

# Representations of Matrifocality in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Fiction

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# **Representations of Matrifocality in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Fiction**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the representation of African Caribbean matrifocality in the novels of five twenty-first century writers from the Caribbean: Jacob Ross' *Pynter Bender* (2008); Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009); Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* (2014); Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006); and Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003). Matrifocality, meaning mother-centric or mother-focused, has been of interest within the social sciences for almost a century, particularly within the Caribbean region, and continues to be a subject of interest within the discipline. My thesis offers an analysis of the representation of matrifocality in fiction, and a consideration of what fictional engagement with the phenomenon contributes to existing and emerging debates. By situating my literary analysis of my key texts alongside debates from sociology, anthropology and history, I advocate for a multi-disciplinary approach to Caribbean literature that positions fiction as an interesting site of analysis within wider cultural studies. This thesis argues that matrifocality is represented in my five key novels as an integral component of family and community life, and functions as a driving force for each text's storyline. I argue that each of the novels I analyse engages with existing debates about matrifocality in the Caribbean – such as tropes of missing or marginal men, the African influence on the phenomenon, and a rejection of patriarchy. Though each novel is highly unique, each positions matrifocality as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal and Eurocentric normativity, and as an important literary trope. I suggest that the novelists imagine and write matrifocality as a distinctively Caribbean phenomenon that has been influenced by the African traditions of the region's majority population, and each attempts to reject dated misconceptions of matrifocality as a fractured system, by positioning it as a family and community structure that encourages strength and autonomy among African Caribbean women.

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandmothers, Mrs Linda David and Mrs Marie Renaud.

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# Introduction

This thesis explores representations of matrifocality in five novels by Caribbean writers published in the twenty-first century. Andrea O'Reilly defines matrifocality as 'mother focused' and 'characteristic of a cultural cosmology that radically differs from the exaltation of the nuclear family as the most central building block of a society.' She also suggests that '[cultures] that allow for matrifocality tend to be much more communal in nature'.<sup>1</sup> The anthropological study of matrifocality, both in the Caribbean and globally, has evolved over time, and attitudes towards matrifocality have varied. More recent research into matrifocality has largely been dedicated to promoting positive attitudes towards the family structure, appreciating it as a unique element of particular communities, and understanding that women are culturally central in matrifocal families. Though there has been continuing research on matrifocality within the social sciences since the 1920s, there has yet to be a book length study on literary representations of Caribbean matrifocality, within both families and communities. My thesis extends the study of matrifocality by focussing on literary engagements with the phenomenon. By analysing the representation of matrifocality in five texts through an engagement with both literary and social science debates, I aim to set up new connections and create a dialogue between the fields of literature and social science that has the potential to benefit both. My study analyses five novels written by twenty-first century Caribbean writers: Jacob Ross' *Pynter Bender* (2008); Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009); Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* (2014); Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006); and Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003). Each book features a striking and distinctive representation of Caribbean matrifocality. Underpinning my research are three key aims. Firstly, I explore definitions of matrifocality, and consider how the anthropological and sociological study of matrifocality has evolved. I will also address how matrifocality is understood in a Caribbean context. Secondly, I address how matrifocality is represented in five novels written by Caribbean authors in the twenty-first century. Finally, I consider what literary representations of matrifocality contribute to debates about the phenomenon. Drawing on my analysis of these five texts, I argue that

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea O'Reilly [ed], *Encyclopaedia of Motherhood* (London: Sage, 2010), p. 736.

matrifocality is a family and community structure that is prevalent in the fiction of Caribbean writers, and I contend that twenty-first century writers represent matrifocality as a valid and positive structure that encourages connections between and autonomy for women. By considering fictional representations of matrifocality from writers with cultural connections to the Caribbean, I contend that fiction offers an alternative perspective to existing debates about the phenomenon, and is able to highlight the prevalence of family structure without problematizing it.

