I have argued that the representation and embodiment of Tambu, Christine and Nyasha creates a conflicting, yet productive, representation of black feminist politics. Tambu's sense of physical and psychological alienation reveals a Cartesian bodily ideal, meaning her character is unequipped to process past trauma, too deeply embedded in being constructed against whiteness, and refuses to connect personal circumstance to broader political and social conditions. Christine expands the possibilities of embodiment beyond that of experiencing or perpetuating violence by physically cultivating a garden full of plants and crops. Her characterisation also complicates the association of women's bodies with the nation due to the multiplicity she occupies as a female war veteran. Finally, Nyasha leads us to a place where black feminist political worldviews are explicitly fostered, highlighting the importance of the difficult yet necessary process of building an analytical perspective. Whilst Tambu continues to cling to the neoliberal myth of advancement, despite the psychological damage this unfulfilled desire has caused her, Nyasha's characterisation suggests that solidarity is considerably more crucial to agency than material wealth.

Part Two

Neoliberalism, the ‘Gleam’ and the Glow in Dangarembga’s Harare

At the beginning of this chapter I outlined that part of my enquiry concerns the way that neoliberal capitalism is subtly bound up with materiality in *This Mournable Body*. Specifically, I referred to the commodity consumption connected to black women’s bodies. I will now extend my discussion to the structural architecture of the city itself. Bodies remain implicated in this environment because they inhabit it and are ontologically shaped by it. The next scene further unravels the ways neoliberalism shapes the built environment in the text. Nowhere in the novel is this starker than after Tambu’s arrival at the Green Jacaranda Eco Transit to commence employment. Dangarembga’s description of the architecture of the area named Avondale West at the beginning of part three evokes the pervading legacy of colonialism in a newly neoliberal manner:

In Avondale West, not far from the Mediterranean Bakery, Tracey turns into a close. Each of half a dozen gateways arranged in a semi-circle around the road leads to a quarter-acre plot. These pieces of land were dissected out of a sprawling farm decades ago as news of sunny Rhodesia — called ‘God’s own country’ — was circulated to attract dissatisfied Europeans from the north of the world.⁴²

The carefully arranged plots of land are structured to accentuate their exclusivity, the gates functioning to keep out those who supposedly do not belong. The sense of order is reinforced by Tambu’s romanticised and sanitised version of Zimbabwe’s history — one she probably internalised during her colonial education. The structure of the environment uncovers how colonialism shaped the land. To understand how and why the land has been shaped this way it is important to now briefly contextualise Zimbabwe’s history of colonisation and economic turmoil, which are closely related to one another. During the 1960s and ’70s, and post-independence in the ’80s, Zimbabwe followed an economic model known as ‘structuralist, neo-mercantilist, or corporatist’.⁴³ For simplicity I will refer to its economy as corporatist. Corporatist policies aimed to stabilise the economy through government intervention to regulate the finance sector and enforce market rules and regulations.⁴⁴ Corporatism was closely adhered

⁴² Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.181.

⁴³ Edward A. Brett, ‘From Corporatism to Liberalization in Zimbabwe: Economic Policy Regimes and Political Crisis, 1980–97’, *International Political Science Review*, 26 (2005), 91–106 (p.92).

⁴⁴ Brett, ‘From Corporatism to Liberalization in Zimbabwe’, pp.92–5.

to under Prime Minister Ian Smith's white minority government from 1964 to 1979. Zimbabwe was then Southern Rhodesia, named after the owner of the economically powerful British South Africa Company, Cecil John Rhodes. After battling resistance from Shona ethnic groups, Rhodes's violent and underhand tactics successfully colonised an area of southern Africa and in 1898 the landmass was named the colony of Rhodesia.⁴⁵ This very brief glimpse into history shows that Zimbabwe has always been implicated with the imperial project of capitalist expansion. This begs the question: how did the economic collapse associated with neoliberalism occur?

Adopting an economic model similarly as strong as Ian Smith's, Prime Minister and then President Robert Mugabe (from 1987, after Canaan Banana) adopted a 'highly corporatist' government between 1980 to 1990, which facilitated a high level of government intervention in the economy.⁴⁶ According to economist Edward Brett, the decline that began in the late 1990s 'inherited one of the most structurally developed economies and effective state systems in Africa'⁴⁷ and was kept relatively strong by Mugabe's government during his early years in power. This economy was agrarian at independence, involving large and small-scale farms almost entirely owned by white minority settlers and foreign capital. As Sam Moyo argues, this 'narrow import-substitution and export-led development strategy involving mining and agriculture' mostly served the white minority and Britain.⁴⁸ According to Brett, Mugabe's nationalist determination to phase out foreign capital, white-owned businesses, and his lack of financial support to bolster the emerging African entrepreneurial class impeded the progression of neoliberal economics. Pushing against Brett's perspective, however, I have argued throughout this thesis that the way neoliberalism has played out across the Global South shows its policies are ultimately designed to exploit resources to bolster capital accumulation in the North. The mismanagement of Zimbabwe's economy happened due to the *joint* pressures of Mugabe's

⁴⁵ Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe*, p.30 and p.44.

⁴⁶ Brett, 'From Corporatism to Liberalization in Zimbabwe', p.92.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Ed. by Sam Moyo and Walter Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe* (Oxford: African Books Collective, 2013), p.4.

authoritarian rule under ZANU-PF⁴⁹ and the very process of neoliberal structural adjustment.⁵⁰ Mugabe's increasingly authoritarian and *de facto* one party rule forced the weakening economy to rely on loans from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, a debt-inducing process which began around 1990.⁵¹ According to Moyo, there was 'unequal access to' global markets (some of which were 'exploitive') around the time of the economic crash in 2008, which soon led to the 2009 plummet in the value of Zimbabwe's currency.⁵² Scholarship like Moyo's, Chambati's and Mlambo's shows that Mugabe cannot be solely blamed for Zimbabwe's economic collapse, but his authoritarian rule did provide fertile ground for exploitative neoliberal policies to take root. Dangarembga's protagonist is precisely situated in a literary rendition of this devastated economy. Tambu shows no awareness or engagement with these wider conditions, but they significantly negatively shape her experiences and environment.

Dangarembga describes in vivid detail the architecture of Tambu's environment. The processes of neoliberalism are embedded in the structure of the buildings and the curation of the land. In part three, continuing from the description of Avondale West, Green Jacaranda Getaway's headquarters are described: 'the former farmhouse, situated at the centre of the U, its grounds spreading out on either side, is still the largest, most imposing building. Smaller lots run up the sides of the road.'⁵³ The building nestled symmetrically in the centre betrays a history of domination. Its grounds lie either side to subtly suggest the ownership and control of farmland by the white minority. The smaller buildings behind it connote hierarchy, accentuating its 'imposing' size. The way the land is sculpted further compounds economic wealth, which establishes its control over nature: 'behind a rainbow from a borehole-fed water sprinkler, the front garden and vegetable patch thrive like a Ministry of Agriculture model garden.'⁵⁴ Tambu's perspective clearly finds these idealised surroundings beautiful. But underneath her

⁴⁹ Acronym for the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front, the political party leading Zimbabwe since independence.

⁵⁰ According to Brett, 'In June 1998, the IMF approved a standby credit of US \$175 million in response to promises that the government would adopt "a package of corrective policy measures"'. See Brett, 'From Corporatism to Liberalization in Zimbabwe', p.94.

⁵¹ Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe*, p.205.

⁵² Moyo and Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe*, p.9.

⁵³ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.181.

⁵⁴ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.182.

admiration for this affluence lies a darker history sculpted into this space, betrayed by the ‘ancient paving stones that lead to the house’ in which she admits there is ‘only a hint of history, nothing unpleasant’.⁵⁵ Tambu notices the aged stones, revealing a tension between the narrator and the author which plays out throughout the text. Dangarembga wants her readers to notice what the narrator does not fully articulate. The intangible yet heavy weight of colonial history bears down upon the architecture of Harare and upholds the hierarchy existing between the narrator and her white Zimbabwean boss. The architecture itself renders Tambu’s black body, to again echo Sara Ahmed’s words, a ‘body out of place’.⁵⁶

Sam Moyo argues that Zimbabwe’s specific process of neocolonialism was ‘derived from white settler capitalism’ and involved ‘the organisation of labour through both “direct” and “indirect” power over indigenous populations and institutionalised racial segregation’.⁵⁷ These ‘social relations of production induced the sale of “cheap” and “semi-bonded” black labour among a growing landless population, restricting the peasantry’s social reproduction and accumulation from below’.⁵⁸ The legacy of these exploitive labour practices exposes Zimbabwean society as built on racism. The affluent, curated spaces described at Green Jacaranda headquarters, for example, contrast the description of Tambu’s journey to her village outside of Umtali:

The Mutare road narrows into a single lane. Swaths of farmland sweep out toward the horizon [...] on one side, miserable wraiths, which are in fact maize plants, poke up from the earth. In front and behind you the soil glitters like pop stars’ bling with mica, silicon, and crystals. The nearby mountains have, in the years since you last visited, grown as bald as underfed grandfathers. Further away the grey granite of the Nyanga range lowers like a ridge of frowning eyebrows.⁵⁹

The land outside of the predominantly white minority areas of Harare is described as wilder, yet the influence of white settler capitalism pervades. The farmland stretching as far as the eye can see alongside the harsh-looking maize plants struggling to grow from the earth connotes a sense of the imposing — but crumbling — remnants of colonialism. Maize, after all, was a product largely exported

⁵⁵ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.182.

⁵⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.39.

⁵⁷ Moyo and Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe*, p.5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.231.

from white-owned farms and its production has dramatically declined since the year 2000,⁶⁰ which aligns with the official beginning of the ‘fast track’ land reform programme in 2001.⁶¹ The exploitation of the land is metaphorically reflected in the ‘bald’ mountains as they encroach on the view. The Nyanga mountain is the tallest in Zimbabwe, but does not appear imposing. The landscape instead appears completely depleted. Driving the vehicle borrowed from Tracey separates Tambu from this environment by forming a protective shell around her. Dangarembga’s description of the protagonist driving is compelling:

You admire yourself in the rearview mirror, looking forward to the splendid entrance you will make in the village. You belt along Samora Machel Avenue enjoying the looks on pedestrians’ faces [...] it is a time when everything is on the move, from ex-combatants to capital, when momentum is dignity, when cars such as yours have automatic right of way over all creation except a more powerful, superior engine [...] your heart smiles in a hard sort of way before you press your foot down, feeding the engine petrol.⁶²

The intonation and commas in the sentences mimic the speed of the vehicle as the narrator zooms towards her village. It empowers the protagonist in a warped sense of the word. Attained through the tools of capital (cars, petroleum), this oil-powered velocity creates a sense of untouchable power for a fleeting moment. For Tambu, the feeling of speed is visceral and pleasurable. It is also a rare moment we see a glimpse of the narrator engaging with the broader political and economic moment, in the lines: ‘it is a time when everything is on the move, from ex-combatants to capital, when momentum is dignity’. The speed of the car mimics the speed of transactional capital under neoliberal globalisation. But sitting in tension with the velocity of capital is the speed of the ex-combatants, who are literally ‘on the move’ to reclaim land from white minority-owned farms. As Tambu states, ‘momentum is dignity’. This subtle but important phrase reveals a tension suggesting that black Zimbabweans are enacting a reclamation of power through land seizure. Here speed is bound up with the act of taking agency over the land of one’s country. The protagonist’s location on Samora Machel Avenue, named after the Mozambican Marxist-Leninist revolutionary politician, also suggests the reclamation of power.⁶³

⁶⁰ The World Bank, *Zimbabwe Public Expenditure Review with a Focus on Agriculture* (Washington: The World Bank, 2019), p.30.

⁶¹ Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe*, p.236.

⁶² Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.230.

⁶³ Anon., ‘The death of Samora Machel’, *South African History Online*, 3 April 2011 <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/death-samora-machel>> [accessed 19/02/2020].

Zvakanyorwa Sadomba, a Zimbabwe liberation war veteran and scholar, argues that ‘failing neoliberal economic policies, increasing authoritarian rule and heightened external interventions’ led war veterans to organise and lead the ‘land revolution’ from the bottom-up to ‘confront the state, demand welfare benefits’ and redistribute land, working alongside ‘peasants, farm workers and other urban homeless people’.⁶⁴ Sadomba argues that their movement was later co-opted by ZANU-PF and officially named the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP).⁶⁵ Its aftermath is complex and I do not have the space to flesh out its nuances in full here.⁶⁶ The reference Dangarembga makes to it in the novel, however, is clearer. In the extract above, the land seizure enacted by the ex-combatants is likened to the speed of capital and is also indicative of the violence of uneven capital accumulation. Tambu’s body language as she ‘feeds the engine petrol’ is menacing and suggests an addictive sense of power. It is significant that the protagonist feels this power close to the point she begins the Village Eco Transit, a project that ultimately fails, causing the status she gained through Green Jacaranda to abruptly end. Tambu’s Icarus moment suggests that power attained from wealth, exploitation and individualism, rather than anti-capitalist collective unity, is damaging. Furthermore, a disconnection from one’s community can only lead to tragedy. Without explicitly commenting on the nature of the land seizures during the FTLRP, Dangarembga suggests, through Tambu’s representation, that a violent response to the ravages of unequally distributed capital is not a sustainable way forward. But becoming complicit, like Tambu, is not the answer either. An agential alternative, as we will soon see, is offered through the character Mai at the end of the novel.

The majority of the significant moments I have discussed so far involve an image that repeats, appearing in different forms and in various contexts, but always closely linked to the manifestations of neoliberalism. This image is defined by Rashmi Varma and Neil Lazarus as ‘the gleam’. Describing a tourist hotel in the capital city Accra in Aye Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Varma states:

There the neocolonial elites adorn themselves in luxury furs and diamonds and drive around in swanky foreign cars, embodying the gleam of capital itself. The gleam

⁶⁴ Moyo and Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe*, p.17.

⁶⁵ Moyo and Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe*, p.95.

⁶⁶ See Moyo and Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe*, particularly chapters two and three, for a full discussion of the complexities involved in the Fast Track Land Reform Programme.

contrasts sharply with images of the rotting wood bannister in the railway office and the rusty metal that holds the public buses together as they transport the city's impoverished residents between work and home. It is such a manifestation of the gleam – in desired and unattainable luxury goods – that blinds people to reality and blunts the difference between right and wrong. The gleam is the ultimate figure of hegemony in [Armah's] novel.⁶⁷

Looking more closely at Tambu's arrival in her village, we note that the soil 'glitters like pop stars' bling with mica, silicon, and crystals.⁶⁸ At Green Jacaranda headquarters, Tambu is greeted by the gardener whose 'eyes gleam as he examines you'.⁶⁹ During Gertrude's assault, the attractive driver offering help wears sunglasses and the sunlight 'reflects from his teeth as well as his glasses'⁷⁰— attractive, we might presume, because of his relative wealth compared to the narrator. Whilst living in the women's hostel Tambu reflects on the misleading copy written during her previous job at the advertising agency, which 'said your country's village women rub their cow pat floors until they shine like cement floor. The brochures lied. There is no shine in your memory. Your mother's floors never shone with anything. Nothing ever glittered or sparkled.'⁷¹ The glittering and gleaming images in Dangarembga's novel are often metonyms for the allure of capital (to borrow Varma's words) or at least the presence of Tambu's desperate aspirations to become wealthier, as she consciously chases this gleam in her quest for future prosperity. Poverty is glamorised in the tourist brochures, but the narrator ruptures this façade when she states that the cow-pat floors in her village are not shiny but dull. Images of decay and degradation, particularly of buildings and environments, function to contrast the shimmer of modernity and capitalist advancement in the novel. The gleam functions in a very similar way to Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*, in which, as Neil Lazarus points out, 'gleaming lights speak of success, and thoughts of success consume the waking minds and haunt the sleeping thoughts of almost everybody'.⁷² Like Tambu, the characters in Armah's novel have 'become fetishistic in [their] obsession with ostentation and gratuitous consumption, in [the] eschewal of all principles except those related to

⁶⁷ Rashmi Varma, 'The Gleam and the Darkness Representations of the City in the Postcolonial Novel' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel*, ed. by Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp.188–207 (pp.193–4).

⁶⁸ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.231.

⁶⁹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.182.

⁷⁰ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.21.

⁷¹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.6.

⁷² Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), p.57.

materialism and accumulation', according to Lazarus.⁷³ The gleam is compelling, almost mesmeric, appearing as attainable yet always slightly out of reach in the distance. Chasing this gleam blurs Tambu's morals and sense of ethical care for others. She becomes deeply embedded in the all-consuming desire for capital in the form of 'unattainable luxury goods'.

At the same time, the glittering, shimmering reflection of light represents temporary glimpses into the almost invisible structure of neoliberal capitalism which oppresses and exploits the novel's characters and their environment. Just as resistance to the gleam is, as Lazarus asserts, crucial to Armah's text, it is also important to Dangarembga's.⁷⁴ In an extract following Tambu's arrival at her homestead, a compelling description reveals the way the gleam is bound up with capitalist exploitation:

Gob-nosed children scramble from patches of groundnuts and scrawny pumpkins as you drive by [...] The youngsters dance, legs turning grey in the dust that washes from your vehicle's wheels. It floats with a shimmer above the soil and around the children's feet.⁷⁵

The dust emanating from the wheels of the car intermingles with the soil underneath the children's bare feet. As we have established, the car's velocity is fuelled by petroleum and here it again represents a tool of capital. Tambu's entrance into the village marks the arrival of an exploitive regime of neoliberal capitalism encroaching on the rural village and seeking to extract value from it. The shimmering soil is, therefore, prophetic. However, the gleam in *This Mournable Body* appears in a less clear-cut sense than in Armah's text. It is not monolithic and does not always necessarily stand in for the desire for capital.

Light and shine appear in other places in the novel not associated with 'the gleam of capital itself'. In the following extract describing Nyasha's feminist workshop, illumination represents a glimmer of hope which reinforces the potential for black feminist solidarity. Here light plays an important role in affirming the force that is solidarity:

The pale gold of mid-afternoon shimmers through the open space, carrying the warm blossom-sweetened scent of early November. Excited laughter peals, Nyasha leans forward, her elbows on the wooden table. She talks intently [...] the participants gaze

⁷³ Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, p.57.

