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“Man-Woman Business”: Empowerment and Liberation in Elizabeth Nunez’s *Bruised Hibiscus*

Claire Farley

Ryerson University, mcr.farley@gmail.com

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When he wrote of Laventille that it was tempered in violence, the poet raised specters of the horrors of the middle passage and the cruelty of slavery, but he was mindful, too, that violence, like love, feeds on itself and breeds a progeny often worse, or like its opposite, more perfect than itself. (Nunez 211)

In *Bruised Hibiscus*, Elizabeth Nunez traces a history of colonialism and violence in Trinidad's Port of Spain that has left the community "tempered in violence." She invokes Derek Walcott's "Laventille" both as epigraph and in the novel itself, calling Walcott "the poet." Walcott's poem deals with cultural loss, "customs and gods that are not born again." To be severed from the past is a form of "bondage" in which Laventille, the underprivileged community overlooking Port of Spain, is "still bound." In her article "Reading Violence and Postcolonial Decolonization through Fanon: The Case of Jamaica," Maziki Thame explores the ways in which the logic of a colonial system persists in postcolonial societies by perpetuating a culture of retribution that binds individuals in a cycle of violence, a bondage which she believes negates rather than affirms individual and communal humanity. Thame is concerned that, in a culture of retribution, "while empowerment can occur, liberation does not necessarily follow. While violence against the oppressor is important to self-recognition, it is not the same as liberation. While humanity is recognized, liberation requires questioning how humanity can be affirmed" (88). In her novel, Elizabeth Nunez demonstrates this distinction. The restoration of agency and empowerment that remove cultural alienation and promote self-recognition are the foundation of a physical and psychological decolonization, but for a community to heal and to be liberated from the legacy of colonialism, these acts of agency must not occur at the expense of another. It is this tension between liberation and empowerment that Nunez' novel explores within the context of man-woman business—a "business" that has both racialized and gendered implications.

In *Bruised Hibiscus*, the dynamics of power and control are painfully revealed in "man-woman business" (10), the relationships between men and women. Though race and class are central to Nunez's novel, she approaches them through the lens of what Faith Smith calls "the language of sex." Smith argues that political and cultural discussions of Caribbean identity have been "*languaged by sex*" (1, emphasis author's own). Notions of gender and sexuality "are deeply inflected by colonial and imperial inheritances that have framed nationalism's discourses and silences and continue to inform, more or less, the structure of feeling of the region's people" (Smith 2). The connection between sexuality and national discourse is framed in relation to creolization in that "racial combination becomes a way to assign or refute inferiority and to prop up racial and masculine honor. Sex—or at least heterosexual, reproductive sex—proves something about the success or failure of political rule" (Smith 4). Gender, sexuality, and national

creolization discourse in relation to matrifocality presents a possible counter-discourse to masculine empowerment through violent self-assertion and representations of motherhood in Nunez's novel.

Both Thame and Smith approach identity and gender as constructions that necessarily negotiate the legacy of colonialism, a position that is consistent with Patricia Mohammed's argument that,

the psychological scars of emasculation or defeminization caused by such uprooting are not skin deep and have residual effects on gender relations and gender struggles within a society far beyond the periods of disruption... Female gender identities are not constructed in isolation from other components of identity such as race, class, nation and from masculinity. How identities are being affirmed or even constructed are based on real struggles which people and groups are engaged in. ("Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing" 8-9)

Just as sexuality serves as a "language" through which the complex intersection of race, class and politics is articulated, gender cannot be constructed from outside these categories. In this way, individuals embody history and history is itself embodied. In *Bruised Hibiscus*, there is an insistence on the way one's personal and communal history constructs identity and influences action. In the novel, the varying and connected issues of gender, sexuality, race, and class assemble around a fixation on vengeance manifest in acts of sexual violence. Nunez speaks in the language of sex and of the effects of colonialism on gendered identity construction in order to investigate the potential for the complete liberation that Thame invokes.