In the remainder of my introduction, I will offer a brief review of the study of matrifocality within the social sciences. I shall identify three distinct schools of thought regarding matrifocality, and trace the evolution of thought regarding the family structure. In the second section of my introduction, I will consider existing literary analysis of the representation of families within Caribbean literature. I will argue that, although twentieth-century writers have often imagined matrifocality in their work, most existing criticism about family dynamics has been focussed on the mother-daughter relationship. I will highlight some of the current scholarship on representations of Caribbean families in order to establish where and how my thesis seeks to make an intervention, and my own contribution to knowledge. The final section of this introduction shall include a breakdown of my thesis structure, the texts I will analyse, and what I seek to achieve in each chapter.

## **Defining Matrifocality**

Though Raymond T. Smith is responsible for coining the term 'matrifocal', there were a number of anthropologists who were already researching the African Caribbean family, and had noticed a prevalence of non-nuclear households within the region. Since the publication of Smith's 1966 study, *The Matrifocal Family: Pluralism and Politics*, research on matrifocality, both in the Caribbean and across a variety of different regions and cultures, has continued to evolve. There are, I propose, three distinct schools of thought that have been established, and for the purpose of my thesis, I will group these schools of thought: Eurocentric perspectives, which encompass the earliest research into the Caribbean family from the 1930s to the 1960s; feminist perspectives, with influential research being published between the

1970s and 1990s; and post-matrifocal perspectives, which includes research from the 1990s, and into the twenty-first century.

M. G. Smith's introduction to Edith Clarke's *My Mother who Fathered Me* (1957) offers a succinct overview of the study of the African Caribbean family in early twentieth-century Jamaica. The roots of the research into non-nuclear Caribbean households sheds a light on the general attitude of European anthropologists who conducted research in the region. Smith references the Mass Marriage Movement of 1938 as being particularly influential in sparking an interest in family life in the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> He explains that the low marriage rates amongst lower-class African Jamaicans attracted the attention of colonial administrators, and there was a general feeling of concern about the 'disorganisation of family life and on the apparent increase of "promiscuity" as against faithful concubinage, the "common law" or consensual cohabitation which had hitherto been accepted as the Negro peasant's equivalent of marriage, and the basis of his family life'.<sup>3</sup> Smith comments on the ultimate lack of success of the Mass Marriage Movement, and suggests that, at best, the movement highlighted the 'vital need for adequate knowledge of West Indian social conditions in advance of the "organised campaigns" mounted to remedy or reduce them'.<sup>4</sup> Smith agrees that the Jamaican family is disorganised and 'brittle', but recommends that administrators conduct more research before implementing campaigns to remedy the issue.<sup>5</sup>

T. S. Simey's book *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies* (1946) offers insight into how Eurocentric attitudes towards non-nuclear families in the Caribbean are expressed through the language used to categorise different household structures. Simey observes four distinct types of household in his research:

The Christian Family, based on marriage and a patriarchal order [...]  
Faithful Concubinage, again based on a patriarchal order, possessing no legal status [...]  
The Companionate Family, in which the members live together for pleasure and convenience [...]  
The Disintegrate Family, consisting of women and children only.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> M.G. Smith, 'Introduction', in *My Mother who Fathered Me*, Edith Clarke (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), pp. i-xliv (p. iv).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. i.

<sup>6</sup> T. S. Simey, *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), pp 82-83.



What is particularly interesting about these categorisations is Simey's choice of the word 'disintegrate' to describe the female-headed household, as it suggests that the author regards the family structure as fractured or unstable. This type of language permeates literature on the non-nuclear Caribbean family throughout this earliest generation of study.