⁷⁴ Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, p.66.

⁷⁵ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.231.

at your cousin, they take notes. And then they are all laughing again [...] they fling their arms here and there, around each other, and Nyasha is lost in the heart of it.⁷⁶

The language Dangarembga uses is figurative and poetic: the pale gold shimmering sunlight imbued with beautifully sounding assonance. This empowering aspect is another, more productive, manifestation of light. This is further corroborated when later, over dinner, Tambu envies the serene ‘glow’ which ‘emanates from [Nyasha’s] centre’.⁷⁷ The glow is not merely aesthetic. It is deeply political and suggestive of the agency she cultivates in herself and other women. Nyasha is nourished by the interactions taking place between other women racialised as black during the workshop. I highlight this alternative way of seeing the representation of light in order to emphasise the nuances and conflicts within this text. Whilst the invisible structures of neoliberalism, which function to exploit black women and resources in the Zimbabwe setting, are fleetingly glimpsed in the form of the gleam, the glow subversively and equally as tentatively manifests as a moment of hope.

On a less optimistic note, the reality of rural Zimbabwe contrasts with the imagined version that white Zimbabwean entrepreneur Tracey intends to sell to tourists as part of her new venture, the Village Eco Transit in Tambu’s village. Its description adds another layer to the extractive function that neoliberalism plays in the novel. It is crucial that this extraction of value takes place at the level of black women’s bodies. The kind of extraction Tracey is seeking is more than labour power. It is a particular kind of aesthetic cultural value tied to the representation of black women’s bodies. No longer able to extract from the land due to the encroaching war veterans acting under the Fast Track Land Reform Programme, Tracey turns to poor, rural citizens.⁷⁸ After Tambu insists that her arrangement to convert her village into a tourism site will give her boss ‘value’, Tracey insists that yet more value must be mined:

‘We’re talking, in principle, real eco values, authenticity, like millet and thatch, milk from the udder. We haven’t done that before, that’s unlocked value. They’re talking the rest of it, you know, all those things they say go with villages on... uh, on our landmass, like dancing authentically... minimal, like agh, loincloths, naked... torsos.’

⁷⁶ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.133.

⁷⁷ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.139.

⁷⁸ The FTLRP during the 2000s, according to Sam Moyo, ‘reversed the racially-skewed agrarian structure and discriminatory land tenures inherited from colonial rule, whereby over 6,000 large-scale white farmers and a few foreign and nationally-owned agro-industrial estates controlled most of the prime land, water resources and bio-reserves, while regulating the majority of the population to marginal lands and cheap-labour services’. See Moyo and Chambati, *Land and Agrarian Reform in Zimbabwe*, p.1.

As you begin to understand, the air in the room floats to the floor [...]. Naked male chests are normal in traditional dance. Tracey can only be talking about the women.⁷⁹

The language Tracey uses is a carefully crafted kind of neoliberal corporate jargon that is a façade in itself. The informality, use of metaphor and confident declarative statements attempt to hide exploitative aims and champion the power of the market above people and emotions. The ellipsis and linguistic fillers, however, betray a breakdown in her speech that reveals a conscious and overt attempt to exploit black women. For Tracey, black women's naked and aesthetically exoticised bodies must perform the European imaginary of 'Africa' in order to provide 'unlocked value' for her investors in Amsterdam. Without access to the farmland she inherited, she endeavours to turn people into human capital. Despite her initial recoil, Tracey ensures Tambu's complicity in the act.

Tambu's mother Mai, however, refuses to be complicit in extracting value from her own body and the bodies of other women in the village community. At the welcome ceremony for the Village Eco Transit, Tambu anxiously shows the women performers a bag full of cash and asks them to wear just neck beads and shells in place of the top half of their costumes. The women protest but Mai quiets them, clearly in control as an important member of the women's committee. The performance soon commences:

Out of the house and down the steps comes your mother. She is leading two dozen women. They congregate in a semicircle in front of the house. They swing their arms and pad their bare feet in the sand in time to the music. Young and old, all your sisters and aunts and cousins wear lengths of Zambia cloth beneath colourful blouses [...] Your mother stamps her foot. Dust puffs up. She raises and lowers her elbows with the rhythm of the marimba. This way and that way Mai turns her head, first to one and then to the other shoulder.⁸⁰

The dance performance has been carefully choreographed for a European audience. The performance functions quite differently to the dance portrayed in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*. The business-like movements are tightly constructed and, at this point, betray little emotion. The scene of women of multiple ages wearing colourful clothes is striking, suggesting collectivity as they dance in unison. The women are clothed, but Mai's plan is soon revealed. The scene builds to a crescendo as 'hands above drums fly faster' and singing 'women open their mouths wider and wider', until, finally:

⁷⁹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.258.

⁸⁰ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.276–7.

The dancing women move forward. Your mother raises her hands to her chest [...] then with one swift movement she shrugs off her blouse and dashes it in the dust. This is the sign. All the women undress. [...]

Tata-tah-tah-ta, Tata-tah-tah-ta the marimbas begin again. A girl turns round, stamps her feet, and shakes her buttocks at the visitors. Herr Bachmann extracts his hand from his pocket and throws a ten-deutschmark note into the clearing. Guests are pleased to have something to do. Various bills of small exchangeable denominations flutter onto the sand [...]

‘U-u-u! U-u-u!’ your mother and the women swell Nyasha’s ululation.⁸¹

The women’s nakedness does not suggest a natural ‘native’ exoticism. In this context, stripping becomes a parodied display of entertainment for Western eyes. Whilst the shocked and horrified locals stare at the women’s coerced display of nakedness, the white European tourists respond with a degrading spectacle of material wealth. Refusing to end the performance upon Tambu’s request, the women — including Christine, cousin Lucia and Nyasha — create a raucous chorus whilst a younger woman flaunts her sexualised body parts. The ‘small exchangeable denominations’ overtly symbolise the commodification of the women’s bodies. The money becomes part of the performance, swept up in the women’s movement as it flutters to the ground. In spite of the exploitive purpose of the performance, the women have taken control and found a rebellious way to express their agency. The ‘shaking buttocks’ point towards a long history of the hypersexualisation of the black woman’s body, referred to as ‘batty politics’ in Shirley Anne Tate’s scholarship and called ‘rear end aesthetics’ in Janell Hobson’s.⁸² Tate suggests that popular culture representations of black women’s bottoms may indeed ‘valoriz[e] racial alterity’, but racialised bottoms are no longer solely associated with a repulsive excess that recalls ‘the steatopygia of [Sara] Baartman’ and have now ‘entered the global body market in “erotic capital”’.⁸³ This moment in Dangarembga’s text should not be solely understood as the performance of commodified bodies, despite the throwing of money. Significantly, the women do not collect the money. The young woman’s overtly displayed buttocks can be more closely aligned with the ‘revolt against respectability politics’ that the bodies of women in Jamaican dancehall music culture enact.⁸⁴ In their rejection of respectability politics (meaning, boundaries placed on their bodies due to

⁸¹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.278.

⁸² Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Women’s Bodies and the Nation: Race, Gender and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.47.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Tate, *Black Women’s Bodies and the Nation*, p.66.

patriarchy, racism and class bias),⁸⁵ *This Mournable Body*'s dancing village women refuse to control their bodies and instead choose to flaunt their feminine excess. The pre-meditated and coordinated removal of clothes by a group of women contrasts significantly with the forced removal of clothes endured by Gertrude at the beginning. The ululation unites them, and they stand tall in solidarity with one another. The society in the rural village, although clearly still patriarchal (domestic violence, for example, pervades), manages to be woman-centric and democratic in a sense and functions to keep a localised sense of cultural norms alive. Fascinatingly, the women's routine reclaims agency and becomes an act of resistance. The performance rebukes the encroaching influence of neoliberal capitalism in the form of tourism in the rural Zimbabwean village.

Stripping as a form of resistance is not merely a metaphorical device deployed by Dangarembga; it has a long history in African contexts. Anthropologist Terisa E. Turner has studied the use of nakedness as a form of protest, particularly in the case of the hundreds of rural women in Nigeria organising protests against Shell's extraction in the Niger Delta river from July 2002 to February 2003.⁸⁶ They effectively 'shut down 40 percent of Nigerian crude oil production capacity'⁸⁷ and inspired similar naked protests held by women in different locations across the world. Their reasons for doing so were environmental and economic. According to Turner, who draws upon the ecofeminist theories of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, 'international petroleum corporations had reduced the once-rich subsistence economy of the Niger Delta to a polluted wasteland', creating a 'death economy' which disproportionately affected the rural women whose subsistence was based on the land.⁸⁸ One anonymous Nigeria-based source from the International Oil Working Group reported that in many rural communities 'the practice of throwing off the wrapper' is said to 'inflict curses ranging from death to madness on its foes. In the 1980s it was very prevalent among the Gokana people of Ogoni'.⁸⁹ Turner elaborates, suggesting that the exposure of naked bodies is part of a practice of 'social death' projected

⁸⁵ Tate, *Black Women's Bodies and the Nation*, p.46.

⁸⁶ For a full discussion of the power of nakedness in African women's political protest, see Naminata Diabate, *Naked Agency: Genital Cursing and Biopolitics in Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

⁸⁷ Terisa E. Turner and Leigh S. Brownhill, "'Why Women are at War with Chevron': Nigerian Subsistence Struggles Against the International Oil Industry', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 39 (2004), 63–93 (p.63).

⁸⁸ Turner and Brownhill, 'Why Women are at War with Chevron', p.67.

⁸⁹ Turner and Brownhill, 'Why Women are at War with Chevron', p.71.

onto ‘oil company male dealers’ and highlighting it as a ritualised last resort used only in extreme circumstances, particularly when elderly women are involved.⁹⁰ Mai’s rebellion in *This Mournable Body* is tied to this wider history. This seemingly small, localised act of disruption can be incorporated into a larger milieu of resistance, strengthening its meaning and impact.

The culminating moment of Mai’s act of rebellion takes place as Herr Bachmann (one of the more vocal German tourists) insists he take a photograph of Tambu with her mother. Instead of complying, Mai rolls the camera cord over his head and shrieks:

‘Me, that’s what you think I am. Not a someone, but that I am whatever you want to put in your picture.’ [...]

Round and round her head by its cord Mai twirls the equipment. With a grunt she opens her hand. Away the camera sails, with everyone looking up, following the arc and then gazing down, to see where it lands. [...]

Your mother gazes in exultation at the camera dangling from the mango tree.⁹¹

Mai refuses to engage in the aesthetic commodification of her body that the photograph symbolises. She refutes the European gaze that Herr Bachmann represents and will not fuel the Western imagination which stereotypes African women. Launching Bachmann’s camera into a tree is a small but impactful challenge to white supremacy. Although he is able to retrieve his camera with relative ease, its placement in the tree is significant. It echoes the moment Netsai’s leg was blasted from her body into a tree during the liberation war. Netsai’s leg was part of the collateral damage paid for independence, and the camera placed in the tree similarly symbolises a demand for justice; this time coming from women. Further highlighting the impact of Mai’s rebellion is another character who otherwise does not appear in *This Mournable Body*, Tambu’s uncle Babamukuru, disabled during the war. He ‘starts out of his wheelchair and stands teetering, holding on to the armrest. Maiguru [his wife] bursts into tears, for Babamukuru has not stood up since Independence.’⁹² Mai’s decision to place the values of her community above monetary advancement has caused a miracle to happen amongst its inhabitants. Tambu has certainly been complicit in the further exploitation of black Zimbabweans, but her mother’s defiance, corroborated by the other women in the family and village, totally refuses neoliberal capitalist exploitation at a small, local, but impactful level.

⁹⁰ Turner and Brownhill, ‘Why Women are at War with Chevron’, p.67.

⁹¹ Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.279.

⁹² Dangarembga, *This Mournable Body*, p.280.

Tina Campt, as part of her broader work with The Practising Refusal Collective including Saidiya Hartman,⁹³ has theorised refusal as a form of black feminist resistance and activism. Her description of the way it functions does not narrowly define it but attempts to capture its essence:

refusal: a rejection of the status quo as livable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise.⁹⁴

Here Campt refers to viewing an art piece taking as its subject the spouse of Philando Castile, an unarmed black man shot by police in front of his partner in 2017.⁹⁵ Refusal in aesthetics (which is the focus of her essay) can take the form of the silence, subtle body language and the glance conveyed in the still-moving-image portrait of this unjustly bereaved black woman. In the face of dehumanising anti-blackness, refusal is a politics that may involve action but more often than not involves *inaction*: a refusal to labour, whether physically or emotionally, completely rejecting the commodification of one's black body and being. In *This Mournable Body*, Mai's attempt to sabotage the performance and destroy the tourist's camera is certainly a rejection of 'diminished subjecthood'. It is a refusal that negates the other women in her community being defined by a system that is unlivable outside of the structures of capitalist exploitation. Whether in the refusal to emotionally perform for the viewer, in the case of the portrait Campt discusses, or in the rejection of a photograph being taken in order to commodify a black woman's image for a white gaze, refusal is here enacted through artistic and literary aesthetics. Mai's refusal offers a valid and radically feminist alternative to Tambu's complicity.

This chapter has argued that a complex sense of black feminist politics is mediated through character, form and language in *This Mournable Body*. Alongside prevalent forms of neoliberalism, which seep into the built environment and the land forming the text's setting and appear in the form of what Rashmi Varma calls 'the gleam', some moments of resistance are enacted. These acts of resistance are crucial for the narrator's possible redemption. Resistance in this novel is a particularly difficult

⁹³ Practising refusal 'names the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as well as what it means to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles.' See Tina Campt, 'Black visibility and the practice of refusal' *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, 29 (2019) 79–87 (p.86).

⁹⁴ Campt, 'Black visibility and the practice of refusal', p.83.

⁹⁵ Campt, 'Black visibility and the practice of refusal', p.84.

endeavour, and it is hard for the reader to find moments of rebellion because the narrative is dominated by Tambu's perspective: a selfish and reprehensible character willing to achieve neoliberal notions of success at any cost. Whilst the narrator is a flawed and complicit figure we are encouraged to critique, Christine's, Nyasha's and Mai's characters — who find agency through connecting to the local land, developing group feminist consciousness, and acts of sabotage and rebellion — offer us alternatives. Each develops practices of resistance that reject the exploitive structures of neoliberal capitalism. The sabotaged performance they all take part in reveals a long history of female protest, and Dangarembga suggests through the text that seemingly small acts have significant consequences for the agency of individuals and, furthermore, entire communities. Dangarembga uses Tambu's character to critique those who neglect solidarity in favour of the individualist pursuit of advancement through attaining capital. The protagonist's turbulent life and fall from grace at the trilogy's end teaches us that a black feminist politics of empathy, aligned with a politicised and agential understanding of one's material conditions, is crucial for women in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Dangarembga highlights Tambu's flaws and misdeeds to critique the system that forces the protagonist into poverty and then encourages her to exploit the people in her own community. At the same time, the author shows us that individual choices are as important as understanding the systems that uphold one's material conditions. The novel's black feminist politics is ultimately located in refusal, to use Camp's term, maintained through woman-centric solidarity. The climatic dance performance is a scene of agential movement, and simultaneously a moment of absolute refusal to allow neoliberal exploitation to triumph in the rural Zimbabwean village depicted in *This Mournable Body*.

Chapter Five

Part One

Becoming Fugitive in Dionne Brand's In Another Place, Not Here

Saidiya Hartman opened her keynote address at the Fugitive Feminism conference in London in 2018 with a reading from her recent fictional piece about a collective of young, black, female anarchists organising against state governance in the US, entitled 'The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner'.¹ In the piece, Hartman constructs a speculative history using the prison records of a young black woman, Ester Brown (Hartman changed her name due to confidentiality). Brown's prison records show she was indicted for 'vagrancy' at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in 1917. We learn that after a short spell of domestic work at aged fifteen, she refused to work. As Hartman's prose tentatively pencils in the ambiguous gaps and implicit emotions gathered from the records, Ester Brown becomes part memory, part fictional character. Hartman implies that her idleness was a political act of free will, for rather than work, she preferred 'strolling along Harlem's wide avenues and losing herself in cabarets and movie houses'.² The use of 'anarchy' in the title as a collective noun to describe a group of black female inmates revolting against their imprisonment is an illuminating play on words. For Hartman, fiction is a particularly productive way to visualise what a radical black feminism might look and feel like.³ Hartman places Brown into the broader history of black women whose unrecognised activism plays a major part in social struggle. Although Brown's everyday activism (and that of other black women like her) remains excluded from anarchist socio-political theory, as Hartman argues,⁴ her first paragraph culminates with the assertion that Brown was an anarchist:

¹ The title of Hartman's essay, as well as playing on the phrase 'righteous manner', draws intertextual parallels with Ntozake Shange's theatre piece 'for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf', a performance of poetic monologues performed by African-American women that explores emotive experiences explicitly tied to black womanhood first performed in 1976.

² Saidiya Hartman, 'The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117 (2018), 465–90 (p.468).

³ Jason Hirata, 'Saidiya Hartman on Fugitive Feminism' *Vimeo*, 19 July 2018 <<https://vimeo.com/281249079>> [accessed 10/10/2018].

⁴ Hartman, 'The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner', p.466.

[Ester Brown] well understood that the desire to move as she wanted was nothing short of treason. She knew firsthand that the offense most punished by the state was trying to live free. To wander through the streets of Harlem, to want better than what she had, and to be propelled by her whims and desires was to be ungovernable. Her way of living was nothing short of anarchy.⁵

Hartman figures the phrase ‘to live free’ in terms of bodily movement, made clear by her use of the verbs ‘wander’ and ‘propelled’. These words conjure a specific sense of freedom, suggesting adventurous exploration unbound from the restrictions of poverty, racism and patriarchal violence. Hartman continues, asserting that these black women (‘street strollers, exhausted domestics, nocturnal creatures, wannabe chorus girls’) were arrested by the state based on charges created to control them and their bodies (‘Loitering. Riotous and Disorderly. Solicitation. Violation of the Tenement House Law’).⁶ She suggests that when enacted by black women, this freedom is anarchic because it is ‘ungovernable’; a refusal to obey the laws that keep black bodies within low-paid labour regimes and policed in both public and private spaces. Protecting their freedom to move ungoverned is a crucial part of these women’s rebellion.