The construction of masculinity in the Caribbean is central to this discussion and is the starting point for an exploration of Thame's definition of liberation. Thame points out that,

the victory of patriarchy in the postcolonial Caribbean was not unexpected, since the nationalist leadership accepted patriarchal notions of nationhood and masculinity and colonialism's racist and class based underpinnings... a particular type of hegemonic masculinity associated with conquest, control and the consolidation of power. (77)

The region's history of colonialism has directly influenced the construction of masculine identity in particular and notions empowerment in general. As Thame explains, the "process of acquiring power, establishing recognition, visibility, humanity, is deeply problematic. It relies on a masculinist understanding of empowerment—the imposition upon another as the basis for establishing one's

humanity" (88). In Nunez's novel, the description of the men in the Chinaman's shop illustrates this mindset, "these were men prematurely forged into cynics by deprivation and failure... men who, having nowhere to go, sought to build colonies of their own kind if only through the debasement of others" (Nunez 7). Masculine empowerment in the Caribbean defines subjectivity and agency in terms of subjugation; however, this negative empowerment is understood as a direct result of the persistent influence of the colonial mindset of domination.

Ideas of empowerment in the region have also been influenced by Frantz Fanon's theory of decolonization. Fanon argues that the legacy of colonialism is psychological and emotional as well as institutional and that the colonized "can only triumph if we use all means to turn the scale, including, of course, that of violence" (Fanon 36). Violence is necessary in the process of decolonization not only because structures and institutions of imperialism must be physically dismantled, but also because the damaged psyche of the colonized can only be healed through acts of agency. In this sense, "psychological and physical liberation are inextricably linked" (Thame 83) and violence is a means to both ends. However, while for Fanon violence is the requisite adversary of violence, little attention is paid to the ongoing ways in which violence also perpetuates violence. In Fanon's dialectic, in which the subject and object of violence are inverted, it is difficult to imagine a synthesis that would not also include violence.

Though Thame recognizes that decolonization does require violence in order to dismantle imperial structures, she is concerned that the climate of violence in Caribbean societies is not always focused on the praxis of decolonization. For Fanon, this is less concerning as he argues that even violence not directly aimed at the institutional deconstruction of colonial or neocolonial power structures is still considered "empowering in its capacity to establish personhood" (84). This model of empowerment is, however, concerning for Thame and she questions, "What kind of human does the being who imposes violence on another as a route to recognition become? Can they truly be liberated through this process?" (87). Simply put, Thame's primary concern is that Fanon's empowerment "uses the language of colonialism, violence, to remove the colonizer" (88) and thus perpetuates the very problems it seeks to resolve by confirming violence in a cycle of culturally coded interaction.

Significantly, Thame also considers "whether violent struggle, even if just, is also patriarchal" (88) and questions how "a patriarchal model of liberation [can] exist" (88). Patricia Mohammed shares Thame's anxiety and also addresses the way that processes of decolonization have transferred the dynamic of the colonizer's power over the colonized to relationships between men and women: "The question of why, out of this legacy, blame has been conferred on to black women, and women in general, for a persistent emasculation of the male, needs to be investigated thoroughly" (25). What Mohammed suggests is that, perhaps inadvertently, the climate of violence that Fanon deems necessary for decolonization creates the potential for violence against women; in both the

colonial and postcolonial environments, the female body remains a site on which to act out and claim male agency. Nunez explores this tendency in her novel.

Thame concludes her discussion with the assertion that “what is required is a new focus on the meaning of liberation, which seeks to deconstruct a decolonization steeped in men’s desire for power” (89). The goal of this new liberation maintains Fanon’s focus on psychological as well as the material self-determination but also focuses on liberation from the cycle of vengeance perpetuated by the colonial mindset and the establishment of new bonds between individuals and communities. As with Fanon’s model, “it requires the nation to say yes to humanity, yes to justice, yes to freedom, no to oppression, no to exploitation and no to alienation” (89) but it also requires that the nation and the individual say no to violence and to revenge. While self-recognition and empowerment may be attained through control over one’s own life, a more complete liberation also involves relinquishing control over the lives of others. The characters in *Bruised Hibiscus* who are able to move forward with their lives—Zuela, Mary Christophe and Tong Lee—do so through their commitment to acknowledging and witnessing their anger as an appropriate response to the abuse they have undergone while letting go of the need for retribution as a recourse to self-worth. Rosa, Cedric, and the Chinaman are unable to recognize their complicity in the cycle of violent retribution, an incapacity that binds them to this cycle of vengeance and ends in literal or metaphorical death.