Simey regards the Caribbean as a colonial testing ground. He suggests that the region acts as a space in which to conduct research that has the potential to impact 'the future social and political development of the Negro peoples, not only in Africa, but also in other parts of the world where they have settled in large numbers.'<sup>7</sup> It becomes obvious that the scholars offering Eurocentric perspectives on matrifocality did not appreciate and regard the Caribbean as a unique region with its own distinct set of cultural values. Simey's lack of nuance and understanding about the region he studies is further revealed in his suggestion that the 'symptoms of serious disease in the body of modern society are only too obvious in the colonies in general, and the West Indies in particular.'<sup>8</sup> This statement, made in the book's introduction, signifies that Simey means to problematize the Caribbean family as a symptom of a wider disease rather than consider any merits of a non-nuclear family structure, and his description of the Caribbean family as 'loose' suggests his wariness of its sustainability. Though his study precedes the coining of the term 'matrifocal', Simey, like Raymond T. Smith, does agree that women, in their roles as mothers, are central to family life.<sup>9</sup> Thus, although he problematizes the prevalent family structure, Simey recognises the centrality and autonomy of women within the domestic space. For example, he suggests that women are 'unwilling' to be 'bothered with a husband',<sup>10</sup> and notes that although the Caribbean family is not matriarchal, 'since the status of women in society is undefined and weak [...] it is the women who keep the family together.'<sup>11</sup>

Fernando Henriques' *Family and Colour in Jamaica* (1953) is written with a similar perspective to *Welfare and Planning*, and also references the Mass Marriage Movement as a recent experiment that informed his interest in the Jamaican family.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Simey, p. vi.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Fernando Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1953), p. 93.

Henriques identifies four household types prevalent in Jamaica: 'A. The Christian Family. B. Faithful Concubinage. C. Maternal or Grandmother Family. D. Keeper Family.'<sup>13</sup> The Christian family refers to couples that are married with or without children. That the Christian family is the first structure referred to suggests that it is preferential to Henriques, exposing his Western and religious bias. In Henriques' article 'West Indian Family Organisation' (1949), he contends that 'illegitimacy figures for the territories in the Caribbean area fall between 50 and 70 percent for all livebirths. Thus, the so-called "deviation" from the norm of Christian monogamous marriage is fairly uniform over the whole area'.<sup>14</sup> The Maternal or Grandmother Family is closest in definition to Simey's Disintegrate Family. Henriques defines the Maternal Family as having 'no male head of family' and the Grandmother Family as one wherein 'the grandmother may stand in the place of the mother but a man is normally head of household.'<sup>15</sup> Henriques identifies two distinct family types but groups them together because in both a woman, in her motherly role, is the central figure in the household. Whilst the Maternal Family, then, is equivalent to the female-headed household, the Grandmother Family, though male-headed, is matrifocal in nature because the grandmother is the most senior member of the household, and thus the family structure is named for her presence. Henriques recognises the prevalence of alternative family models, but chooses not to use such negative language as 'Disintegrate' to describe them.

The question of the influence of slavery on African families in the Americas was of particular interest to academics with Eurocentric perspectives, and most scholars agreed that slavery was largely influential on the contemporary Caribbean family. Henriques, for example, argues that, though 'the possibility of African influence on the pattern of sexual promiscuity' cannot be ignored,<sup>16</sup> 'the contemporary family structure amongst New World Negroes can be distinguished as a phenomenon due mainly to the influence of slavery'.<sup>17</sup> He continues:

The slave was able to perpetuate those aspects of his culture which were in essence secret such as magic, divination and religion [...] But in the

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<sup>13</sup> Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica*, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Fernando Henriques, 'West Indian Family Organisation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 55.1 (1949), 30-37 (p. 32).

<sup>15</sup> Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica*, p. 113.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

sphere which was controlled by the master, family life, the slave was forced into a new uniform mould.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Henriques concludes that it would be an impossibility for African family values to survive the legacy of slavery in any recognisable manner. By attributing Caribbean family structures to the hostile environment of slavery he offers a negative analysis of the non-nuclear family.