Hartman and the convenor of the conference, sociologist Akwugo Emejulu, have begun to build what they term ‘fugitive feminism’: an anarchic black feminist praxis based on the collective desire to dismantle the current system. Fugitive feminists are black female subjects who attempt to ‘flee’ neoliberal capitalism to pursue building ‘other worlds’ that articulate black women’s desire to live ‘free’.⁷ Fugitive feminist praxis entirely rejects capitalism, racism, gender and heteronormativity. It is concerned with futurity and works towards a theory and practice of black feminist world-building. Tina Campt’s notion of refusal is also an important part of its ideology.⁸ The conference also held a workshop centred around ‘the politics of pleasure’, which theorises and reimagines sexuality, friendship and self-care from a radical black feminist perspective.⁹ Although fugitive feminism was coined in 2017, it is the culmination of at least a century of black feminist theorising to which Emejulu’s and Hartman’s

⁵ Hartman, ‘The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner’, p.466.

⁶ Hartman, ‘The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner’, p.473.

⁷ Hirata, ‘Saidiya Hartman on Fugitive Feminism’.

⁸ Akwugo Emejulu, ‘Fugitive Feminism’ *ICA London*, July 2018 <<https://www.ica.art/learning/fugitive-feminism>> [accessed 10/10/2018].

⁹ Rita Gayle and Nydia A. Swaby, ‘The Politics of Pleasure Workshop’ *ICA London*, July 2018 <<https://www.ica.art/learning/politics-pleasure-workshop>> [accessed 27/05/2020].

work is indebted. For Emejulu, fugitive feminism begins when black female subjects refuse the category of womanhood and accept that they have never been protected by the structures of femininity. Emejulu builds upon Hortense Spiller's ideas in 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' regarding black female bodies as 'ungendered'. To reiterate, Spillers argues that black women are cast 'out of the traditional symbolics of female gender' and advocates that we must 'make a place for this different social subject'.¹⁰ Broken free from the concept of gender itself, according to Emejulu, this 'marginal space' can be harnessed and its liminality used to our advantage. Rather than interpreting marginalisation as a driver to demand inclusion, black women harness being liminal so that an ungovernable space is created where new possibilities may flourish.¹¹

Fugitive feminism is part of a broader school of thought known as Black Studies. Whilst I have used aspects of Black Studies throughout this thesis (namely Saidiya Hartman's and Achille Mbembe's work) I engage with it more fully in this chapter. Black Studies recognises that the university, and institutions in general, are frequently built on white supremacy. It forms a space born from but reaching beyond the academy, loosely defined by Darlene Clarke Hines' five characteristics: intersectionality, non-linear thinking, diasporic perspectives, oppression/resistance, and solidarity.¹² As Derrais Carter asserts, Black Studies scholars 'writ[e] against our demise' and pursue 'our own versions of humanity. Our own versions of civility', highlighting the friction between blackness and citizenship by suggesting the idea of a black citizen is 'impossible' because of the way black people are excluded from discourses of humanity.¹³ In this vein, fugitive feminism prompts a deep consideration of the kinds of new worlds black women might collectively create from their liminal position. It is speculative, precarious, and dangerous precisely because it is so radical, and we do not yet know what this future world could look like.¹⁴

¹⁰ Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' *Diacritics*, 17 (1987), 64–81 (p.80).

¹¹ Akwugo Emejulu, *Fugitive Feminism, Towards a Fugitive Feminism* [podcast], Institute of Contemporary Arts London <<https://soundcloud.com/icalondon/fugitive-feminism-towards-a-fugitive-feminism>> [accessed 10/10/2018].

¹² Darlene Clark Hine, 'A Black Studies Manifesto', *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 44 (2014), 11–15.

¹³ Derrais Carter, 'Black Study' in *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence*, ed. by Azeezat Johnson, Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Beth Kamunge (London: Zed Books, 2018), p.39–40.

¹⁴ Emejulu, *Towards a Fugitive Feminism*, podcast.

As I have suggested, Hartman's language articulates Ester Brown's desire for radical, anarchic freedom using visceral language, suggesting the black female body is a central site within fugitive resistance. The kind of corporeal fugitivity Hartman evokes in Brown's fictionalised biography draws parallels with the focus of this chapter: Dionne Brand's fiction. I argue that fiction is the medium through which these fugitive freedom dreams might dare to be made manifest. Part one of this chapter asserts that Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) imagines what I term a radical fugitive aesthetic. The era-defining Fugitive Feminism Conference engaged with one of the key concerns of this thesis: creating a syncretic transnational black feminism that is radical and functions across borders. This radical fugitive aesthetic is shaped by black women who flee to the ungovernable space of possibility that Emejulu and Hartman outline. Radical fugitives disappear from the world in which our being is made possible and seek to live beyond constraining identities. Like Ester Brown, Brand's characters in the fiction I explore in this chapter break laws and unspoken social rules. In part two of this chapter, focusing on Brand's long poem *Ossuaries* (2010), the narrators are either imprisoned in some form or forced to live in spatial and temporal exile. In part one, I read Brand's characters with recourse to Hartman's speculative account of the imprisoned black women. The characters in *In Another Place, Not Here* exemplify black feminist fugitives striving towards an existence outside of capitalist exploitation. In the vein of fugitive feminism, I argue that the novel is uniquely placed to offer alternatives to the current way the world is organised.

In Another Place explores alternative ways of being in a fugitive feminist space through the prism of the queer relationship between two black female protagonists, Elizete and Verlia. As I argue, queerness is central to Brand's fugitive poetic. The novel harnesses the potential of liminal diaspora spaces with black women as the agents who attempt to flee the labour economy and live, figuratively, underground. *In Another Place* is part of the body of queer Caribbean literature and queer theory that has grown within the past thirty years in order to challenge, as Ronald Cummings puts it, 'the heteronormative notions of sex, sexuality and gender long institutionalized in Caribbean cultural life

and thought.¹⁵ My use of the term queer draws upon queer studies and its specific relationship to resistance in Caribbean literature and theory.¹⁶ Although it is rooted in sexuality, queer is an expansive term that is used as both a noun and a verb in academic thought. For Gayatri Gopinath, those who trouble any hegemonic ‘gender and sexual ideologies’ can be read using a ‘queer reading and citational practice’, which she develops to explore queer diaspora through representations of South Asian people in visual and textual art.¹⁷ As a verb, to ‘queer’ means to destabilise normative, binary ways of thinking. Queer is used in this way to describe subversive practices that are not always directly related to sexuality. Following Gopinath’s expansive use of queer aesthetics shaped by the contours of race (albeit within a different cultural context), my argument suggests that Brand’s novel’s queer aesthetic furthers the fugitive potential of the protagonists. My approach to the text is in line with Ronald Cummings’ reading, who coins the phrase ‘queer marronage’, which represents both flight from the plantation and flight from ‘colonial’ and ‘heteropatriarchal’ dominance in Brand’s novel.¹⁸ Queer marronage is ‘a process of departure from, and construction of alternatives to, established modes of embodiment and reproduction’.¹⁹ These alternative, queer modes of embodiment deserve further attention because bodies are so central to Brand’s text.

The first part of *In Another Place, Not Here* is told from Elizete’s perspective as an indentured labourer on an unnamed Caribbean island. She cuts sugar cane, working for a man named Isaiah who abuses her physically, sexually, and for her labour.²⁰ The novel opens with Elizete and Verlia’s first meeting. Caribbean-born Verlia has returned after migrating to Toronto aged seventeen. Inspired by radical thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Karl Marx, she wants to find ‘The Movement’: a

¹⁵ Ronald Cummings, ‘Queer Theory and Caribbean Writing’ in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (Abingdon: Routledge Handbooks Online, 2011), p.323.

¹⁶ Ronald Cummings’ overview of Caribbean queer critical thought and literature in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* cites Timothy Chin (1997), Ian Smith (1999), Rosamond King (2002) and Jennifer Rahim (2005) as key figures who established, challenged and continue to destabilize the definition of queerness in Caribbean literature. Cummings, ‘Queer Theory and Caribbean Writing’, p.323.

¹⁷ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p.22.

¹⁸ Ronald Bankcroft Cummings, ‘Queer marronage and Caribbean writing’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2012), p.81.

¹⁹ Cummings, ‘Queer marronage and Caribbean writing’, p.88.

²⁰ Elizete cannot escape Isaiah’s control, stating only that she was ‘given to him’ after her guardian died. She does not mention payment for her work. It is likely her character is subjected to indentureship or neo-slavery.

Pan-African term she uses to describe a group of black activists who are mobilising to change the world. After an intense romantic relationship with a fellow activist named Abena, Verlia becomes disillusioned with the group's lack of tangible progression and exhausted with operating underground to accomplish illegal anarchist stunts, like freeing imprisoned activists or smuggling migrants into the country. She returns to her (again, unnamed) birthplace in the Caribbean to continue The Movement's mission. Verlia labours in the cane field where Elizete works in order to attempt to convince the workers to unite and revolt. Elizete and Verlia soon become lovers as well as comrades. Their early meetings are consistently returned to, exploring their complex love for one another. Their relationship is difficult, painful, and hopeful, acting as a form of solace as they navigate their constrained existence. Following Verlia's sudden death, Elizete flees to Toronto to search for the remaining fragments of Verlia's life. But she finds only further isolation when she is forced to become an illegal migrant worker. Elizete mourns Verlia for the majority of the novel, becoming increasingly alienated from her body and on the verge of madness. The novel ends with the scene of Verlia's murder, the details of which are finally revealed to us in the closing pages. Her activist group are chased by armed guards, sprayed with bullets and forced off a cliff edge, plunging into the ocean.

As Brand's first novel, *In Another Place* garnered some scholarly attention and reviews, although more attention has been paid to her subsequent, less formally experimental novels *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) and *What We All Long For* (2005). There was a renewed interest in *In Another Place* when Brand became Toronto's Poet Laureate in 2009. Scholars have paid attention to the novel's exploration of queer blackness, diaspora and memory.²¹ Yet, the potential of Brand's work to engage with radical black feminist resistance has not yet been fully explored. Critics often position Brand as a writer who draws attention to the relationship between past and present racialised injustice, but few have examined her potential solutions for the future from an explicitly black feminist perspective. Pamela McCallum and Christian Olbey's reading explicitly explores Brand's articulation

²¹ See Paul Huebener, "'No Moon to Speak Of': Identity and Place in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*", *Callaloo*, 30 (2007), 615–25, Johanna X. K. Garvey, 'Spaces of violence, desire, and queer (un)belonging: Dionne Brand's urban diasporas', *Textual Practice*, 25 (2011), 757–77, Vikki Visvis, 'Traumatic Forgetting and Spatial Consciousness in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*', *Mosaic*, 45 (2012), 115–31 and Kristina Quynn, 'Elsewheres of Diaspora: Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 48 (2015), 121–46.

of the future. They suggest the novel's ending exhibits 'future-utopian moments'²² that reflect its setting: the period of social transformation spanning the late 1960s, '70s and early '80s. Alexis Pauline Gumbs suggests Brand's use of form, 'dream sequences' and 'lyrical ambiguity' allows her protagonists to 'break apart into a freedom that is unlivable and almost illegible, revealing the constraints of the economic systems and language patterns that bind us.'²³ Gumbs' phrasing here is intriguing. She suggests the poetic elements of the novel serve to fragment and transform Brand's characters, allowing them to move into a state of 'unlivable' freedom. Taking this further, I argue that within this unliveable freedom lies fugitivity, which is figured as a kind of exile. Brand tentatively shows us alternative ways of being to expose the constraints of exploitive capitalism, and even language itself. She creates a fugitive feminist landscape using a multitude of linguistic textures and a non-linear form to produce, in the author's words, 'a grammar in which black existence might be the thought— and not the unthought'.²⁴ Taken from Brand's 2017 talk 'Writing Against Tyranny and Toward Liberation', these words express a poetic that writes against the oppressive structures of (Anglophone) language itself by thinking grammar anew and challenging its compositional rules in order to centre black diasporic existence. In Brand's fiction, black subjectivity is no longer continuously cast out of existence. It becomes the 'thought' affirmed through this new grammar. Placing black existence at the centre, then, means harnessing the liminal space that Emejulu highlights. Ultimately, Brand, Hartman and Emejulu are interested in taking seriously the alternatives to capitalist oppression for black female subjects.

Brand's experimental literary form plays a crucial part in articulating a black feminist fugitive poetic. The novel purposefully obscures our sense of time and place and rarely specifies exact dates, although some important details are revealed. Before Verlia returns to the Caribbean we learn she has been in Toronto for thirteen winters. In part two, Verlia describes the gradual erosion of her activist group: 'some of the people in the cell left, went to Zimbabwe to join the Patriotic Front or to Guyana

²² Pamela McCallum and Christian Olbey, 'Written in the Scars: History, Genre, and Materiality in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*', *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 68 (1999), 159–82 (p.178).

²³ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, 'Dionne Brand: A Poetics of Diasporic Domestic Radicalism' in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* ed. by Bucknor and Donnell, pp.3–10.

²⁴ Barnard Center for Research on Women, 'Dionne Brand: Writing Against Tyranny and Toward Liberation', *YouTube*, 20 August 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ychlzoeelM0>> [accessed 10/10/2018].

to join Walter Rodney.²⁵ Zimbabwe was granted independence in 1980, and Walter Rodney (a Guyanese socialist activist and academic) was assassinated this same year, suggesting that the activities took place in the late 1970s. The only date included tells us that Verlia first joined The Movement in 1973.²⁶ Therefore we can discern the novel takes place between the 1970s to early 1980s. Despite the modern setting, Elizete's environment in the cane field maintains the same structural exploitation as a slave plantation, reflecting the low-wage labour, export-driven market that has continued the underdevelopment of the Caribbean post-emancipation.²⁷ The novel's chapters are not numbered and appear in no clear sequential order. It is divided into two parts, 'Elizete, beckoned' and 'Verlia, flying'. The split echoes the liminal space Brand explores through the narrative. Elizete is beckoned from a place that is not 'here', referring to the plantation that is the source of her exploitation in the unnamed Caribbean location. The use of geographical ambiguity echoes the history of slavery in the region. 'Beckoned' implies a calling, a direction, and a destiny, all of which are uncertain and fluctuate throughout the text. The title 'Verlia, flying' creates an image of Verlia suspended in the air, suggesting the transitive state she embodies when she leaps over the cliff edge at the novel's end. The narrative oscillates between these two states — being beckoned to somewhere and flying — suggesting an ascent to another way of being. These two states and the space in between significantly affect the way embodiment is portrayed. This form reflects the nature of fugitivity, which involves piecing together fragments to create something anew. The fragmentation also reflects the instability and ambiguity involved in thinking about fugitive feminist futures. I argue that *In Another Place* asks us to consider how we might remain cast out, *become* fugitive, and create new ways of being in this alternative space.

Carried out secretly and in private, Elizete's and Verlia's relationship is fugitive in nature. For brief moments, their love for one another rejects heteronormativity and allows them to wrestle free from the violence of patriarchy. At first, however, Elizete is repelled by Verlia's activism and tries to create a rift between them:

²⁵ Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* (London: The Women's Press, 1997), p.192.

²⁶ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here* p.167.

²⁷ For further information regarding how neoliberal economics functions to keep the Caribbean underdeveloped, see Winston H. Griffiths, 'Neoliberal Economics and Caribbean Economies', *Journal of Economic Issues*, 44 (2010), 505–12.

Nobody coming here to tell me what I done know. Anything she do could help me? Who she think she is coming preaching here? Revolution, my backside. Then, she say 'Sister.' And I could not tell if it was breeze passing in that heat-still day or if I hear the word. 'Sister.'²⁸

Elizete initially perceives Verlia as a foreigner from the Global North advocating for a labour revolt that seems impossible. She cannot picture an existence outside of the one she is living, and her sense of hopelessness is palpable. Another example of Elizete's distinct loss of hope occurs earlier in the chapter, when she states: 'nobody here can remember when they wasn't here'.²⁹ Referring to her fellow plantation workers, the ambiguous and repeated adverb 'here' reaches beyond the present plantation environment and points towards the long history of slave labour in the Caribbean. Their collective memory-loss suggests that the traumatic experience of indentureship causes a cyclical memory state which erases the past. However, Elizete's hopelessness is disrupted after Verlia reaches calls out to her with a single word: 'Sister.' The utterance brings about a sudden change in Elizete:

I know I hear it, murmuring just enough to seem as if it was said but not something that only have sense in saying. I know I hear it silver, silver clinking like bracelets when a woman lift her arm to comb hair. Silvery, silvery the wind take it. It hum low and touch everything on the road. Things in me. I feel it cuff my back. I have to take air. A spirit in the road. It make a silence. It feel like rum going through my throat, warm and violent so the breath of her mouth brush my ear. Sweet sweet, my tongue sweet to answer she and it surprise me how I want to touch she teeth and hold she mouth on that word. I keep walking. I don't answer. But I regret every minute until I see she next.³⁰

Elizete hears, feels and tastes Verlia's calling, reacting to the kinship that the word implies in a sensory and visceral way. This encounter marks the beginnings of what I term queer solidarity between them. In this intimate moment, Verlia's 'sister' calling reaches beyond the limits of sound and into metaphysical space for Elizete, who feels it as if 'a spirit in the road'. It transforms Elizete's environment and her body, touching 'everything on the road'. This single word opens up a new world. The road implies a journey that could lead Elizete away from 'here' and to another place — or space. 'Sister' connotes companionship, understanding, and mutual identification. Avoiding a simplistic notion of kinship due to their shared blackness, Brand shows us how Verlia's use of this word attempts

²⁸ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.14.

²⁹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.8.