Bruised Hibiscus opens with the discovery of a white woman’s body washed ashore on a beach near Port of Spain. The following day an article appears in *The Trinidad Guardian* in which a reporter, who is not a member of the Port of Spain community, “gratuitously expresse[s] his moral indignation”:

Once again, a poor, unfortunate East Indian woman has been a victim of the wave of senseless violence that is growing wild all over Trinidad. Can a woman, even a poor woman peasant, be safe anywhere? Isn’t it time that the little men learn that they can’t take out their frustrations on their women? Violence is not the answer.
(Nunez 24)

The reporter, who believes the “white woman” is in fact an “East Indian woman” and mumbles “the masses are asses,” offers a simplified reading of the event in which the violence is “senseless” and “not the answer” (Nunez 24). This reading, which ignores the complex layers of meaning such an event carries while also communicating the assumption that violence is limited to the lower class—and presumably coloured—population of Trinidad, stands in direct opposition to the historically located perspective on gender and violence that Nunez develops.

The historical location of the events in *Bruised Hibiscus* is itself revealing. Though set in 1954, at the eve of independence, Nunez clarifies in the Author’s Note that “the events in Laventille described in this novel are loosely connected to

the Black Power revolution in Trinidad, which pitted the working class against the middle-and-upper-classes, and, inevitably, Trinidad's black population against its brown and white people" (287). The gender ideology described in Victoria Pasley's article "The Black Power Movement in Trinidad," parallels Fanon's rhetoric of masculine empowerment. Pasley quotes a 1971 pamphlet printed by the Joint National Action Committee, a committee at the forefront of the Black Power demonstrations: workers were "no longer concerned about wage increases. THEIR STRUGGLE IS BASICALLY ONE FOR THEIR MANHOOD – A struggle for the recognition of their humanity, a struggle to assert their pride, to realize justice for Black People" (26). Pasley's reading of the movement's goals is also in line with Thame's suggestion that patriarchal empowerment is in fact anathema to liberation from the colonial mindset: "The movement derived its concept of manhood directly from the model of hegemonic masculinity of the ruling class, the same elite whom advocates of Black Power challenged, yet they never seriously questioned the structure of masculinity, nor the oppression of women" (26). However, Pasley also argues that the cultural changes inspired by Black Power and women's active role in the demonstrations—though "scholars and observers generally have failed to document their participation"—led to "the beginnings of a feminist discourse" in the region (24). The drafting of the *Sexual Offences Bill* by Trinidad and Tobago's Law Reform Commission in the late-1970s provides a concrete example of the focus on issues of sexuality and gender as a result of the movement. M. Jacqui Alexander calls the bill, "the first time that the coercive arm of the postcolonial state had confronted the legacy of its colonial trauma specifically in the regulation of sexuality" (qtd. in Tambiah 145). The connection that Nunez draws in her novel between the period that directly precedes independence and the further awakening of national and cultural independence in the Black Power movement, illustrate the ongoing convergence of national and political discourses with issues of gender and sexuality.

However, as Prudence Layne observes in her analysis of the novel, Nunez is "careful not to issue a blanket indictment against men or the failure of male/female relationships" (77). Speaking directly to the Trinidadian context and the role of women in Eric Williams People's National Movement, which gained influence in the same period as the novel is set and remained a political force in Trinidad beyond the period of Black Power, Patricia Mohammed speculates that "while leaders and politicians have no doubt been aware of women's importance or crucial roles in various platforms, the consciousness of the time did not lead women themselves to demand equal treatment or recognition as the unspoken ideology of patriarchy affected both men and women" (29). A description of gender relations in Laventille following the murders of Paula Inge and Melda exemplifies the complexity of a system under which women suffer abuse and simultaneously show unwillingness to begrudge "their men" this avenue to empowerment.

Five women were brutally beaten in that town of tears where deprivation forged loyalty and poverty soldered love. They were made to pay for Melda's insult... The women cursed Melda, blinded by a code of loyalty that would not let them strike out against their men—the endangered species. The men blackened eyes and made bruises that blossomed into flowers over the bodies of their women, crazed by their powerlessness, the unfairness of the advantage money allowed. They would not bear the humiliation alone; their women would bear it, also. (Nunez 96)

Without access to power through normative structures, the aggressive masculinity that responds to this powerlessness turns inward to its own community. The characters' actions in Nunez's novel take place on a limited scale in which "community" may function in reference to the larger community of Port of Spain and Laventille, or the family unit and domestic relationships. These are the limited spaces in which individuals may assert agency, the spaces in which societal frustrations are concretely languaged in sex. In particular, this sense of powerlessness and aggression in face of a system beyond an individual's capacity to dismantle is channeled through the sexual and physical abuse of women.