Edith Clarke contends that under slavery there was 'no room for the family as a parent-child group in a home', and as such, family patterns were disrupted during this period.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Simey argues, 'slavery left its mark deeply imprinted onto the family, and it is thus in the strengths and weaknesses of family life that the characteristic features of West Indian social organisation are most clearly displayed.'<sup>20</sup> Simey comments on the inevitable legacy of post-slavery trauma, and argues that this trauma is most evident in family structure in the region. He uses slavery to rationalise what he describes as the 'looseness' of the Caribbean family.<sup>21</sup>

Though there was a notable trend of linking contemporary family patterns to slavery, there were researchers aligned with European perspectives that made compelling arguments to the contrary. Melville J. Herskovits, for example, takes a different approach to understanding family in the Americas, and identifies correlations between African culture and the culture of enslaved people in the Americas.<sup>22</sup> Whilst Herskovits agrees that the 'plantation system rendered the survival of African family types impossible', he suggests that truncated derivations of African family traditions were able to survive in diluted forms.<sup>23</sup> Like Simey and Henriques, Herskovits highlights 'high illegitimacy rates and the particular role played by the mother' in African American families. Rather than attribute the prevalence of non-nuclear families solely to slavery, Herskovits argues that the 'sanctions underlying this "matriarchal" Negro family type is the fact that in a polygynous society a child shares his mother only with his "true" brothers and sisters [...] This means that the attachments between a mother and her child are in the main closer than those between father and children'.<sup>24</sup> By drawing comparisons to polygyny, which he

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<sup>18</sup> Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica*, pp .107-108.

<sup>19</sup> Edith Clarke, *My Mother who Fathered Me* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Simey, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1958).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.169.

acknowledges is prevalent in a number of West African cultures, Herskovits is suggesting that the African American family has successfully held onto certain African traditions. Matriarchy is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a form of social organisation in which the mother is head of the family, and in which descent is reckoned in the female line'.<sup>25</sup> With this definition in mind, I would argue that the family structure Herskovits describes is more matrifocal than matriarchal, in that he emphasises the relationship between mother and child; thus, it is the woman's role as mother that is most important.

M. G. Smith's *West Indian Family Structure* (1962) also observes four different family structures in the Caribbean, though Smith uses notably less hostile language than Simey to describe them:

(1) the elemental family, 'a group composed of parents and children; (2) the bilateral extended family, a 'roughly defined cognatic group frequently including affines'; (3) the domestic family, 'a group of relatives and their dependants constituting one household; and (4) compound families, which arise from successive unions or marriages of widows, widowers, divorced or informally separated parents'.<sup>26</sup>

M. G. Smith moves away from such language as 'disintegrate', and also distances himself from Christian bias in his categorisation of Caribbean family structures. He attempts to offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of Caribbean families, and finds correlations between the West Indian family and the polygyny of the Hausa tribe, before ultimately concluding that the 'mating organization of slaves' had the most influence on family structure in the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> *West Indian Family Structure* takes into consideration families from a variety of communities across three islands in the Caribbean, and the negative attitudes towards the non-nuclear family that defines Eurocentric perspectives is evident in M. G. Smith's study through his choice of descriptors such as 'unstable' and 'fragmentation'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Smith concludes his book by comparing the West Indian family to the European, positing: 'we have to ask why West Indians rejected the idea of lifelong exclusive unions while the Europeans accepted it.'<sup>29</sup> By ending with this comparison, Smith

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<sup>25</sup> Oxford English Dictionary [online], 'matriarchy', <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115017?redirectedFrom=matriarchy#eid>> [accessed 6 July 2018].

<sup>26</sup> M. G. Smith, *West Indian Family Structure* (Seattle, Washington: Washington University Press, 1962), p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp 260-263.

<sup>29</sup> M.G. Smith, *West Indian Family Structure*, p. 263.

undermines the extensive observations he makes about West Indian families and communities by demonstrating his inability to appreciate the West Indian family as unique in structure, away from comparisons to Western cultural norms.