³⁰ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.14.

to erode the barrier between them. Their bond begins to create a fugitive space that offers a temporary release from the constraints of their material realities.

It is necessary to dwell here on this notion of queer solidarity in Brand's novel, which makes the connection between the two protagonists — a blend of sexual intimacy, love and comradeship — so empowering. Queer being resists the hegemonic structures relied upon by capitalism to reproduce labour, which include heteronormativity and cis-gender.³¹ Audre Lorde explores the erotic as feminine empowerment, specifically between black women, in her pioneering essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power'. For Lorde, the erotic is an 'intimate' and 'creative' source of agency and knowledge connected to the feeling of sexual and non-sexual pleasure. Through the erotic, black women 'do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society'.³² The sensory language Brand uses to describe Elizete's and Verlia's first meeting, 'sweet sweet, she tongue sweet', draws upon this sense of queer erotic. The two experience pleasure and nurture one another outside of the confines of capitalist labour production. 'Sweet' suggests that they find sustenance in one other's bodies. Its repetition emphasises that sugar, as a commodity, is inextricably bound up with black bodies because of the physical labour that produces it (a common trope in Caribbean fiction).³³ Brand takes this trope further, queering sugar's association with labour practices by suggesting that this sexual desire between women is 'sweet'. This desire becomes empowering throughout the narrative because it is synonymous with escape from the monotony of labour under patriarchal capitalism. The site of the cane field represents neocolonial labour exploitation. Black women finding pleasure in their bodies is, according to Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, an unintended by-product of labour productivity that creates a 'different kind of erotic autonomy' within which 'same-sex eroticism enters into the history of sexual labor in the Caribbean as a practice by which women take control of sexuality as a resource they share with each other'.³⁴ Sex, in Brand's novel, creates a form of resistance that accentuates the protagonists'

³¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (London: Routledge Press, 1996), p.9.

³² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), p.53.

³³ Angela Naimou, *Salvage Work: U.S. and Caribbean Literatures amid the Debris of Legal Personhood* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p.96–7.

³⁴ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p.20.

connection with their bodies and renders vulnerability and pleasure empowering: ‘I sink in Verlia and let she flesh swallow me up. I devour she. She open me up like any morning.’³⁵ Elizete’s memory of this pleasure is relived in the present tense. Their bodies becoming one constitutes a feminist expression of intimate solidarity. Their erotic relationship is indeed self-affirming, as Lorde and Tinsley suggest. Although the class and economic boundaries between them still exist, the structures of patriarchy and racism do not in their context of their romance. The joy that the erotic harvests is all the more empowering *because* they are black women. The intimacy portrayed through metaphorical language ultimately figures woman-loving desire as radical. Through sexual intimacy, Brand offers the protagonists alternatives to the numerous ways their bodies are instrumentalized, bound up as they are with labour regimes and patriarchy. The temporary sexual ecstasy they experience allows them to suspend these structures for a moment. In this sense, same-sex erotic agency reaches beyond self-affirmation, becoming a vehicle for liberation.

Although Brand’s prose closely ties desire for social change to sexual desire, empowering her protagonists, it is worth focusing briefly on the structures of power that still exist within their relationship. Shalini Puri’s suggestion that we ‘resist reading the novel as romance’³⁶ is useful here, although I argue it is not necessarily an ‘anti-romance’. *In Another Place* challenges our perceptions of romance as a genre. Compared to Elizete, Verlia is relatively privileged because she has access to the education needed to theoretically organise against racist oppression. At times, though, she fails to break down the power dynamics between them. For example, Elizete usually refers to Verlia by her name, but Verlia often refers to Elizete as ‘the woman’, ‘her’ or ‘somebody’.³⁷ There is something pernicious in the way Verlia’s desire for Elizete is framed as part of her longing for societal change. Her thoughts are narrated in the third-person here: ‘she needed somebody who believed that the world could be made over [...] not just knowing that it had to be done but needing it to be done and simply doing it.’³⁸ In the following passage, she romanticises Elizete cutting cane:

³⁵ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.5.

³⁶ Shalini Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present: Operation Urgent Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.269.

³⁷ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.201–2.

³⁸ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.202.

Anyone who did that all day, passed through everything that made up the world, whose body anchored it, arc after arc after arc, who was tied to the compulsion of its swing, who became the whirl of it, blue, white air, green stroke, black dust, black metal, black flesh, anyone with such a memory would know more than she, be more than she. [...] each person caught up in their own arc of metal and dust and flesh until they were a blur, whirring, seemed to change the air around them.³⁹

Brand's prose describes the cutting of the cane poetically as the blue, white and green colours of the natural environment 'blur' and merge with 'black dust, black metal, black flesh': the tools and human labour that shape it, transforming and shaping the materiality of the earth. The beauty that Verlia sees in the worker's connection to the land, despite their labour exploitation, is palpable. However, Brand does not necessarily endorse the character's perspective. Verlia appears to idealise Elizete and her fellow labourers as unliberated proletariat workers whom she might instrumentalise for a purpose greater than herself: world revolution. Verlia's obsession with revolution at times eclipses her romantic relationship with Elizete. Her radical activism has manifested itself in a volatile way, causing her to seek out risk and be constantly on the move. These impulsive tendencies lead to her failure to unite the workers towards a successful revolution. Brand appears to be subtly critiquing the dangers of idealising the collective agency of the proletariat worker and expecting sustainable social change. Verlia's flaws reveal to us that solidarity between black women is difficult work: changing the system involves a long process of radical but sustainable transformation. Despite these cracks in the protagonist's relationship and the failure of the labour revolt, their love for one another galvanises them into believing that another world is possible. Their queer and queered relationship resists the simplicity of romance, expanding the possibility of love as a productive force when it is read in tandem with revolutionary desires.

As I have so far suggested, one of the most productive ways in which Brand exposes the possibilities of the liminal black space that queer solidarity helps to form is through the protagonists' bodies. The novel's opening lines are striking, describing the 'grace' Verlia brings to Elizete: 'Grace. Is grace, yes. And I take it, quiet, quiet, like thieving sugar'.⁴⁰ The divine undertones of 'grace' suggest gentle, subtle bodily movement. Verlia's 'grace' captivates Elizete. She offers her a glimpse of pleasure and tenderness, an escape from hard labour and Isiah's physical abuse. In contrast, Verlia describes

³⁹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.203.

⁴⁰ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.3.

Elizete as ‘solid and permanent’,⁴¹ ‘earthbound’ and ‘someone who believed that the world could be made over’.⁴² Verlia gives Elizete hope, while Elizete makes Verlia feel as if the revolution is possible. Their bond is predicated on the difficulty of loving one another’s bodies and the experiences that they carry within them. Although they hold different positions of power, they find solace in their mutual vulnerability (the erotic in Lorde’s sense). The room to which they escape together, away from the plantation, is described as a refuge from Verlia’s perspective:

This morning is shedded in light and dust. [...] The hand opening the wooden window will be the hand of the woman I sleep with in this room. [...] It is a room where I will open my eyes and the woman opening the window will be the woman I will live with for ever. I will not look at her, I know her face, it is melting into the soft sun she lets in with her hand on the window.⁴³

The light filtered through the window and the soft ‘s’ sounds in this passage lend an assonance to Brand’s prose, granting an ethereal, escapist quality to their room. Rare in this novel, the future tense is used, suggesting that Elizete makes Verlia sure of the future. These moments of intense intimacy are heightened because for most of the novel the protagonists are physically separated, whether in different countries or due to Verlia’s death. Brand tends to narrate their memories of one another in the present tense to recreate them without the sense of retrospection that a narrative consisting of memories often involves. Their connection with one another, lying at the intersection of queerness, blackness and womanhood, is fugitive because it constitutes their own refuge away from the relentless exploitation bound up with their black female bodies. Like thieving sugar, their secret relationship is a form of resistance against those profiting from the plantation. From the perspective of radical resistance, however, the refuge they build together has limits. Refuge implies a temporary escape, but hiding away from the material world is not a tangible solution for changing it. For black feminist fugitivity to be enacted as a radical politics, it must actively engage in remaking the world from this liminal space in the margins. This is why, in this novel, refuge is not productive. In the chapter that follows, the narrative switches back to another of Verlia’s memories (her decision to return to the Caribbean from Toronto) and the temporary sense of safety Brand creates through their room dissipates.

⁴¹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.201.

⁴² Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.202.

⁴³ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.201.

I have established that Elizete's and Verlia's interconnected material and metaphysical being creates queer solidarity, allowing us to explore the textures of the liminal fugitive feminist space. Their bond is sparked by Verlia's commitment to black emancipation and Elizete's exploitation under the neocolonial politics of the plantation. Brand's attempts to dissolve the barrier between them through sensory language is particularly important here. It is also significant that the two protagonists spend the majority of the novel apart. Their positionality is different, and this dichotomy between them is useful. Brand explores the malevolent, dystopian aspects of living fugitively, which are equally as important as both the sense of freedom and the solace that being fugitive facilitate. Brand portrays the undesirable aspects of fugitivity through Elizete's and Verlia's fraught relationships with their bodies and psyches. This is most clear during Elizete's time in Toronto.

It is necessary first to pay attention to the chapter preceding Elizete's initial impressions of Toronto, which contrasts with the alienation she feels in the bustling city. As she retrospectively recalls her childhood, Brand portrays a complex yet nourishing relationship to the land and nature. Her memories are intertwined with fabricated reimaginings of the life of her great-grandmother, Adela. Adela arrived in the Caribbean 'registering the stench of the ship'⁴⁴ and named the place 'Nowhere'. Brand's lyrical prose, richly describing the natural environment, creates an unsettling tone to represent Elizete's detachment from her surroundings. Elizete renames plants and birds to make them seem more real to her: 'make haste weed, jump up and kiss me flowers, waste of time plant'.⁴⁵ This strange blend of verbs and nouns suggests that the plants bear witness to past legacies of rebellion: the whispers of an escape plan, stolen intimate moments, the urgency to use time effectively. Elizete is attuned to the memory held within her environment. The 'Nowhere' of Elizete's childhood is a source of history and memory that is as beautiful as it is hostile. It is the only place she felt she belonged because of her intergenerational connection to Adela, whose voice and thoughts she often envisions. In contrast, the plantation and Toronto are places that stifle and oppress her. But the following chapter finds Elizete in a starkly different environment, the unforgiving cosmopolitan city of Toronto:

This city didn't pay any mind, everybody looked straight ahead of themselves. Eyes never hit a corner or anything hard to watch, never took in the whole world which is

⁴⁴ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.21.

⁴⁵ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.20.

why since landing at that mall it had been three weeks and she'd faded, she hoped, into the concrete and glass.⁴⁶

Elizete wanders the city in mourning, without a direction or purpose other than to feel some kind of connection to Verlia. Her depression distorts her connection to her own body which feels 'heavy as hell' as she sleeps on the streets.⁴⁷ In 'Nowhere' she was able to name the plants around her, but in Toronto she is subsumed into the architecture of the city, metaphorically disappearing into the concrete and glass. Being a citizen in Toronto means participating in labour, consumption, and social culture, but Elizete is exiled from these things that validate citizenship. The 'grace' that Verlia brought into her life has now disappeared. The disillusionment created by Toronto's neoliberal regime leaves behind another kind of fugitive figure. Poor, alone and invisible, Elizete is cast out of the normative ways of living in the city. Without Verlia's revolutionary vision, Elizete struggles to realise the potential of fugitivity. Instead she becomes unproductively marginalised, depressed and extremely alienated from her body (to again use alienated in the Fanonian sense). The form of the novel constantly severs Verlia and Elizete from one another: spatially through separate chapters, geographically in different countries, and temporally, skipping between the past and the present. The sparse moments of intimacy I have discussed function to realise the potential of black feminist solidarity. The protagonists become fugitive when they believe they can build an alternative society *together*. Ultimately, Brand suggests that for fugitivity to be realised, we must discover and maintain collective solidarity. Isolation, which is aligned with capitalist individualism, is the antithesis of fugitivity.

In contrast to Elizete's migration to Canada, Verlia's migration is a result of her yearning to create another world. Verlia wants to be an active participant in societal change, rather than a passive victim of poverty, racism and sexism. She moves to Toronto to become 'the kind of Black girl that is dangerous. Big mouthed and dangerous.'⁴⁸ Verlia's transformation into a radical activist is closely tied to her bodily representation. When she first finds 'The Movement', a group whose Afros and bell-bottom jeans echo the Black Panthers, the experience is visceral. Brand describes their skin as

⁴⁶ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.48–9.

⁴⁷ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.54.

⁴⁸ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.157.

‘electrified Black, burning.’⁴⁹ It is not only political ideology, but black skin itself that is loaded with an empowering energy. The phrase ‘*The Movement*’ belies locational specifics, suggestive of a borderless transnational movement which could have been found in ‘any city’.⁵⁰ The crowd of activists is described as ‘like a sea’,⁵¹ akin to a body of water that conjures of the image of a unifying connection to blackness across the diaspora. The Movement greet Verlia with the words ‘Welcome sister’, which mirrors her first meeting with Elizete. Interestingly, she initially fails to hear their greeting. Her body is sweating and she is surrounded by ‘stunned air’ until ‘some hand tugs at her and the air collapses’.⁵² Her palpable energy, the failure of her senses, and the recognition of the disembodied hand hint that her body is going through a process of transformation. At the end of the meeting she tells herself she ‘will be a new person’.⁵³ Becoming fugitive, in this sense, involves a metaphorical shedding of the skin, slipping into another way of being in the world in order to perceive alternative possibilities. Fugitive feminism is figured in the novel as simultaneously uncomfortable and difficult; bleak in the present but brimming with hope for the future.

Amidst Brand’s fragmented narrative, multiple voices, the scattered recollection of memories and the refusal to locate the narrative within a clear timeframe or geographical place (with the exception of Toronto), one recurring image consistently holds the narrative together: Verlia leaping. This image is clearest in the novel’s crucial final paragraph, which we will look at more closely at the end of part one of this chapter. First, it is worth mentioning other relevant moments that build up to Verlia’s final leap. As Elizete mourns Verlia’s death in a state of deep depression in Toronto, she questions the validity of her own senses if they cannot hear, feel and see her, fearing her body’s grief-stricken reaction. Referring to herself in the second person, she ponders: ‘the worst of all if every time she opened her eyes she saw a verdant leap, saw her own fingers clutching stones’.⁵⁴ The ‘verdant’ leap, bright and striking, recurs as if happening repeatedly in front of Elizete’s eyes. Elizete envisions clutching the stones we later learn tumbled over the cliff with Verlia, clinging onto something tangible

⁴⁹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.166.

⁵⁰ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.159.

⁵¹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.167.

⁵² Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.168.

⁵³ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.169.

⁵⁴ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.88.

as a way of coping with her unbearable loss. Later, still in mourning, Elizete recalls Verlia's way of 'leaping into another life',⁵⁵ hinting at the alternative way of living she believes is possible. Finally, during a conversation with Abena, Verlia describes her decision to move back to the Caribbean as taking a leap.⁵⁶ Verlia's leap places her body into what Emejulu names an 'ungovernable state of possibility',⁵⁷ outside of the laws of physics. The protagonist leaps towards a place beyond the oppressive systems that her activism continuously tried, and failed, to resist against. This place beyond remains elusive, yet the novel gestures towards it throughout.

Verlia's body is particularly significant because of the distinct way it is narrated. Its representation communicates a crucial aspect of the liminality of blackness in the text. Before we know Verlia's full story, Elizete is initially struck by her ability to envision new worlds. Her thoughts are followed by the image of her leaping:

I was sure of what anybody would be sure of. Spite, hunger, rain. But Verli is sure of what she make in her own mind and what she make didn't always exist.

I like how she leap. Run in the air without moving. [...] she moving, moving, moving all the time without moving. If I didn't like it she would frighten me.⁵⁸

Verlia leaps, not from a solid geographical place or towards one, never seeming to land. She moves outside of the laws of physics and rationality. Her black body suspended in the air encompasses the fleeting and transitional state of being in a liminal space. Elizete's observation that Verlia imagines unspecified things that do not yet exist, yet form in her mind, is part of the black feminist world-building that Brand gestures towards in the novel. Verlia's leap — a movement that usually lasts a brief moment before gravity takes hold — is repeatedly preserved in Brand's prose, returning at significant moments. The protagonist's movement represents a fleeting temporary sense of freedom, propelling her towards future emancipation and beyond the exploitation of the present world.

The build-up to Verlia's leap off the cliff, as the group are chased through a cemetery by armed guards, is carefully constructed as ambiguous. In the cemetery the activist group is portrayed as lying somewhere between material and metaphysical reality. Brand describes dreamscapes of ordinary,

⁵⁵ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.113.

⁵⁶ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.186.

⁵⁷ Emejulu, *Towards a Fugitive Feminism*, podcast.

⁵⁸ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.7.

everyday moments against surreal images that all appear strange, enhanced by the palpable, urgent danger:

One dreamed she multiplied into pieces and flew away, one dreamed his feet clawed and he flew away, one dreamed he sprang like a tree, one dreamed she blew into dust [...] one dreamed light [...] one dreamed lifting a baby, one dreamed eating snow cones, one dreamed eating pepper, one dreamed pounding cassava [...] All dreamed and dreamed and dreamed they flew away. The one in the red, his head alone flying, and the one in the green, her head aching, stayed awake dreaming. The ones in black screamed.

‘I’m not dying in this fucking cemetery!’

Verlia, screaming, screaming through the gathering of dreams, the aerie of dreams at the tombstones.⁵⁹

These images of bodies breaking apart, flying, transforming and disintegrating into nothingness hint at an existence beyond the material. The cemetery setting reinforces black radicalism as a threat to society as the activists are cast out of existence and seem uncomfortably close to death. We often associate dreaming with sleep, but here Brand suggests that these ‘dreams’ are memories from the past that are reimagined into visions of the future. I read this scene, tentatively, as the activists dreaming a collective vision of another realm where they might be free from capitalist exploitation: a bizarre yet utopian place full of ‘light’, beauty and simple pleasures. The noise of Verlia ‘screaming through the gathering of dreams’ pierces their collective vision with a jarring sound. Considered together, the moments in the text I have discussed thus far suggest that reaching a radical fugitive feminist space is a painful and surreal process because of the change that must occur in order to find it. The shape of such a radical new space is ambiguous, and bodily transformations are needed in order to transition into it. Brand positions the cemetery as a place of both dream-like potential and catastrophic danger, bringing into fruition, to again echo the author’s words, ‘a grammar in which black existence might be the thought’.⁶⁰ By using language in unfamiliar ways, Brand creates an aesthetic of strangeness that forces the reader to think things anew through the unusual grammar, language and structure of her sentences. The dreams and screams taking place in the cemetery open up a liminal space in-between living and dying, creating the radical potential for change and transition.