Cedric offers the clearest example of self-empowerment at the expense of liberation as his abuse of Rosa is directly tied to their families' shared history in the colonial system. Cedric believes that, as a white woman, Rosa has access to a source of power that he both desires and resents, "She was the poison eating him alive, the poison he had freely swallowed because of his hatred for her people and also his insatiable need for their approval" (Nunez 175). Further, Thomas Appleton's sexual abuse of Cedric's father is what drives Cedric's need for retribution and designates Rosa Appleton as the direct object of his revenge, and "when he struck out at Rosa he believed that he was doing so to avenge his father's death—the part that Thomas Appleton played in taking his father to such desperation" (Nunez 175). For Cedric, education does not instill self-worth or approval from Port of Spain's white community. Though he marries Rosa, he is still aware that even she desires not him but his "awe." Cedric wants to break Rosa and "her people" of their unmerited power symbolized by "Just your white skin. That's all you need. Your white skin" (Nunez 55). Cedric's measures his sense of self-worth, the degree to which he feels empowered, in direct relation to Rosa's lack thereof.

Cedric and Rosa's relationship demonstrates a type of equalizing violence: "If the colonized cannot make a colonized or colored life as good as that of a colonizer or white one, they can at least make a white one no more valuable than a colonized or colored one; they can, that is, bring the white down to humanity" (Gordon qtd. in Thame 87). Though Mary Christophe tells Rosa that Cedric "knows it hurt you more when you take your blows on the inside" (Nunez 235), the absolute power of one individual over another is here symbolized by control

over the body. He claims ownership over Rosa saying, "*it's mine*" (30, my emphasis) in reference to her body, which he considers metonymy for her entire power and being. Sex is then the means through which the power Rosa holds as a white woman is drained and reparations are paid for the past: "he would fuck her... until there was no more echo left in his head, until the promise Thomas Appleton had collected from his father had been returned in kind. Yes, he would use her" (Nunez 173). Cedric claims ownership over his own body when Clara Appleton insists that Cedric has cancer, he declares, "*it's my body*. I know what's in *my body*" (Nunez 199). But he is unable to feel empowered without reversing the dynamic his father suffered by making Rosa powerless. It is clear that Cedric's desire for retribution is the reason he is "dead inside" (Nunez 284); the narrative shows that "his very life depended on his willingness to lay down his vengeance now, to remember the timeless lesson of his youth: Hate can be its own destroyer... But Cedric was obsessed with vengeance" (Nunez 264). Cedric has linked a sense of restitution for the past directly to Rosa's body and her self-worth at the expense of his own health and liberation. Zuela's final recollection of Cedric as a young boy memorizing his book "by heart," as he also does in his jail cell, is a reminder that even before he was physically imprisoned he was not free; he was bound by his participation in a legacy of vengeance, for which his cell is only a physical permutation.

Like Cedric, the Chinaman is the colonized turned colonizer. Though China was never officially a colony, the Chinaman may be read as a victim of British imperialism. He tells Zuela, "I smoke brown ball so Englishman can drink tea" (Nunez 82). As Prudence Layne describes, "not only do Cedric's and Chinaman's reactions and behaviors demonstrate the toll of history on their personal lives, but more importantly, they show how male desire is a symptom of loss that structures individual choices" (109-110). In this sense, though the Chinaman is a victim of the corrupting greed of imperialism, he is also complicit in this system. The Chinaman's relationship with Zuela is consistently described in colonial metaphors: "When he'd gone into the rainforest in Venezuela looking for alpagats to sell in his store, the Chinaman found Zuela, too, and had taken her for himself" (Nunez 9). He "bargained for her life" (35); he names her "my little Venezuela" (82), directly relating her person to a land to be exploited for resource; "She *belonged* to the Chinaman" (65). Tong Lee also explicitly aligns with the exploitative economic powers associated with British imperialism when he assigns blame to the Chinaman for the destruction of their village, claiming, "If it had not been for you, for your father and your greed, all of us would have lived. The whole village" (Nunez 231). Still, Tong Lee also recognizes that Ho Sang is able to seek redemption and unchain himself from his guilt through recognition of his complicity in the system that has victimized him because "the blood will never leave you, Ho Sang, until you ask for forgiveness" (Nunez 231). Of course, the wife and child from whom he must seek forgiveness cannot grant pardon as they died many years before, the victims of a brutal murder. Instead, the Chinaman has