⁵⁹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.243.

⁶⁰ Barnard Center for Research on Women, ‘Dionne Brand: Writing Against Tyranny and Toward Liberation’.

Crucially, it remains ambiguous whether the radical potential of the liminal space the activist group are situated in comes into fruition. Following the climax of the chase, Brand makes an important narrative choice as she describes the shooting of Verlia's group. After we closely follow them running to escape, she switches to a cinematic 'distance shot' whilst maintaining the velocity of the sentences:

Someone taking a shot of rum across the harbour saw them fall, saw the arms out wide at the end of the cliff, heard the pound, pound *po, po, po, po, pound* of the guns driving them off the cliff's side into the sea. [...] Someone spilling rum saw them tumble, hit, break their necks, legs, spines, down the cliff side and some of them flew, leapt into the ocean.⁶¹

In this devastating scene the broken bodies tumble down the cliffside. But, fascinatingly, their presumed deaths cause them to morph and leap into the sea. Brand's careful language disrupts the finality that death implies. The horror of the tumbling movement of the bodies and their shattering bones is offset by the image of their 'arms out wide' as they appear to fly, landing in the ocean. As is the case in other texts discussed so far in this thesis, flight is deployed as an important metaphor for resistance. Verlia and her activist group refuse to go quietly. Their dive into the water is significant, recalling the legacy of black bodies strewn across the Atlantic ocean floor during the Middle Passage. More than representing a final, grisly plummet to the death, the image of flight suggests the transition of the body into another, non-material realm.

Furthermore, the scene draws striking parallels with the assassination of Maurice Bishop, former Prime Minister of Grenada and leader of the Marxist-Leninist New Jewel Movement. It is necessary here to dwell on this event in order to fully understand its implications for the vision of resistance portrayed in the novel. The Grenada Revolution was the only socialist revolution in the Caribbean. As Shalini Puri's study of the revolution states, the date remains significant in the memory of people across the Caribbean. It is crucial to note that Dionne Brand lived in Grenada during this time. Maurice Bishop's party, who gained power after a non-violent *coup d'état*, dramatically increased political participation amongst citizens and made significant gains in employment, housing, health, education and the arts during just four years in power.⁶² As Puri recounts, after a split developed in the Party's leadership, a majority vote meant that Bernard Coard was elected to lead alongside Bishop.

⁶¹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.246.

⁶² Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present*, preface.

When Bishop refused to comply with the joint leadership, he was put under house arrest and, some months later, freed by protesting citizens. Brand was part of the crowds celebrating Bishop's freedom. Bishop then made the fateful decision to seize the weapons at the military fort, which led to street unrest and violence that killed many. Bishop and seven of his comrades were caught by members of the opposition party, the People's Revolutionary Army, disarmed, lined up against the wall at Fort Rupert and shot. Brand's Grenadian friend forced her to leave shortly before the army began firing into the crowd. Although Bishop's socialist party was justly criticised for shunning a necessary aspect of democracy, the Grenada Revolution nevertheless represents a successful socialist government led by politically active working-class people. It is significant that Bishop's demise mirrors Verlia's at the end of *In Another Place*. Clearly describing a direction (which is rare in the novel), Brand explicitly states that Verlia's group are heading to the fort.⁶³ The fort represents a barrier between the land and sea, and in the text the activist group are forced over a cliff edge and shot. The only difference between Bishop's group's murder and Verlia's is there is no wall separating them from the land and the sea. This difference, though, is significant. As the narrative perspective pans out in the passage above, Brand encourages us to view the group's murder alongside this poignant example of the eradication of radical socialist politics in the Caribbean. In this sense, the group's descent off the cliff is a fictional response to the repression of people-centred societal structures relevant to many postcolonial nations across the Caribbean and Africa.

The echoes of the Grenada Revolution in *In Another Place* are an attempt on Brand's part to decipher her personal experience of it. The novel's retribution lies within its protagonists living fugitively in order to conserve the radical energy of this revolution. Most critics have understandably read Verlia's leap off the cliff at the novel's end as signalling her death. Shalini Puri and Raphael Dalleo explore the influence of the Grenada Revolution, but neither critic dwells long enough on the reasons behind Brand's choice to articulate the events through a queer love story.⁶⁴ Puri concludes that 'the fall of the Revolution as an ending after which new beginnings seemed impossible is formally signalled by

⁶³ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.245.

⁶⁴ Raphael Dalleo, 'Post-Grenada, Post-Cuba, Postcolonial: Rethinking Revolutionary Discourse in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*', *Interventions*, 12 (2010), 64–73.

the death of Verlia'.⁶⁵ Despite this sombre statement, she also suggests that hope lies in Elizete's character. For Puri, Elizete's creative renaming of the material world surrounding her is a consoling counterpoint to the more fragmented language and form deployed in the chapters narrated from Verlia's perspective.⁶⁶ She suggests the text's heroine is Abena, a character who 'continues to struggle in small ways', and within her 'revolutionary practice quietly survives'.⁶⁷ Dalleo similarly concludes that hope in the novel lies in Abena's everyday activism.⁶⁸ Both critics, I believe, overlook the author's commitment to black radical activism because Verlia's apparent murder leaves them unable to locate any solace.

Brand's personal investment in radical black resistance leads me to consider alternative meanings hidden within the tragic ending. My argument in this thesis has so far established that death is not a sustainable form of resistance, but transformation into other realms could be. The final paragraph carries forth the hint in the novel's title that 'another place' may exist. The last image of Verlia's leap into the sea in the text's closing paragraph does not appear to suggest finality:

She's flying out to sea and in the emerald she sees the sea, its eyes translucent, its back solid going to some place so old there's no memory of it. She's leaping. She's tasting her own tears and she is weightless and deadly. [...] Her body has fallen away, is just a line, an electric current, the sign of lightning left after lightning, a faultless arc to the deep turquoise deep. [...] She's in some other place already, less tortuous, less fleshy.⁶⁹

The words 'flying' and 'weightless' suggest freedom as Verlia is swept up in the current of the water. Tasting sea-salty tears, she is heading towards a place outside of time itself — 'so old there's no memory of it'. Without her body she is 'deadly', suggestive of a sense of empowerment that reaches beyond materiality. She burns electric, like the electrically charged black skins of those in *The Movement*. Verlia's ungovernable body, suspended in the air, metonymically stands for the potential for revolution that can be realised through radical black feminism: a space outside of Western constructs of linear time and the material world. Furthermore, Brand's earlier description of Verlia 'leaping into another life' refuses to depict finality, opening up the possibility that her leap over the cliff edge suggests an escape,

⁶⁵ Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present*, p.161.

⁶⁶ Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present*, p.159.

⁶⁷ Puri, *The Grenada Revolution in the Caribbean Present*, p.269.

⁶⁸ Dalleo, 'Post-Grenada, Post-Cuba, Postcolonial', p.73.

⁶⁹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.247.

rather than death. Reading this moment as a fugitive one allows us to think through the possibilities for transformation and resistance that the novel brings to the fore.

There are other subtle suggestions throughout the text that Verlia's leap over the cliff edge does not signify her death, but rather, her transition into another space no longer tangible to Elizete, the reader, or even the author — who are all still bound to the material world. For example, Verlia is air-bound in comparison to Elizete's 'earthbound' way of being. She describes Elizete, as I mentioned earlier, as 'the woman I will live with for ever',⁷⁰ suggesting their connection extends beyond the physical material world. This contrast between the two women is referred to in the final chapter as the activists are chased by MiGs (Russian Soviet fighter jets). As Elizete's 'solid' body hits the 'solid' ground,⁷¹ she turns to watch Verlia 'running, turning, leap off the cliff.'⁷² The present-tense verbs contrast with the declarative 'leap' to emphasise the movement, creating a clear image that purposefully avoids the temporal markers of the present or the past tense. Verlia's leap remains suspended in time, emphasising the notion that she inhabits fugitive space. McCallum and Olbey similarly position the novel's ending more hopefully than other critics. They highlight the embodied potential within this final depiction of Verlia, which 'bursts open a sense of the innumerable, unpredictable futures that can be produced by the affective body'.⁷³ Verlia's body represents the potential for revolution which is impossible to destroy permanently. Fascinatingly, the 'other place' that Verlia has reached exceeds the limits of the text itself. Through subtle references to Zimbabwean independence, Marcus Garvey's Pan-African activism, and the Grenada Revolution, Brand uses Verlia's body to communicate, through literary form, the pertinent message that the eternal possibility for change lies within radical political movements across the black transatlantic. The novel, however, offers us no way to make this potential concrete. This task instead lies ultimately with its readership: we must think about how we can use the potential that living fugitively holds to create the alternative world we want to live in.

In reality, the end of the Grenada Revolution led to US intervention. 'Operation Urgent Fury' ensured any remaining revolutionary groups could not seize control of the country. The only socialist

⁷⁰ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.201.

⁷¹ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.245.

⁷² Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.246.

⁷³ McCallum and Olbey, 'Written in the Scars', p.128.

revolution in the Caribbean in history remains a memory of untapped potential. Yet, Brand's restaging of its events through a fractured, distorted, fictional lens hints at the cyclical nature of radicalism. The ending of *In Another Place, Not Here* could easily return us to the beginning, where we find Elizete contemplating her memories of Verlia. Although Elizete mourns Verlia, who embodies the failure to sustain the change began by radical black activism, the cyclical form of the novel subtly suggests radicalism will continue to rise up and return. Like an ocean wave, revolutionary potential builds, crashes, and dissipates, only to accumulate again.

The novel ends with Verlia's leap, but Elizete is left in a different place entirely. After all, her fulfilment lay in her relationship with Verlia and not within the promise of a revolution. Sadly, she remains stranded in Toronto on the verge of madness, trying to make sense of the world in the office of Verlia's ex-lover, Abena. Elizete's incoherent communication suggests she is slipping into insanity. She finally tells Abena the news she came to Toronto to deliver personally. After she tells Abena of Verlia's death, she returns to mumbling the names of things:

She jump. Leap from me. Then I decide to count the endless names of stones. Rock leap, wall heart, rip eye, cease breath, marl cut, blood leap, clay deep [...] coral water, coral heart, coral breath...⁷⁴

Here Elizete's speech lies closer to poetry than prose. The nouns alongside unexpected verbs suggest that she is trying to create an alternative reality for herself. We as readers are no longer able to understand her. Her descent into madness suggests she is becoming illegible in the context of her material environment. But, if we understand madness in the Foucauldian sense, as something that 'fascinates because it is knowledge',⁷⁵ madness can become productive. Elizete's 'endless names of stones' suggest there are endless possibilities for interpreting the world. 'Rock leap' aligns a solid, concrete material with the light quickness associated with leaping. 'Rip eye' and 'cease breath' hints at the violent restructuring of human bodies. If Verlia's leap signalled her departure from the constraints of exploitation into an immaterial space, then Elizete's naming creates a way to reorder the world that remains deeply invested in the material. Although Elizete's vision of the world is not yet legible to us

⁷⁴ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.241–42.

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor and Francis, 2001), p.32.

— or even to the author — she could be legible in a different world. As Brand herself eloquently put it, borrowing the words of the Bissau-Guinean revolutionary Amilcar Cabral: ‘we won’t be fit to live in the world we’re fighting to make’.⁷⁶ Elizete’s lyrical speech in the passage above is a testament to this future that is possible, but its shape still remains a strange enigma in our minds, and is persistently elusive even to renowned black radical thinkers.

In light of a task so colossal and unimaginable, what can literature do? In a 2002 interview Brand explicitly mentions one of the functions of Verlia’s character: to preserve the black-led, politically charged, anti-capitalist atmosphere that lasted from the early 1960s until around 1980. In the wake of recent decolonisation across the Caribbean and Africa, Black Power in the US, Garveyism in Jamaica, Walter Rodney in Guyana and the beginning of the Grenada Revolution, Verlia serves as the embodiment of this time:

Through the 1980s and 1990s Marxism was discounted by many as a legitimate political alternative; people spoke of [...] ‘the end of Marxism’ and so on. I thought I needed to preserve that moment in Verlia, because there’s a kind of forgetfulness that capitalism produces once it’s scooped up all these things and thrown them off, even though it leeches from these movements.⁷⁷

‘Preserve’ is a compelling word which I highlight to bring the first part of this chapter to a close. *In Another Place, Not Here* is set in the material world, but exists imaginatively apart from it. The infinite potential of radical blackness, and the language it produces (or fails to legibly produce), remains concretised in the novel. Although Brand’s fiction often seems bleak, this is where hope lies for her: in preserving radical black energy within Verlia and her comrade’s ‘electrified Black, burning’ skins.⁷⁸ The demise of capitalism to make way for a radically alternative, more just system did not happen in the seventies, in the nineties at the time the novel was written, nor in the present as I write this thesis. Nevertheless, Brand has managed to preserve a psychological shift in this novel. During the ’60s and ’70s, black people across nations were able to think themselves anew and realise the capacity collective solidarity has to create significant change — however small or tragic the results of action may be. Ultimately, Brand preserves a radically black, feminist, fugitive aesthetic through her protagonist’s

⁷⁶ Christian Olbey, ‘Dionne Brand in Conversation’, *ARIEL*, 33 (2002), 87–103 (p.101).

⁷⁷ Olbey, ‘Dionne Brand in Conversation’, p.92.

⁷⁸ Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, p.166.

bodies. Like Verlia's body, the novel itself is a container for its own radical vision. Brand encourages us to leap off the cliff with Verlia into the unknown.

Part Two

Exhuming Brand's Ossuaries: Towards a Radical Black Feminist Poetics

The beginning of Dionne Brand's long poem *Ossuaries*, published in 2010, appears to begin where *In Another Place* ends. As I argued in part one, Brand leaves us with two protagonists who are unable to exist in the world. Elizete and Verlia enact a fugitive feminist praxis that causes them to flee to another place and become illegible to the author and to us as readers. Taking its cue from this ambiguous other place, *Ossuaries* is a difficult text that asks a tricky but crucial question: what might a language that makes radical blackness *legible* look, sound and feel like? We find no definitive answer to this question in the poem, but we do discover exploratory responses to it. In Brand's poetry, the project to create a transnational, radical black feminism begins with language. Whilst I recognise that she has published several other poetry collections since *In Another Place* (*Land to Light On*, 1997, *Inventory*, 2006, and *The Blue Clerk*, 2018), *Ossuaries* attends to questions of black liberation and the body politic most usefully for this thesis. In an interview discussing her most recent poetry book *The Blue Clerk*, Brand asserted she is 'very committed to how language frees us'.⁷⁹ As we will see in my reading of *Ossuaries*, she is similarly concerned with how it binds us. In thinking about the role of language in depth, part two of this chapter considers how this long poem uses language and form to develop what I term a radical poetics.

In the foreword to the edited collection entitled *The Fire Now* (2018), inspired by James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe looks closely at *Ossuaries*' opening to draw attention to anti-blackness within our current political moment. The essays address the climate of racial violence that has become more overt since Donald Trump's 2016 presidency and Britain's vote to leave the European Union in the same year. The essays address racism under the climate of late capitalism, adopting a transnational and multi-disciplinary approach to theorising and organising against it. Sharpe highlights a section from Brand's long poem's opening

⁷⁹ The Practicing Refusal Collective, 'The Blue Clerk: A Reading with Dionne Brand followed by a conversation with Saidiya Hartman', *YouTube* 22 December 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt-yRZgrCOW>> [accessed 03/02/2019].

pages, beginning with the stanza ‘in our induced days and our wingless days, / my every waking was incarcerated, / each square metre of air so toxic with violence’ and ending with the line ‘let us begin from there’.⁸⁰ Sharpe argues that Brand places the reader ‘in the midst of momentous violence and struggle’ to establish ‘*that* as the space, the here, from which we must begin [...] in the midst of brutality—quotidian, spectacular, cellular, organised and ongoing— against Black and Blackened people everywhere in the world’ [emphasis original].⁸¹ These powerful words place Brand’s text at the centre of scholarly thinking about blackness and the fugitive place that Sharpe encourages us to shift towards. Sharpe finds within *Ossuaries*’ pages a prescience similar to the one I find in them as a poetic response to the insidious way black lives are shaped by neoliberalism.

Despite its richness, other than *The Fire Now*’s foreword, little critical attention has been paid to *Ossuaries* in comparison to Brand’s other texts; perhaps due to its strangeness and linguistic inaccessibility. Notable critics of the work include Anne Quéma, who reads Brand’s poem alongside Achille Mbembe’s notion of necropolitics, focusing on Brand’s ‘poetics of rupture’.⁸² In a 2014 special issue of the journal *MaComère* that focuses on Dionne Brand, Paul Watkins reads her poem as a ‘search for new grammars’⁸³ through the soundscape it creates, inspired by jazz music — what he names an ‘urgent *aversion* and ekphrastic sounding for freedom amidst the ruins of an often-oppressive world’ [emphasis original], an argument I build upon in this chapter.⁸⁴ Dale Tracey asserts that *Ossuaries* ‘examines the interrelation of an imprisoning social structure, the vulnerable structures of individual bodies, and the structure of witness’; the latter primarily through the use of multiple narrators.⁸⁵ Libe García Zarranz offers a materialist feminist reading of the poem, asserting that Brand creates ‘new counter-hegemonic ethical and political positions through alternative accounts of human and non-human materialities’.⁸⁶ However, Zarranz’ consideration of feminism, rather than black feminism

⁸⁰ Ed. by Azeezat Johnson, Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Beth Kamunge, *The Fire Now: Anti-racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence* (London: Zed Books, 2018), xv.

⁸¹ Eds. Johnson, Joseph-Salisbury and Kamunge, *The Fire Now*, xv.

⁸² Anne Quéma, ‘Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*: Songs of Necropolitics’, *Canadian Literature*, 222 (2014), 52–68.

⁸³ Paul Watkins, ‘Listening to a Listening: The Disruptive Jazz Poetics of Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*’ *MaComère*, 14 (2013/14), 124–51 (p.132).

⁸⁴ Watkins, ‘Listening to a Listening’, p.124.

⁸⁵ Dale Tracey, *With the Witnesses: Poetry, Compassion, and Claimed Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), p.208.

⁸⁶ Libe García Zarranz, ‘Toxic Bodies that Matter: Trans-Corporeal Materialities in Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*’, *Canada and Beyond: a Journal of Canadian Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2 (2012), 55–68 (p.66).

specifically, erases Brand's specific anti-racist engagement with blackness and bodies. My reading in part two considers Brand's contribution to a radical black feminist politic through the poetics of the text.

An ossuary is a casket where human remains are placed due to lack of burial space. They have an ancient history, associated with the sacred relationship between the living and the dead that spans syncretically across multiple religions and time periods.⁸⁷ Taken from the Latin *os* (meaning bone), the first ossuaries date back to ancient Egypt. Brand's formal choice to name the parts of her poem 'ossuaries' is compelling. It is split into fifteen 'ossuaries' formed in tercets placed sparsely on the page. Introduced using Roman numerals, the ossuaries of the poem function as containers to hold her lyrical, elegiac, expansive critique of the world. This form is also significant when we consider her exploration of the black body politic. The poem's visceral language, in confluence with its 'parts', seems to suggest that the black body itself is a kind of ossuary. Devoid of humanity and agency, and cast out of existence (to again invoke the words of Hortense Spillers and Achille Mbembe), Brand pursues the idea that black beings must resist from the margins to discover what it could feel like to inhabit a body that exists within them.

First, I turn my attention to some significant aspects of *Ossuaries*' form that lead us into a complex exploration of black being. The poem is one of Brand's most fragmented and there is no clear linear narrative thread. Described by the author as 'a long experiment in verblessness',⁸⁸ it is linguistically innovative, combining unexpected nouns and adjectives. Brand attempts to create a new grammar for blackness that 'imagines us as we actually are' in the present, attending to 'brutality' without binding black bodies to it and exploring 'agility' as a mode of being. For her, the verbs 'brutality' and 'agility' are the 'basic tools of blackness'.⁸⁹ Her language in the poem oscillates between the two, interrogating the interactions between materiality and the black body politic. The only punctuation marks used are commas, lending a disorientating velocity to the stanzas that have no sense of beginning or end. The observations take place from two perspectives that live with the 'brutality'

⁸⁷ Paul Koudounaris, *The Empire of Death: A Cultural History of Ossuaries and Charnel Houses* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), pp.10–19.

⁸⁸ The Practicing Refusal Collective, 'The Blue Clerk', *YouTube*.

⁸⁹ The Practicing Refusal Collective, 'The Blue Clerk', *YouTube*.

the first tercet's line, 'infinitive', suggests a double-meaning. 'Infinitive' refers to the raw form of a verb and acts here as a metafictional reference to its role in the line, but it also sounds similar to 'infinite', meaning endless time. The past cannot be undone, and the infinitive 'undo' becomes void as time stretches onwards infinitely. This interaction between time and space plays out structurally on the page, creating a compelling sense of suspension. Furthermore, the uneven lines produce an uneven metre, but the delicate balance of one-, two- and three-syllable words produces a measured, continuous cadence. In the third tercet the rooms take shape and the atmosphere is manipulated into 'visible/ molecules' by an unknown force. The enjambment between these two words causes us to dwell upon the transformation of the 'atmosphere' from invisible to visible at a molecular level. In this stanza (or ossuary), Brand draws our attention to the abstract process through which the concept of space is created. Due to the poem's lack of linearity and the immediacy of its tense, time is subverted. Time, particularly in the Caribbean context, is bound up with the project of modernity, and by extension, capitalism. Thus, this unusual poetic form disrupts and destabilises linear notions of time. Each of the poem's ossuaries interrogates time by illuminating the past's effects on the present and future. Here Brand's poetics break apart conventional grammar rules and temporal linearity. In doing so, she defamiliarizes her reader from conventional linguistic and temporal boundaries. These are some of the ways in which *Ossuaries*' form attempts to break blackness away from the ontological boundaries that Western modernity established and maintained.

Importantly, though, Brand's attempts to use language to free blackness from oppressive constraint under neoliberal capitalism highlights the extent to which she is always preoccupied with the idea of constraint itself. Much like the ending of *In Another Place*, where we find Elizete and Verlia unable to break free from the limitations of capitalist labour exploitation and patriarchal, racially structured oppression, *Ossuaries* remains in constant tension with these same constraints. Here, they are expressed as a visceral experience. Returning again to the stanza above, the repeating phrase 'to undo' in the first line aligns with the second tercet's suffocating first line, 'this is how she wakes each day of each underground year'. The cyclical repetition functions to create a sense of psychological and physical incarceration. The verbs in the third tercet create a strange catachresis, a linguistic pattern evident throughout the poem which I will address further below. The combination of catachresis and

assonance in the lines ‘the grateful rooms had to be gathered’ and ‘the atmosphere coaxed to visible/ molecules’ creates a verbal fluidity, making these difficult to imagine acts *sound* possible, even if they are not possible in the realm of physics as we know it.

I now turn to consider another aspect of Brand’s radical poetics: the use of catachresis. Generally understood as the misuse of a word for rhetorical effect, the term’s fluid meaning has been elaborated upon by deconstructionist and postcolonial scholars, most notably Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Spivak. Derrida (engaging with Pierre Fontanier) considers the philosophical meaning of metaphor, from which the ‘infraction of a catachresis [...] does not emerge from language, does not create new signs, does not enrich the code; and yet it transforms its functioning, producing, with the same material, new rules of exchange, new values.’⁹¹ These ‘new rules of exchange’ or ‘values’ come into being once we recognise that words have no inherent meaning or ‘truth’ other than the meanings we ascribe to them, which are of course mutable and changeable. For Derrida, catachresis troubles essentialist meaning. He even suggests that philosophy itself, in a sense, is catachresis: ‘the twisting return toward the already-there of a meaning’.⁹² Derrida’s sense that catachresis causes transformation and produces new meaning aligns with Brand’s use of catachresis in *Ossuaries*. Gayatri Spivak, on the other hand, elucidates the erasure of gender specifics in philosophical definitions of catachresis, using Friedrich Nietzsche’s work as one example to critique his positioning of ‘woman’ as a catachresis: ‘a metaphor without a literal referent standing in for a concept that is the condition of conceptuality’.⁹³ Spivak further elaborates on its meaning, highlighting the importance of the (in this case, gendered) subject when catachresis is produced as we think about categories of the human, prompting us to consider who is included and who is omitted. For my purposes in this chapter, another yet more relevant conceptualisation of catachresis can be found in Calvin Warren’s *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (2018). Warren suggests the black body itself is a catachresis: ‘the Negro is neither a proper object of knowledge nor a proper referent (catachresis)’.⁹⁴ Later, critiquing the notion

⁹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Hemel Hempstead: The Harvester Press, 1982), p.257.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.127.

⁹⁴ Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p.37.

that African-American emancipation led to freedom, Warren argues that ‘the free black constitutes an ontological catachresis in that it lacks any proper referent to capture the being without place in the world.’⁹⁵ The idea that black bodies cease to exist without a place in the world leads Warren to the useful question: ‘how do we visualize black as nothing?’⁹⁶ Brand’s use of catachresis offers a response to such a question. Catachresis draws attention to the new meanings that may be constructed between the cracks, beyond the previously established meaning of words. Catachresis’ strangeness — the defamiliarization of meaning it produces — allows Brand to destabilise language from ‘truth’ or ‘reason’ to suggest the possibilities of an existence that entirely rejects the category of the human. The dematerialisation of language, in this poem, serves to shift the black body out of its incarceration.

I have established that Brand’s poetic yearns to free black being from constraint, particularly through troubling the boundaries of language. I now turn to the crucial way that *Ossuaries* refigures black bodies. Bodies and body parts appear figuratively throughout the poem in the form of metaphors and nouns. The suspension of time and space that I have outlined functions as an opportunity to confront a new reality in which we might rethink the black body anew. In the poem’s lyrical opening lines, Brand creates a suffocating atmosphere of relentless violence in which we locate the black body:

I lived and loved, some might say,
in momentous times,
looking back, my dreams were full of prisons

in our narcotic drifting slumbers,
so many dreams of course were full of prisons,
mine were without relief

in our induced days and our wingless days,
my every waking was incarcerated,
each square metre of air so toxic with violence

the atmospheres were breathless there,
the bronchial trees were ligatured
with carbons⁹⁷

Brand’s experiment in verblessness begins with verbs. In constructing the poem’s lines to draw attention to verbs, or their absence, she questions the actions that they allow and inhibit. The speaker in the lyrical

⁹⁵ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p.88.

⁹⁶ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p.144.

⁹⁷ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.9–10.

verse is elusive and anonymous, possibly changing throughout the ossuaries. The opening words in the past tense, 'I lived and loved', creates an immediate sense of loss and lamentation. Brand lulls us into what could be a clichéd opening line before dismantling our expectations of the life lived by this narrator. The cliché is disrupted by the oppressively repeated noun 'prisons' and, later, the verb 'incarcerated'. Brand's language attempts to find the words for this liminal gap between blackness and humanity. Furthermore, we hear the meter through a balance of one, two and three-syllable words, causing words longer than this to sound emphasised. This careful rhythm makes 'incarcerated' sound heavy at the end of the line, disrupting the rhythm in the rest of the tercet. The verb seems to incarcerate itself within the tercet's middle line, creating a cyclical, nightmarish, repetitive waking into the prison of the black body. 'Violence' at the end of the next line further compounds the sense of inescapable, toxic air. Notably, the 'I' switches to 'our', referring to both a collective and an individual. The use of 'I' alongside 'our' can be read as representing the embodied state of black being. Brand's stanzas attempt to portray the confinement of existing in a black body. The verbs and nouns ('incarcerated' and 'violence') are constraining, suffocating the speaker.

Brand does, however, offer the reader some solace. The blankness on the white page in the above stanzas once again eludes to the unknown. This unoccupied space draws attention to the transformational possibilities of the black body. The image of the 'bronchial trees' infected with carbons is one of Brand's most poignant. Carbon is the basis of all life on earth and the material that forms the stars. It is also one of the materials that forms petroleum. Brand suggests here that carbon has the potential to transform things; it is simultaneously harmful to the atmosphere and the material we need to survive. The air itself is toxic with violence, yet carbon thrives. Significantly a *black* substance, carbon has the potential to be dangerous and powerful. Carbon's role in this stanza is to begin to relocate blackness beyond the racialised constraints it is subjected to within the body. Brand renders blackness aesthetically, creating a visceral atmosphere of imprisonment and unfreedom which is ruptured by the black carbons in the trees that, nevertheless, remain breathing. Ultimately, Brand's careful use of materiality fights to release the black body from the material constraints of neoliberal modernity.

The extract above typifies the bleak tone that pervades, to varying extents, throughout *Ossuaries*. One of the challenges of the poem is how to work through, and write through, a world in

which blackness excludes one from humanity. This is also one of the central tenets of an emerging concept within Black Studies termed Afro-Pessimism. Throughout this thesis I have drawn upon Saidiya Hartman's, Achille Mbembe's and Hortense Spillers' work. These scholars, along with Brand, are thinkers who fit the Afropessimist continuum. Emerging in the early 2000s and heavily influenced by Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997),⁹⁸ Afro-Pessimism can be loosely defined as 'a lens of interpretation that accounts for civil society's dependence on antiblack violence' by theorising blackness itself as a result of anti-black violence, essentially suggesting that 'humanity is made legible through the irreconcilable distinction between humans and blackness'.⁹⁹ Although dominated by African-American scholars, it has a transnational reach and its contributors are firmly committed to striving towards syncretic black unity. They cite Frantz Fanon's work as a major source of inspiration. Afro-Pessimism, then, is concerned with the ontology of the black body, sketching out the complex ways in which it is structured outside of the human. In his illuminating essay outlining and critiquing the debates surrounding Afro-Pessimism, Jared Sexton quotes Frank B. Wilderson to outline the specific ways Afro-Pessimists theorise blackness:

'Afro-Pessimism theorizes [blackness] as a position of accumulation and fungibility; that is, as condition—or relation—of ontological death.' Further, and due to this insight, 'the Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field ... is structured by anti-Black solidarity.'¹⁰⁰

Wilderson's language, rooted in Black Studies and Marxist discourses, suggests that Afro-Pessimism is a *position* that captures the ways black being and bodies are commodified as a resource and excluded from the rights afforded to 'humanity'. It is important that the distinction is made between a perceived inherent undervalue and a *structured* anti-black society that negates value. Much like black feminist fugitivity, which was also cultivated under this broad Afro-Pessimist umbrella, Afro-Pessimists revisit the long history of race scholars (like Fanon) to rework their usefulness into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Sexton's article asks searching questions that further clarify the Afro-Pessimist position,

⁹⁸ Sebastian Weier, 'Consider Afro-Pessimism', *Amerikastudien/ American Studies*, 59 (2014), 419–33 (p.419).

⁹⁹ Patrice Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe and Frank B. Wilderson, 'Afro-Pessimism', *Oxford Bibliographies* 28 August 2018 <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0056.xml>> [accessed 14/02/2018].

¹⁰⁰ Jared Sexton, 'Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word', *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 29 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02>> [accessed 27/05/2020].

notably, how might we think ‘through it or against it’, consider its ‘limit and potential’, and view it as something that names ‘an aspiration, a call and demand, or a wish?’. I contend that *Ossuaries* positions Afro-Pessimism as all four of these things, even the utopian-sounding ‘wish’. In a similar fashion to Brand’s fiction, Afro-Pessimists assert that a radical way of positioning blackness can be reached if we create from the outside of these anti-black categories of the human.

Returning, for the final time, to Mbembe’s essay ‘Necropolitics’, allows me to more carefully consider Afro-Pessimist reframings of the black body. To recap, Mbembe reflects on sovereign power (by which he means the power to decide who lives and who dies) and the way it has shaped Western imperial domination. The violence of necropolitics forms ‘*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*’ [emphasis original].¹⁰¹ Mbembe suggests that a preference for death over continued servitude creates ‘power’ for the racialised subject, as death becomes a space where ‘freedom’ and negation operate.¹⁰² Therefore necropolitics blurs ‘the lines between resistance and suicide.’¹⁰³ However, as I have suggested in this thesis, death is no radical way to escape the bondage of capitalism. Mbembe’s essay is more useful when he suggests, using the preserved skeletons after the Rwandan genocide as an example, that dismemberment acts as a kind of ‘demiurgic surgery’, its memory haunting the present. Thus, in the present, the black body remains metaphorically broken into ‘pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close’.¹⁰⁴ Mbembe highlights how black bodies, under the regime of necropolitics, are split apart metaphorically *and* literally. Fiction can harness this metaphorical fragmentation most productively, without the risk of suggesting that escaping bondage through suicide is a legitimate mode of resistance. Mbembe’s language is compellingly relevant to Brand’s project in *Ossuaries*. Her poetics examine these ‘pieces’ ‘fragments’ ‘folds’ and ‘wounds’ that the black body has been shattered into due to its abject positionality. Bearing this fragmentation in mind, I turn to discuss further extracts from the poem in detail.

¹⁰¹ Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, *Public Culture*, 15 (2003), 11–40 (p.40).

¹⁰² Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p.39.

¹⁰³ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p.40.

¹⁰⁴ Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, p.35.

The fractured bodies in each of Brand's ossuaries are made productive despite enduring constant attempts to destroy them. Throughout the poem we encounter body parts, often appearing next to raw materials and chemicals:

what brutal hours, what brutal days,
do not say, oh find the good in it, do not say,
there was virtue; there was no virtue, not even in me

let us begin from there, restraining metals
covered my heart, rivulets
of some unknown substance transfused my veins
at night, especially at night, it is always at night,
a wall of concrete enclosed me,
it was impossible to open my eyes¹⁰⁵

Looking back on the 'brutal hours' and 'brutal days', the anonymous speaker narrates the atmosphere of terror that enacts violence towards black bodies. Bodily organs are fused with metals, and the strange use of the adjective 'restraining' gives the metal a human-like quality, continuing the pervasive sense of incarceration. An 'unknown substance' fills the veins instead of blood. The impossible scale of the 'rivulets' drown the body. 'Transfused' suggests a transformative process within which the body becomes less biologically human. Brand's catachresis creates a new effect similar to what Libe García Zarranz refers to as 'transcorporeality'— a 'time-space framework where human materiality is inseparable from the natural and technological worlds'¹⁰⁶ — in order to capture the black body politic through language. The oppressive wall of concrete suggests a final enclosure. This represents the ossuary itself: it is concrete, with human bones placed inside it. In the stanzas that follow, the narrator precedes to travel through time and space, abandoning the rules of physics and biology to experience the world as if in a different dimension. Here the narrator's black body transcends the walls of the ossuary and by extension the physical, sensual atmosphere of violence that threatens to exterminate it. The narrator leaves bodily reality behind for the remainder of the poem to explore a realm beyond our world: a place still material, but not as we know it. Evidently, Brand is interested in the potential that exists beyond the confines of the racialised and gendered human body. Through poetry, she asks if it could be possible to untether blackness from its associations with inhumanity to imagine it anew.

¹⁰⁵ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.11.

¹⁰⁶ Zarranz, 'Toxic Bodies that Matter', p.57.