tried to forget his past through Zuela by “resurrecting” in her a conflation of his dead wife and daughter. Zuela’s body is used by the Chinaman not as a type of vengeance (as Cedric uses Rosa), but rather as means to forgetfulness alongside opium and ganja. At the same time, however, Zuela also offers the Chinaman an opportunity to seek the type of forgiveness that Tong Lee suggest would liberate him—forgiveness must also come through Zuela. Though he is unable or unwilling to step outside his guilt and victimization, the Chinaman, like Cedric, is a multi-dimensional character who is not villainous as a result of his manhood or race, but because of his inability to recognize his own complicity in, and therefore ability to choose to move beyond, a cycle of oppression and violence.

That Rosa is abused and victimized by Cedric is clear; and yet, her position in the novel and the degree to which she transcends the colonial mindset remains ambiguous. This is partially because of Rosa’s status as a white woman in Caribbean society. In “The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction,” Nunez discusses the equivocal position of white women like Rosa, “In the English-speaking Caribbean these women must bear the guilt of the horrors of slavery inflicted by their own white ancestors upon the people whose country they now call their own” (282). This extremely complex and troublesome negotiation between culpability and belonging is what Rosa faces in self-acceptance. While Rosa’s characterization is often sympathetic, her dismissal of any guilt in association with the actions of her family contributes to her death, her complete removal from society. She tells Cedric, “my blood is as black as yours” (Nunez 225). From her liminal position “Rosa thinks that her white skin will permit her to choose her racial designation, but she does not grasp that being able to choose is itself a form of privilege, one that is denied to Mary Christophe and Zuela,” and to Cedric (Sparrow qtd. in Layne 229). Mary Christophe explains this to Rosa, “they see you all as one—one enemy. Is too late then to explain you different” (Nunez 104). For all of Nunez’s characters, including Rosa, “the burden of history is etched on the psyche and on the skin” (Layne 274). Rosa may feel that blame has been conferred on her unfairly but this does not exempt her from asking forgiveness and recognizing her place in the regional history that has been “etched on her skin.”

Rosa’s position is also ambiguous because the power she believes she exerts over Cedric is more difficult to define. As Mohammed suggests, “power in gender relations is not easy to grasp except when it is physically demonstrated in the case of domestic violence or sexual abuse” (xv), though the psychological domination that Rosa craves is also a legacy of the colonial mindset. The significance of what she and Zuela witnessed from the behind the hibiscus bush is that it served as catalyst for her sense of power over her husband:

When she said yes to Cedric after he asked her to marry him, she thought she was giving him what she was certain he craved, what the man behind the hibiscus craved, though she did not remember

him then, only the feelings: awe for the power the girl held over him, and pity for the man made savage by his hunger for her... No, Cedric had not dreamed that a woman like her would say *Yes*, in spite of the Greek and Latin he read. (Nunez 45)

Though the power she desires is not manifest in physical dominance, it is a power exercised at the expense of another's self-worth.

The knowledge that it takes to move beyond this cycle is articulated in Rosa's aunt's worldview:

In the towns they destroy you... you begin to think in categories—you, them, the land. You separate yourself from them and the land. You think whenever you want, however you want, you can use them, you can use the land. But here you learn there are no categories. We are all the same. You, me, they, the land, the cocoa, we are all one—the expression of the Spirit. (Nunez 207)