In the ossuaries narrated from the perspective of the anonymous narrator, Brand abandons gender signifiers. The character Yasmine's perspective, however, is gendered. Through her lens we can expose the constraints and possibilities of womanhood. In this text, black womanhood is articulated less explicitly than in Brand's earlier work involving black female protagonists. Nevertheless, Yasmine does fit a now familiar trope in Brand's work: the fugitive. This suggests an interesting intertextual continuity in Brand's fiction. Notably, Yasmine's destination differs to Elizete's and Verlia's in *In Another Place*. She lives a transient existence underground, constantly on the run. The erotic agency of love between black women is realised through Elizete and Verlia's queer relationship, but in *Ossuaries*, sex is analogous with patriarchal control. In the fourth ossuary we witness the female body constrained by sexism. Yasmine's comrade and lover, Owusu, is the only other named character in the poem. His verbal abuse portrays the oppression of patriarchal black masculinity, evident in the damning words 'you're nothing, Yas, / I made you something by fucking you'.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to *In Another Place*, their heterosexual relationship is toxic and destructive. Yasmine reacts to these damaging words in a visceral manner. She 'slips out the room, a volcanic mist, / molten through the doorframe, / brain on fire'.¹⁰⁸ She vaporises, fusing with the materiality surrounding her in an attempt to leave behind the powerlessness bound up with her black female body. The even trimeter in the tercet's second and third lines build up to the climatic noun 'fire'. Fire suggests the destructive sense of agency that abandoning her body has manifested. This empowering moment is gradually transformed into action and a sense of purpose. Yasmine continues to transform in the next stanza through the interaction between sound and the body: 'she's gone, a low hum, a bacteria, incubates in her left ear, / Charles Mingus recovers her'.¹⁰⁹ Recalling a childhood memory involving listening to the jazz musician with her mother, she is suddenly struck with bodily affect. Importantly, Yasmine is able to 'recover' her body through music. The 'last movement' of Charles Mingus' composition suggesting the 'frantic burst of a dying organism' causes the memory to become distorted, and suddenly we find ourselves in a different metaphysical place in which 'the planets already spun for months and years'.¹¹⁰ Removed from time, Yasmine's black female

¹⁰⁷ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.41.

¹⁰⁸ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.42.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.43.

body finds a temporary and transient freedom in the realm of music: an affect lying within the transformative power of sound. The fourth ossuary ends with Yasmine waking again, this time ‘the base of her head flaming with small fires’.¹¹¹ The ossuary closes with the lines ‘conscious as bees / to the finest changes of sound, / and shadow, sweat and heat, she knows what she is to do’.¹¹² Yasmine’s senses become exaggerated as she taps into the radical potential that previously lay dormant within her. The moment suggests a seed has been planted in her mind that alludes to the bank robbery carried out in ossuary ten. Although the robbery is an act against the capitalist state, we know it cannot change the system. Yasmine’s ultimate purpose runs deeper than this act. Her destiny aligns with the purpose of the poem itself: to find a realm in which to legibly exist as a black woman.

Furthermore, several typically uncritical signifiers of femininity (a dress, bracelets and mermaid-like imagery) in ossuary eight offer temporary relief from the poem’s pervasive despair. Read alongside the communist setting of Cuba, Yasmine’s black womanhood allows her to feel an affinity with Afro-Cubans, and she experiences some peaceful months in Havana. She bonds with the local people who sustain her as they exchange stories, conversation, and share revitalising ‘lemon water’.¹¹³ Havana is the only fully described and tangible place in the poem. These sensuous lines encapsulate the serenity Yasmine feels there:

one night she walks fully clothed, like Bird,
 into the oily pearl of the sea’s surface,
 coral and cartilage, bone and air, infrangible
 and how she could walk straight out, her dress,
 her bangles, her locking hair, soluble,
 and how despite all she could not stay there¹¹⁴

Caesura is particularly noticeable in the third and fifth lines. The overall effect of the commas in the stanza cause it to ebb and flow, mimicking ocean waves. Yasmine’s ‘soluble’ body threatens to dissolve into Cuba’s surrounding ocean. Another jazz reference (‘Bird’ was the musician Charlie Parker’s alias) further suggests a sense of solace. This moment is the only strong suggestion of belonging rooted to a specific place, and the reality that Yasmin could not stay feels heavy. Brand ultimately suggests that for

¹¹¹ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.46.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.66.

¹¹⁴ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.67.

black women to create real social change we must continue the struggle to dismantle capitalism, which, as the poem shows, is dangerous and restless work. The difficult task required is emphasised in the ossuary that follows, which takes us, geographically, back down to earth. The unnamed narrator resembles a divine being, looking down upon the destroyed planet: ‘the human skin translucent with diesel, / the lemon trees’ inadvertent existences, / the satellite whales, GPS necklaces of dolphins and turtles’.¹¹⁵ We move from being rooted to a particular place (Havana) to a broad impression of the world infected with the ravages of capitalism’s toxic technologies and waste products. The contrast between these two ossuaries makes it clear that Brand does not aim to create comfort for her readers. Despite the pockets of solace in our existing world, her fiction asserts we must continue to reach beyond it to maintain any hope of true liberation.

Jazz music, though, offers more than just a temporary release. *Ossuaries* is inspired by John Coltrane’s ‘Venus’ (1967), its sparse instrumentals and quick pace suggesting the ‘agility’ of blackness which Brand’s controlled rhythm successfully captures in language.¹¹⁶ For Paul Watkins, the long poem ‘can be read as an extended jazz solo that draws improvisation from the margins of history to assert a poetics of dissent, difference, and disruption’.¹¹⁷ As an expression of black pain, the poem formally embodies jazz music to express the condition of the black body: frozen within its repetitive frantic burst, like a chorus, repeating infinitely and therefore resisting fatality. Its agile pace, predominantly short syllabic words and sparse stanzas resemble the cacophonous melody of jazz. Jazz serves to link the black body to self-expression beyond language, because language, as we have established, can be violent and oppressive. Jazz is rooted in blues music which is synonymous with radical black empowerment.¹¹⁸ For the author, jazz creates a sonic sense of movement that is freeing. Unlike language, it seems, jazz can function to release the body from the constraints of black racialisation.

¹¹⁵ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.69.

¹¹⁶ E. Martin Nolan, “‘Life Amid the Bones’”: A Review of Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*, *The Puritan*, 10 (2010) <<http://puritan-magazine.com/life-amid-the-bones-a-review-of-dionne-brands-ossuaries/>> [accessed 18/01/2019].

¹¹⁷ Watkins, ‘Listening to a Listening’, p.124–5.

¹¹⁸ For a discussion of free jazz’s ‘militant’ anti-capitalist radical blackness, see Phillippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli, *Free Jazz/ Black Power* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1971).

In contrast to Yasmine's perspective, Brand abandons the boundaries of gender and individualism through the unnamed narrator, who uses both singular and collective pronouns. Ossuary five returns to this first-person narrator who, as I have argued, represents an expansive blackness. Here the poem does its most productive work. Brand destabilises the normative ways of describing, understanding and embodying blackness. Essentially, she queers it. At first the narrator speaks of the ability to harden oneself against the world and remain a resilient activist by sharpening the black body into something 'oblique' and 'serrated' like 'shark's teeth'.¹¹⁹ However, weaponizing the body gradually wears it down, and the speaker becomes 'bone dry' and exhausted:

the crate of bones I've become, good
 I was waiting to throw my limbs on the pile,
 the mounds of disarticulated femurs and radii
 but perhaps we were always lying there,
 dead on our feet and recyclable,
 toxic and imperishable, the ways to see us¹²⁰

The double-meaning of the ossuaries emerges here: as physical containers for the bones of black bodies denied their humanity and as formal 'caskets' containing the parts of Brand's poem. The slow decay of the body gives way to the narrator abandoning their bony limbs. The discarded bones tossed onto a pile is reminiscent of the physical and metaphysical fragmentation that Mbembe suggests taints black bodies. The verb 'disarticulate' carries a dual meaning here, suggesting the literal ripping apart of 'femurs' and 'radii' and the failure to understand a point of view, again suggesting the narrator's blackness is illegible, inhuman and fragmented. At this moment the black body becomes an ossuary. As well as acting as a container for language, each ossuary functions as a casket for the black body itself. This body is incarcerated, contained and buried, essentially cast out of existence. Yet, Brand seems to suggest there are ways to exist beyond an embodied reality. The signifiers of gender evident in the ossuaries written from Yasmine's perspective have now disappeared. If we again recall Hortense Spillers' suggestion that understanding black women's ontology involves a process of 'ungendering' — the premise that black women are cast out of the social structures of gender — it becomes clear why

¹¹⁹ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.48.

¹²⁰ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.49.

the unnamed narrator has no gender. The tercets above describe a metamorphosis as the narrator sheds bones, like skin, to become another being entirely.

Throughout this chapter I have established Brand's positioning of blackness as an abjection. Her language in the stanzas that follow is compelling. The narrator hears music coming from 'somewhere' unidentifiable 'in a distance backward or forward',¹²¹ unable to locate the space or time from which the music originates. Brand bends the laws of physics as the music transforms into a speeding 'granule of light' and the moon lies 'on the floor alone with us', creating a strange image: '[the moon] ate what we ate'. The tercet 'the body skids where the light pools, / each bone has lost its dialect now, / untranslatable though I had so many languages',¹²² suggests an intricate bodily transformation has taken place as the cumulative pooling of light interrupts the body's movement, causing it to lose its language and become illegible. Finally, the black body has become an empty thing: 'if I broke my chest open now, / with a small hammer, / I assure you, there would be nothing there'.¹²³ But we cannot read this emptiness as simply articulating more despair because of the surreal transformation that has just occurred. Brand's poetics repeatedly makes use of jazz music to signify the energy, or agility, of black being which is further symbolised through the conversion of sound into light. The presence of the moon suspends the laws of gravity, and the bones of the black body have now 'lost dialect' and are 'untranslatable'. Brand's language strains under the weight of finding the language for this reconfigured black body, which is now not a body at all in the ways we typically understand it biologically. Her poetics queers this body because it now refuses to be understood by the laws of Western physics or biology, and can only be articulated in sparse fragments using language. In the final line, the body has no heart; its chest is empty. Into this nothingness we can read a transformation that remains unknown to our current systems of knowledge and refuses to be contained in the poem's tercets. Brand gestures towards a sense of affect that we connect with as readers, even if her language does not allow us to articulate a clear image of this alternative way of being a black woman in our minds.

¹²¹ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.50.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.51.

The way that Brand's poetic queers means that the black body described in the stanzas above gradually breaks out into the universe in *Ossuary seven*, which opens with the line 'venus, I could walk there on the ragged edge'.¹²⁴ Here the first-person narrator exceeds the limits of the body to represent an 'I' that can be understood beyond the usual boundaries of the human. I have so far suggested that Brand seeks to make radical blackness legible, and here she begins to move blackness beyond the body into the territory of sound. As such, blackness becomes untethered from the body:

what force or will collected,
in that walking figure, erectus,
what fierce bright timbals
and which ambitious cells,
and which collisions of molecules,
reach their outer space sounding
don't take me in from the window, please,
I hear the crackle of the oceanic crust,
the fracture of extraterrestrial plains¹²⁵

The repeated 'what' and 'which' determiners preceding the phrases 'force or will collected', 'ambitious cells' and 'collisions of molecules' suggest the search for an alternative black ontology. Bodily 'cells' and 'molecules' scatter into 'their outer space' beyond our physical world and outside of our psychic comprehension. The assonance and catachresis in the line 'fierce bright timbals' and the phrase 'space sounding' means we hear the line's accumulating hiss, signalling the potential energy about to be unleashed. Catachresis again destabilises language from its meaning. Importantly, 'sounding' is used as a verb. Often a term used to measure depth, here Brand suggests that 'sounding' is a praxis for transforming the body into something else. Once again, the author is unable to bring about the transition beyond the black body within the limits of language, instead turning to sounds that 'crackle' and 'fracture'. Although the anonymous narrator is not overtly gendered, we might ask whether gender is relevant within this new notion of materiality which has broken free of the constraints we usually ascribe to bodies. Rather than expressing an escapist, utopian hope for the future, Brand confronts what Sexton names the 'spatial and temporal borders of anti-blackness [...] to find an edge beyond or before which true living unfolds.'¹²⁶ This 'edge beyond' is figured through the sonic presence of black being. We

¹²⁴ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.61.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Sexton, 'Afro-pessimism: The Unclear Word'.

notice that Brand hints at, rather than fully articulates, the presence and relevance of sound. Sound allows her to represent blackness without constraining it through language: an essential part of her radical poetics. Considered alongside the earlier references to jazz, the sonic realm offers an alternative to the constraints of language. This alternative way of figuring bodily movement and expression is a central means by which Brand makes blackness legible. In contrast to *In Another Place*, there is a productive legibility here that we are permitted to access sonically. In this poem, Brand leads us to music. In ossuary eight, for example, the memory of jazz music sparks the thought process that prompts Yasmine to carry out the bank robbery, figured as a radical act of financial terrorism against the state. Jazz music also follows her whilst she rests in her hideout in Havana. In ossuary seven, the black body is broken apart and re-constructed through a sound aesthetic. For Brand, sound carries within it a radical potential to transform and express an immaterial state that cannot be expressed through language.

In sum, *Ossuaries'* linguistic and formal strangeness allows Brand to develop a radical poetics. Despite the limited scholarly conversation surrounding it, the long poem is one of Brand's most important works that allows us to reach answers beyond the bleak messages often present in her fiction. She subverts and reworks elements of Afro-Pessimist thought to serve her project: to create a radical new poetics in which to articulate blackness and transform blackness itself into a radical form of resistance. By remaking the ancient practice to place human bones inside ossuaries into a poetic form, Brand also gestures towards the destructive nature of capitalism that is hurtling us towards ecological collapse. The ossuary form is suggestive of the radical possibilities of black feminism — for black embodiment cannot be contained within the grave-like ossuary within which the poem attempts to confine it. Instead, blackness seeps out as an aesthetic of excess, articulated beyond language through sound and musicality. Brand unpacks the ways that even representation through language might fail to adequately represent black emancipation. The omniscient black body in *Ossuaries* is able to realise a tangible and radically empowering alternative existence. This body is outside of the constraints of gender. Whilst Yasmine's character serves to explicitly represent embodiment from a gendered perspective, the anonymous narrator entirely rejects gender binaries. By turning to sound and musicality, Brand ruptures the constraints of language, suggesting that any form of representation

articulated through language may indeed be implicated within, and therefore complicit with, capitalist modes of value and consumption.

To conclude, Brand's radical poetics deploys linguistic and formal techniques, ranging from assonance, catachresis, caesura, enjambment, and multiple narrative voices to a jazz-inspired sonic soundscape, in order to attempt to reach a place in which black women can be imagined otherwise. Read as an expression of the constraint attached to existing in a black body in an anti-black society, the long poem is a search for an alternative way to exist in the world. Whilst gender is not explicitly central to Brand's reimagining of blackness, the narrator Yasmine adds a necessarily gendered perspective, allowing the author to work through alternative ways of being through the prism of black femininity. Through the lens of Afro-Pessimism, I have placed Brand's radical poetics within an emerging continuum of emancipatory black thought. The poem's ending remains ambiguous and the final tercet offers no concrete clarity: 'were this a painting, it would combust canvases, / this lunate pebble, this splintered phalanx, / I can hardly hold their sincere explosions'.¹²⁷ But Brand's expectation of her reader may be more explicit. As Paul Watkins proclaims, 'like the revolutionary undulations that permeate the sonorous textures of the text — from revolutionaries actual, to theorists of the revolution, to the jazz manifestos that swing the notation of the text — we are called to listen'.¹²⁸ Brand encourages her reader to hear within the poem's language the metaphysical space it gestures towards. Nevertheless, this ambiguity is one of the poem's fault lines. The disorientating journey I have unpacked in this chapter makes for a reading experience that is, in my view, inaccessible to most lay readers. This shortcoming could be linked to the reasons why this long poem is one of the least read of her oeuvre; to some, it may seem less applicable to our material world.

In comparison to the realist narratives explored in the previous chapters, though, *Ossuaries* is experimental and the only poem explored in this thesis. My reading shows that Brand's ability, through poetry, to contort, repurpose and experiment with language allows her to reach a space beyond the usual remit of novels and short stories. Free from the constraints of narrative plot and relatively conventional language, Brand makes use of language and form innovatively to take the reader on a journey into an

¹²⁷ Brand, *Ossuaries*, p.124.

¹²⁸ Watkins, 'Listening to a Listening', p.143.

unfamiliar space far away from the laws of the material world, in order to discover the emancipatory possibilities of reimagining blackness. At the poem's end, rather than representing a finalised position on how black women can live otherwise, *Ossuaries* leaves us with valuable questions concerning how to create a society in which black people (especially black women) are not continuously exploited. The position offered in *Ossuaries* is not an explicitly gendered one because, as I argue, the poem takes its point of departure from Hortense Spillers' notion of 'ungendering', attempting to describe a subject untethered from the limits of gender. Although the long poem is a surreal reading experience, this endeavour to abandon gender is a fascinating alternative to the constraints of gendered reality.

If we return to the central lessons we take from black feminism, we know that a world in which black women are not subjected to exploitation is a more equal society for all. Just as Brand's characters often know the next dangerous step they have to take, we learn from her fiction that social justice can only be reached if capitalism is dismantled. Calvin Warren's words elucidate the task Brand has set before us:

The important task for black thinking (philosophizing, theorizing, theologizing, poeticizing) is to imagine black existence without Being, humanism, or the human. Such thinking would lead us into an abyss. But we must face this abyss — its terror and majesty. I would suggest that this thinking leads us into the spirit, something exceeding and preceding the metaphysical world.¹²⁹

The black abyss we are left in at the end of *Ossuaries* leads us to somewhere that exceeds and precedes the metaphysical world. This abyss takes us beyond the oppressive structures of race and gender. One route for us, as readers of Brand's fiction, is to look beyond language. Brand's poem's aesthetic creation of an indistinct vision of black being attempts to imagine existence beyond the boundaries of exploitation. The creative impetuosity of *Ossuaries*' radical poetics ultimately allows us to reach an ideologically productive place beyond the metaphysical limits of black womanhood.