Her philosophy is an assertion of the attitude that the ownership of another is a form of self-bondage; by extension, to exact violence on another is to injure oneself. This philosophy comes with a degree of self-reflexivity and acceptance that appears antithetical to religion in the novel. Indeed, Rosa's relationship to Catholicism provides insight into her position in the novel. Like Rosa's aunt who "didn't believe in God" (Nunez 207), Mary Christophe expresses contempt for Rosa's desire to "leave blameless" (Nunez 106). Rosa's longing is "for the return of a past that was rapidly vanishing away" (Nunez 105), but Mary Christophe makes clear to her that "times now not like old time" (Nunez 100) and that "next time they do something if you don't change" (Nunez 104). Mary Christophe attributes Rosa's unwillingness to reflect on her role in perpetuating a system of domination to her reliance on absolution from a higher power: "You want control. You want things to be just so as you arrange them. And when they not so, you pray to God to arrange them back for you... I don't make my God follow my orders... Is not prayers alone help you, Rosa. Most times is you yourself have to change what you don't like" (Nunez 238). Although in the final chapter Mary Christophe declares that "in the end she free herself [so that his] blows on her inside couldn't hurt her no more" (285), it is perhaps more a reflection of Rosa's self-empowerment than the more complete liberation that Thame invokes in that she is more concerned with her own innocence than with a sense of healing for the community of which she is part. She remains bound in her commitment to the past.

The murders of the women in Port of Spain lead Rosa and Zuela to acknowledge the extent of their victimization. At this point of recognition, the "seed" that is described growing in both of these women is the mindset of retribution as the intuitive response to the abuse they suffer. The Chinaman

declares Paula Inge's murder the product of "man-woman business," causing "the germ lodged in Zuela's soul broke loose and sprouted roots" (Nunez 8). When Cedric claims that the same murder was a crime of passion, that Inge was caught "*in flagrante delicto*," Rosa's desire for vengeance against her oppressor is also ignited: "a seed had shifted in Rosa's breast. Broken through its encasement and sprouted roots" (Nunez 23). The difference between these women is how they manage this potential. Zuela refuses to place her anger and the fate of her children in divine hands, "the self-flagellating guilt she had learned on this Catholic island she had been brought to, retreated again. Not even Our Lady would deny her. With the crowd at Laventille, Zuela sang to her, feeling a new freedom in the righteousness of her anger" (Nunez 62). Here, we are reminded of the pacifying nature of Catholicism as a tool of psychological control in the colonial context and its role in reinforcing patriarchal authority. Like Mary Christophe, Zuela believes that "is normal to want what's bad to leave you and make it pay for hurting you" (Nunez 236), even if this desire subverts the patriarchal norms of the Catholic ethic. Instead of transferring hope to an afterlife, her children are "her salvation" and she refuses to implicate them in the cycle of retribution that she witnesses: "Her sons owed the Englishman nothing and she had paid the Chinaman for everything" (Nunez 83). Zuela confronts the past and wants to move forward, while Rosa looks to the past to ground her identity by neglecting the extent to which she is bound to the society and region that has raised her. In this sense, Rosa does not achieve the full liberation that Thame invokes because she denies and "forgets" the seed and how it came to be planted inside her.

Zuela's sense of futurity and community is expressed in her role as mother. The female characters in the novel are frequently positioned in terms of the maternal relationships that structure their identities. As a child, Zuela is called Daughter in a desperate attempt to stall her entry into adulthood, to hold her symbolically in a childhood that has been stolen from her. In the novel, the mother's mandate is defined in terms of protection. The death of Zuela's mother leaves Zuela without protection from an early age and Clara Appleton's protection of Rosa was always guided by self-interest. Even as Rosa is unable to ask her mother for help, she knows that a mother's role is to protect her child and that Clara has neglected this task:

she thought for a long time about mothers: about the mothers of Trinidadian white women like herself; about the mothers of poor black people like the maids who were mothers to her; about the mothers of poor people of any color like her friend Zuela; about the women who took the place of mothers for motherless children like Zuela; about the mother of God. *She* had stayed to the end trying to protect her son. (Nunez 133)

The role of the mother and the mother-daughter bond is understood here as a universalizing category of womanhood.

A feminine model of empowerment for the Caribbean has often been located in the role of motherhood. In her article, "Reconceptualizing Voice: The Role of Matrifocality in Shaping Theories and Caribbean Voices," Michelle Rowley shows that the invocation of motherhood and the maternal bond is a common trope in defining female identity construction in the Caribbean. Rowley argues that as a counter discourse to patriarchal empowerment, the field of gender studies in the Caribbean has adopted the concept of the "strong Caribbean matriarch" (22). Rowley is concerned with this because "the concept of matriarchy has come to represent a homogenous typeface of Caribbean womanhood, and in doing so silences the complex social, economic, ethnic and inter-and intra-group activities which comprise matrifocal representations" (22). This is also misleading because it conflates the "cultural and affective centrality" of women with "women's ability to act at the broader parameters of social, economic, political and ideological order," which may assign women a symbolic agency that can be confused with the concrete ability to act (Rowley 23).

As with masculine forms of empowerment, the empowerment available through concepts of motherhood and matrifocality must also be located historically and regionally within the legacy of colonialism:

matrifocality needs first to be understood as an interaction with a colonial slave ideology, characterized by the pursuit of capital and the perpetuation of patriarchy... The myth of matrifocality stems from the planters' emphasis on motherhood because of their need to perpetuate slavery through the female line and their vain wish to breed rather than buy new slaves by granting slave mothers relatively easier conditions. (Rowley 26)

It is also important to consider how matriarchal models may also have been embraced by planters as a convenient way of denying the result of sexual interactions with female slaves by relegating all responsibilities for the child to the mother. Broadly, Rowley argues that the "reading of matrifocality as 'female liberation' is a monolithic denial of class, gender and ethnic differentials that operate in subject formation" (27). The role of motherhood in the equalizing discourse of creolization may be scrutinized under the same lens. As Yasmin Tambiah notes, "anticolonial, nationalist movements have charged women with 'bearing' the nation, physically and symbolically. Central to this mandate are women's conformity to particular constructions of family and their compliance with prescriptions that reify female sexual containment through virginity, compulsory heterosexuality marriage and motherhood" (143). Though the Trinidadian women that Rowley interviews for her article often begin with a romanticized perception of mothering, "the conceptualization of pregnancy/womanhood was also closely associated with struggle, hardship and

sexual self-sacrifice” (Tambiah 34). Matrifocality may provide a form of female empowerment, but this empowerment must be located in the history of the colonial system from which it arises and must be investigated for ways in which it also serves to perpetuate a patriarchal and colonial mindset. In other words, matrifocality *in itself* is not a form of empowerment.

Motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship are central to the lived experience of womanhood and they are also symbolic. They are the means through which historical legacies of colonialism are passed down and also a potential paradigm through which to reclaim the healing power of a mutual and loving relationship. There is, then, a tension between the practical burden of womanhood and pregnancy, as well as the historically traumatic traces these states may carry, and the power and agency assigned to motherhood. Rosa blames her behaviour on her mother’s failure to love and protect her daughter: “if she had felt from Clara Appleton, even for a moment, the maternal affection she yearned for, she would not have craved the awe she sought from Cedric” (Nunez 206). Though Rosa may be right in situating her destructive desire as a direct result of her mother’s neglect, by displacing her own culpability as a white woman who has benefited from the colonial system entirely on to her mother, she shuts herself off from establishing meaningful relationships with those who do acknowledge the ways the region’s history has marked them. Further, because Clara Appleton does not accept the symbolism of this role, it cannot define her relationship to Rosa in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the potential for power can be located in the degree to which the woman self-conceptualizes her own role and her relationship to others. Self-conceptualization provides a feminine model of empowerment, which may serve to counter masculinist understandings of empowerment in a way that fruitfully accepts the power of the mother’s role and the mother-daughter relationship while acknowledging the problematic reliance on motherhood and patriarchy that Rowley discusses. According to Rowley, this form of empowerment can be expressed as “voicing” or the need for women to “speak for themselves, name their experiences and make their own connections” (25). In Rowley’s terms, “voicing as an act of naming and representation is also a distinctly political and agentive process” (25). A similar position is appealed to in bell hooks’s “Talking Back,” where, for the colonized woman, “true speaking... is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless. As such, it is a courageous act” (8). As with Fanon’s model of decolonization, the power of “voicing” is in the ability to claim a sense of agency that defines self-worth and to negotiate this agency in constructive material terms. However, rather than fostering a culture of violent retribution, it fosters a culture of communication and mutual respect.

Thus, the positive effects of motherhood and matrifocal relationships must be *claimed* as opposed to the physical state of being with child. Agency is ascribed in the ability to articulate these differences and claim these positions.