¹²⁹ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p.171.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored fictional works written by black women from 1990 to present during an era characterised by neoliberal capitalism. By engaging closely with textual detail, I have discovered the ways in which my selected writers expose the inequality, oppression, violence and privations that effect black women particularly. At the same time, I argued that their narratives challenge these very structures through their specific iterations of literary aesthetics. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dionne Brand, Edwidge Danticat, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Taiye Selasi use form, character, language and genre to imagine worlds in which black women might find empowerment. These writers explore the perspectives of an array of disparate, conflicting, and heterogenous characters, and lead us to equally diverse forms of resistance which are at times overt, and at others, precarious and tentative. They portray moments of collective solidarity, empathy, pleasure and even rage through their creation of black women characters who endeavour to find a sense of agency in spite of the structural oppression faced under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Crucially, the authors I have explored depict black women characters, in their various ways, attempting to realise a politics of solidarity through friendship, familial, or romantic relationships with one another. Their work reminds us that black women's experiences are far from monolithic, yet parallels can also be discerned amongst these texts. In order to create and sustain solidarity, black women must attempt to overcome the class, cultural and economic boundaries that may divide them. Across all of the texts under study, embodiment — both in terms of powerfully materialist feminine bodies and immaterial, spiritual bodily alternatives — plays a crucial role in revealing how the pernicious forms of oppression that specifically effect black women operate. At the same time, bodies are imagined frequently as the means by which moments of resistance are enacted.

My thesis began by focusing on Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes Memory* in order to sensitively consider the kinds of violence faced by black women in a Haitian context wracked by systematic, exploitative and uneven neoliberal capitalism. The novel was published on the cusp of the height of global expansion of neoliberalism. As I argued, in order for symbolic and systemic forms of violence that are legitimised and enacted by the state to be survived, Danticat proposes that the cycle of

violence must be broken through acts of black feminist resistance. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* offers routes to healing through a manifestation of the Vodou goddess Erzulie-Freida, which serves as a crucial part of its empowering feminist vision. Although the novel ends tragically, it is principally a hopeful text that speaks to the experience of rural black women in Haiti and ultimately positions survival itself as a radical form of resistance. Danticat depicts an empowering return to locality and portrays intergenerational feminist resistance through spirituality. In part two of chapter one I explored the ways in which Danticat's black women protagonists in two of *Krik? Krak!*'s short stories form intergenerational collective solidarity at two different moments: 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven', set shortly after the Parsley Massacre and the US occupation of Haiti, and 'Caroline's Wedding', which explores cultural identity in the diaspora in New York during the 1990s. 'Nineteen Thirty-Seven', in a similar fashion to *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, uses Vodou to memorialise the legacy of Défilé, a character based on a Haitian folklore figure who, in the story, survives the massacre to give birth to her daughter. This story's imaginary is also optimistic, but at the same time, instils a productive sense of retribution through the image of the soucouyant spirit in flight and an altered, more vengeful manifestation of the Vodou *loa* Erzulie-Dantor. 'Caroline's Wedding' brings to light concerns relevant to a contemporary globalised world in which migration is constant, by considering some of the ways a small family of Haitian women might maintain a sense of cultural identity whilst living in the diaspora. This story explores the tensions between Haiti and US through the microcosm of the family and offers black feminist embodied practices of healing as a resolution for cultural dissonance. Danticat, more so than the other authors considered in this thesis, locates black feminist resistance within a strong connection to a cultural homeland: Haiti. Her literary responses to trauma involve practices of healing that are embodied and strongly connected to Haitian cultural practices, traditions and religion.

In the first part of chapter two I turned to focus on the nuances of class and wealth privilege portrayed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, a novel concerned with diaspora during the 2000s. In contrast to Danticat's rural working-class black women characters, Adichie's characters are predominantly middle-class Nigerian women. I argued that Adichie's novel creates Afropolitan spaces in which differences between black women (namely, class and economic) are focalised, become sites of tension, and might — tentatively — be overcome. I read the protagonist Ifemelu's return to Nigeria,

however, as evidence of the narrative becoming swept up in upper-middle-class wealth privilege, ultimately complicit in the neoliberal myth that economic progress is the only valid route to happiness. In my view, *Americanah* fails to reach a black feminist position that is distinctly *radical*. Although there are opportunities for black feminist solidarity to be sustained within its narrative, Adichie ultimately sacrifices a more radical black feminist political standpoint to write an ending that befits a romance genre novel but is unable to reconcile the complex questions concerning class and race it has unearthed. In part two I focused on two short stories from *The Thing Around Your Neck*, ‘Imitation’ and ‘A Private Experience’, to consider the ways in which Adichie engages with differences between black women. ‘Imitation’ exposes the inner workings of patriarchy and the precarious position of an upper middle-class Nigerian woman. ‘A Private Experience’ brings together two Nigerian women of different regions, religions and social class who are taking cover from a religious riot, to explore how unexpected moments of contact might temporarily dissolve tensions, creating a form of black feminist solidarity that is mobilised by difference. Although it is set in a temporary and precarious space (an abandoned shop), ‘Imitation’ is the story that most successfully suggests how class, religion and culture might be overcome through tentative moments of affinity which contribute to a black feminist imaginary of solidarity. Overall, my consideration of Adichie’s short stories asserted that her use of this literary form is particularly well-equipped to shed insight on how we might reach a transnational black feminism. Unlike *Americanah*, Adichie’s short stories depict constellations of fragile rapport that always place their emphasis on the impossibility of challenging structures of power under neoliberalism. Whereas Danticat’s short stories countered ‘ruptured’ histories to portray a collective black feminism rooted in Haitian history and cultural identity, Adichie works within and beyond the global flows of migration to bring different people into contact with one another. Chapter two reached the conclusion that in order for black feminist solidarity to remain an empowering political force, solidarity must be built across class and wealth disparities. Adichie’s fiction takes us on a journey that explores the difficult work that finding mutual affinities involves, as her characters often fail to overcome the boundaries that divide them so they may reach and sustain black feminist solidarity. My reading of Adichie’s fiction concluded that these texts contribute to forging a literary black feminist politics of solidarity that is by no means concrete, but contingent, messy and unstable.

In chapter three I continued this exploration of the nuances of class and black feminist solidarity in my discussion of Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*. Selasi's novel emphasises more carefully than Adichie's the ways that class privilege becomes arbitrary and fleeting once it intersects with blackness. *Ghana* draws attention to the disparate and fractured sense of identity experienced by Afropolitans living across the African diaspora. In part one, I argued that the novel positions 'translocal' affinity as an antidote to the disparate, liminal sense of being 'between' places, allowing Selasi's characters to form a more coherent sense of belonging. Through the adversities faced by Kweku's character, I highlighted another important aspect of black feminism: the ways black men are also exploited under white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The novel's black feminist position, I asserted in part two, becomes clear within its ending during the family reunion. I paid close attention to the interactions that play out between Sadie, Taiwo and Fola, to suggest that, for Selasi, black feminist empathy (rather than biological familial ties) is crucial for creating a coherent sense of identity. The black feminist empathy outlined by the novel is an embodied one that erodes the space between the 'self' and the 'other' through affect: it involves listening and understanding, and may be enacted through touch. Notably, *Ghana Must Go* elucidates and builds upon a black feminist politic pertaining to middle-class black women. Selasi offers few solutions to the question of how solidarities might be built between women of different social classes that are bound by the economic power they wield. The novel's conclusion, like *Americanah*'s, remains in domestic space and is focused on the fate of the Sai family. Nonetheless, to my mind, *Ghana* is more successful than *Americanah* in exposing how class and blackness operate together. Whilst Selasi offers no more definitive answers than does Adichie, she is deft at narrating emotional and intimate experiences that draw attention to the often obscured underbelly of middle-class privilege. I do not position this novel as a necessarily radical black feminist text, but I do believe it contributes to a deeper understanding of how class operates pertaining to black women characters. In highlighting the fragility of Afropolitan class privilege, Selasi contributes significantly to the broader conversation in this thesis about the importance of, as well as the challenges to, solidarity between different black women.

In chapter four I focused on the final instalment of Tsitsi Dangarembga's bildungsroman trilogy, *This Mournable Body*. The protagonist Tambu demonstrates the plight of a highly educated yet unemployed and disempowered black woman, alienated from her body and experiencing acute mental

health issues. In contrast to the depiction of many of the other characters explored in this thesis, Dangarembga's novel asks what happens to black women *not* granted the privilege of mobility. My discussion paid close attention to the structures of patriarchy and white settler colonialism in Zimbabwe that almost send Tambu irretrievably into a state of madness. Fascinatingly, as I argued in part one of this chapter, the other black women characters in the novel become her saviours. Cousin Nyasha offers an explicit black feminist praxis through the feminist workshop she runs in her home. Through the character of Mai, a politics of black feminist refusal can be located; one that can be understood, I argued, as a refusal to be complicit in the logic of neoliberal capitalist expansion and labour exploitation. In part two I highlighted the way that *This Mournable Body* most acutely and directly deals with the crises of capitalist expansion that neoliberal capitalism has wrought. I argued that the context of Zimbabwe brings into sharp focus how intricately woven whiteness is with capitalism. At the novel's end, Tambu's realisation that success does not lie within individualistic wealth attainment but within one's sense of community forms a crucial part of the novel's black feminist message. This text may appear to be the most despairing I consider in this thesis as Dangarembga offers only a small amount of solace for the protagonist in the closing pages. Yet, the tentative glimpses of black feminist resistance through peripheral characters are radical and empowering. They function as the author's call to champion the redemptive and revolutionary power of radical black feminist politics.

Chapter five's engagement with Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here* brought sexuality and queerness into the thesis's wider conversation. Its protagonists Elizete and Verlia make use of their marginal, liminal positionality as black queer women to attempt to reimagine an alternative world free from the constraints of patriarchy and capitalism. In part one, I asserted that this novel enacts an aesthetic and politic of black feminist fugitivity. The Grenada Revolution is a counterpoint from which the novel builds its black feminist politic, memorialising the radical potential of this era in which black activism was taking place transnationally and globally. The text attempts to reach a world in which radical blackness becomes legible, leaving the tangible alternative space it gestures towards ambiguous to the reader. In part two I explored the single work of poetry I have selected, *Ossuaries*. Brand's long poem approaches a horizon of literary possibility that the prose texts I have discussed do not. Through strange and sonic language, poetic techniques and experimental form, the text builds an

abstract picture of what radical black feminism could look like. *Ossuaries* is also the most experimental text I discuss in terms of its unfamiliar language and form, which I argue allows us to truly reimagine a strange new world in which blackness is untethered from the structures that usually constraint it. Brand's long poem positions blackness as a different kind of materiality. The sheer difficulty of the text, however, threatens to disrupt the connection between theory and practice which, as I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, is integral to *sustaining* a radical black feminist praxis applicable to black women in the material world. If we are to seriously consider the radical possibilities of black feminism through the creative and exploratory lens of literature, then our discoveries are, I contend, most useful when they remain within a parameter that reimagines an alternative way of being, yet can still be legible in our material world. Consequently, I regard Brand's earlier text, *In Another Place, Not Here*, as more usefully balancing black feminist activism in the material world with an aesthetic rendition of and literary response to black feminism.

My study has shown that the most successful texts that advocate a significantly radical black feminist position may raise more questions than answers. All of the authors I critique reveal the intricacies and nuances involved in creating and sustaining transnational black feminism. Notably, all of the texts in this study were published amidst recessions and the realisation of the crisis of late capitalism. My readings of Adichie's, Brand's, Dangarembga's, Danticat's and Selasi's fiction make the case that the crucial imaginings of black feminist solidarity in literary texts enact a powerful and transformational resistance to the structural oppression wrought under neoliberal capitalism. Black feminist solidarity appears as the antithesis to the neoliberal individualism which perpetuates the myth that, because we live in a supposed meritocracy, accumulating capital is the solution to the economic, racial and gender inequality that capitalism creates. The forms of black feminism that the literature I have explored fosters are, crucially, *transnational* in their reach. My reading of these authors has led me to conclude that local particularities cannot be forgotten in lieu of global systems because locality plays a foundational role in forming transnational connections across borders. My pursuit of the literary iteration of black feminist solidarity has discovered how black women writers endeavour to propose other ontologies, alternative modes of embodied being, in order to imagine the thriving of black women beyond the oppressive structures of capitalism and patriarchy. Yet such thriving is not easy to achieve:

my study has also dwelt upon the ways in which black women characters in some of the texts are complicit in the oppression of, and even carry out violence towards, themselves and other black women. This matter is further complicated by the economic gains and class ascension that some black women increasingly experience under neoliberalism.

My research has also empowered me to contribute to some ongoing conceptual discussions in black feminist cultural enquiry. *Vis-à-vis* the fiction of Adichie and Selasi, I have stressed the need for Afropolitan feminism, an emerging ideology, to remain critical of the class bias it may dangerously perpetuate if it solely focuses on upwardly mobile black women. I suggest that the imaginative space literature creates equips Afropolitan feminism with the nuance it needs to deal with class tension. Tina Campt's theory of black feminist refusal, which I expanded upon in chapter four, aptly encapsulates the rejection of patriarchy, racism and capitalism I find across all of the authors discussed in this thesis. I assert that black feminist fugitivity, coined by Akwugo Emejulu and Saidiya Hartman, finds prescience in Dionne Brand's novel because of fiction's exceptional ability to imagine alternative ways of being within and beyond our material world. Refusal and fugitivity, to my knowledge, have not yet been used in literary theory. Importantly, my use of these concepts in a literary-critical context does not break away from black feminism's radical origins, as they form part of the long genealogy of black feminist theory.

In light of my research, I advocate that black feminist literary criticism, as a field, should not only lessen its focus on the US in order to discover fresh connections across the African diaspora, but continue to break free from a primarily nation-centred focus whilst still recognising the agency black women find in locality. In concert with the heterogenous standpoints taken by these texts, my position is that black feminist literary criticism must continue to articulate a position attuned to the transnational and syncretic qualities of the African diaspora in order to aptly understand the work of a generation of widely read black women authors located across the world. In order to maintain black feminist literary criticism's radical agenda, we should remain wary of the way neoliberalism seeks to subsume and co-opt such ideologies. We have a duty to reclaim radicalism and bring this idea back to its original meaning: overturning the current system to reimagine alternatives to exploitative neoliberal capitalism. Drawing upon Karen Salt's multiplicitous conceptualisation of blackness (which is informed by the

work of Achille Mbembe, Toni Morrison, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, and Mimi Sheller, to name but a few), I have positioned blackness in this thesis similarly to Salt, as a ‘mobilising idea’, a ‘social movement’, a ‘political demand’ and a ‘creative impulse’¹³⁰ which galvanises all of the writers I consider. Through their narratives, they contribute to a syncretic and transnational black feminism that functions across different time periods and cultures, applicable to *different* black women globally.

We find ourselves in urgent times in which the political resistance that can be found in black feminism is needed more than ever. The consequences of the current late stage of neoliberal capitalism has far-reaching global effects. In the UK context — the one I know most intimately — the devastating effects capitalism has on racialised people in the economically poorest sectors of society is playing out in real time. I began this research in September 2016. In the years prior, austerity wreaked havoc on the lives of the working-class, which of course includes many migrants and people of colour.¹³¹ Britain voted to leave the European Union some months prior to the beginning of this research, which empowered anti-immigration rhetoric and racism nationwide. During the time it has taken to write this thesis there have been three Conservative British Prime Ministers. Prime Minister Theresa May’s ‘hostile environment’ immigration policy led to the 2018 Windrush Scandal,¹³² and the Grenfell Tower disaster in June 2017 epitomised the government’s neglect of poor, predominantly racialised migrant communities. The necessity of the work I have pursued has emerged in the wake of state-legitimised xenophobia and far-right nationalism. Emerging scholars, some of whom are part of the network I have built pursuing this thesis, are soon to publish pertinent work about black feminist organising and solidarity. Jade Bentil’s *Rebel Citizen: A History of Black Women Living, Loving and Resisting* (forthcoming 2021), Lola Olufemi’s *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (2020), Minna Salami’s *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone* (2020) and Francesca Sobande’s *The*

¹³⁰ Karen Salt, *Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), p.21.

¹³¹ From 2010–2015 there was an £18 billion reduction in welfare spending, affecting social housing and disability, childcare and pension support. See Leah Bassel and Akwugo Emejulu, *Minority Women and Austerity: Survival and Resistance in France and Britain* (Policy Press: Bristol, 2017), p.11–12.

¹³² For a rigorous account of the political and racial implications of the Windrush Scandal, see Amelia Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019).

Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain (forthcoming 2020)¹³³ evidence the rising number of black feminists in Britain doing work to return feminism to its political origins. As a discipline, literary studies may be more limited in its ability to *materially* change the conditions of our society. Nevertheless, at a time where black women writers are exceptionally active and receive much mainstream recognition, it is vital that we take seriously the role literature written by black women can play in maintaining a sense of hope and imagining future change. The writers I have explored in this thesis create a necessary respite away from polarised and sensationalist responses to the world because they hold up a mirror to our political, social and cultural realities and encourage us to reflect on their meaning carefully and slowly. The potential of literature to imagine new worlds is limitless. Whilst the novels, short stories and poetry I have explored here do not offer prescriptive answers, definitive solutions, or concrete alternatives to the oppressive regime of neoliberal capitalism, they do — in contradictory, exploratory, nuanced, experimental, and daring ways — portray imaginaries in which black women actively resist its grip. Adichie, Brand, Dangarembga, Danticat, and Selasi are writers who continue, in distinct yet confluent ways, to transformatively contribute to the long history of black women's resistance.

¹³³ Emerging scholarship like Sobande's recognises that the digital sphere facilitates possible transnational connections and solidarities, specifically for black women who can find agency by constructing their own narratives online based on their real-world experiences. Currently, much literary production across the African diaspora is happening online. Black women writers can overcome issues connected to elitism within established publishers, access, and distribution by publishing their work online in the form of blogs and social media apps (like Nayyirah Waheed), or using crowd-funding initiatives to publish (for example, Monique Roffey's 2020 novel *The Mermaid of Black Conch*).

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