Rowley agrees with Mohammed that "the potential for indigenous Caribbean feminist theorizing is limitless. At the point at which women are able to speak for themselves, to name their experiences, positions of difference will be articulated" (39). Zuela, who is initially defined in her role as Daughter, derives all of her self-worth from her role of mother: "the thought that she would bear one more child kept her strong: if not her childhood, theirs; if not her happiness, her daughters' and her sons'" (Nunez 83). She claims this role as meaningful to her, her self-conception as mother is more important than the fact of her motherhood.

Though Zuela also mourns the loss of her mother's protection, she understands that it is up to women to form these bonds on their own. Zuela encourages Rosa to recognize her bond with Mary Christophe as a surrogate mother since as a child she was "like a mother to her" (Nunez 111). When Rosa is being raped in Laventille, "she said *Mother* again and again and he had to crash his fist into her temple to quiet her" (Nunez 277). She is not calling for Clara Appleton but for the symbolic mother figure that will protect her, the link she has been offered by Mary Christophe and has failed to claim openly, instead falsely locating this symbol in Our Lady. Zuela and Mary Christophe have both become positively empowered by choosing forgiveness over vengeance. As Mary Christophe says, "I get my satisfaction from loving other people and from learning to love myself" (Nunez 237). These women have chosen their relationship with each other as one that affirms the way they define their self-worth. They have named their experience and they have made their own connections. The meaning of being called Daughter changes as Zuela claims it as representative of her relationship with Mary Christophe when "Mary Christophe squeezed her hand, and claimed her. *Yes, Daughter*. Zuela sighed. She was a daughter again. She had found a mother" (Nunez 286). The mother-daughter relationship as claimed by Zuela and Mary Christophe is shown as an avenue to liberation because it not only affirms their own humanity but each other's. As Walcott's poem demonstrates, the "bondage" that is experienced by the individuals and communities marked by slavery is related to a shared history of violence and colonial enterprise, and the absence of a shared sense community outside this system. As a shared history is the foundation of a shared future, these chosen familial bonds work toward establishing a new lineage that recognizes but is no longer bound to the legacy of colonialism.

Nunez's novel is unique in its refusal to relegate this power of healing exclusively to the realm of women. The inclusion of Tong Lee's character is particularly hopeful in terms of rejecting any essentialising view of gender and gender relations in the Caribbean. Tong Lee espouses the same model of empowerment and liberation as do Zuela and Mary Christophe. His sense empowerment and healing are completely unequivocal, "he felt renewed, reborn. Human" (Nunez 253). His liberation is expressed through his relationship with Zuela. He refuses ownership over her, telling her "I want you the right way" (170) and encouraging her to choose "the name [she] wants to call [herself]" (253). His

position in the novel is especially significant because his insistence that he will “help” without anything in return is what brings about Zuela’s realization that it is impossible for her to “use him,” allowing her to step outside the cycle of ownership, oppression and use. That there is implication that Tong Lee and Zuela’s relationship will develop beyond the platonic signals possibility for a liberating relationship within the framework of “man-woman business” and affirms Tong Lee’s masculinity. Moreover, that Tong Lee openly accepts a healthy paternal role in Zuela’s family is significant in suggesting an integrated national narrative. The final image of a family unit of Black, Asian, and Indigenous members whose family ties are grounded in liberatory rather than merely emancipatory practices suggests an inspiring future for Caribbean society without glossing over their painful history.

Fanon writes that, “to break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communication will be set up between two zones. The destruction of the colonial world in no more and no less than the abolition of one zone” (41). However, movement towards a liberation that extends beyond self-recognition may necessitate communication between zones, whether these zones are defined as individuals or communities. I find Prudence Layne’s recommendation in line with my understanding of Nunez’s novel; Layne writes: “West Indians—black, white, indigenous, mixed, Asian—are all victims of history, but the power to overcome the burdens of history lies in a collective and individual affirmation that disregards the stranglehold of identity categories that have hampered the movement toward a more tolerant society” (118). The restoration of agency and empowerment that remove self-alienation are the foundation of a psychological decolonization, but for a community to heal and to be liberated from the legacy of colonialism, these acts of empowerment must affirm rather than deny a mutual recognition in a shared humanity and history.

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