Smith's attempts to nuance debates about the Caribbean family are apparent, and his admiration for Edith Clarke's attempts to do the same are evident in his introduction to her book *My Mother Who Fathered Me*, where he describes her research as 'one of the fundamental studies of West Indian family and social organisation'.<sup>30</sup> Clarke critiques earlier research on the Caribbean family as taking a 'sterile' and 'dangerous' approach in that they use history to explain 'dissident elements of contemporary social institutions'.<sup>31</sup> She agrees that slavery must be taken into account when considering the contemporary Jamaican family. However, she considers it ineffectual to stop analysis there. Though Clarke is critical of earlier research, she shares Henriques' and Simey's normative assumptions and negative attitudes towards matrifocality. For example, Clarke admits that, when starting her research in Jamaica, she assumed 'the existence of the family as a social group,' and when confronted with non-nuclear families, describes them as 'casual and unorganized'.<sup>32</sup> Clarke exposes her Western bias through her assumptions on the universality of the nuclear household and, like her predecessors, she uses negative language to describe family patterns that she determines non-normative.

As I have previously mentioned, the term 'matrifocal' was coined by Raymond T. Smith, and his book *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism and Politics* (1996), which is a study of lower class African-Caribbean families in British Guiana, is a seminal contribution to Caribbean anthropology. Smith defines matrifocality as 'a property of the internal relations of male- as well as female-headed households' wherein 'women in their role as mothers [...] come to be the focus of relationships, rather than head of household as such'.<sup>33</sup> Smith makes it clear that, in his opinion, 'the nuclear family is both ideally normal, and a real stage of development of practically all domestic groups'.<sup>34</sup> His negative assumptions about the non-nuclear family colour his definition of matrifocality, and Smith draws parallels between matrifocality and the economic marginalisation of African Caribbean men in the

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<sup>30</sup> M.G. Smith, 'Introduction', p. i.

<sup>31</sup> Clarke, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

region. He writes, 'men's low status and power in the economic and class systems reacts back upon their roles in the domestic system, making it impossible for them to live up to norms.'<sup>35</sup> Thus, men's apparent marginality is an important component of Smith's conceptualisation of matrifocality. Though Smith recognises that matrifocality is potentially a component of a number of household structures, the language and manner in which matrifocality is described in his work has largely negative connotations.<sup>36</sup> By normalising the nuclear family, and emphasising the marginalised role of men in both domestic and economic spheres, Smith positions non-nuclear family structures as non-normative and thus a problem. However, although Smith, like his predecessors, normalises the nuclear family and was sceptical about alternative family structures in the Caribbean, his coining of the term 'matrifocal' created an opportunity to develop the analysis of family structures in the region.

In the 1970s, there was a marked turn away from the male gaze so prevalent in academia until this point, and feminist anthropology started to emerge. Lisa Anderson-Levy writes:

Feminist anthropology is simultaneously a critique of male as well as Euro-centred and biased anthropology; a historical moment that marks the development of theoretical frames through which the different frames of knowing are produced; and a vast body of literature through which dynamic conversations are situated that engage questions about gender, race, sexuality, ability and class among much more.<sup>37</sup>

Feminist anthropology was concerned with questioning the heteronormative assumptions, and European and male biases that underpinned previous phases of anthropological research. There were a number of feminist anthropologists during this time who turned their attention towards matrifocality, both in the Caribbean and globally. As such, the definition of matrifocality developed, as did debates on what matrifocality had the potential to offer women, families and communities. In her article "Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and among Black Americans' (1974), Nancy Tanner defines matrifocality as follows:

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<sup>35</sup> Raymond T. Smith, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Smith makes it clear that his definition of matrifocality does not include marital instability, illegitimacy, or female-headed households (p. 42).

<sup>37</sup> Lisa Anderson-Levy, 'Feminist Anthropology', *Oxford Bibliographies* [online] <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0007.xml>> [accessed 12 October 2017] (para 1 of 1).

(1) Kinship systems in which (a) the role of the mother is structurally, culturally and affectively central and (b) this multidimensional centrality is legitimate; and (2) the societies in which these features coexist where (a) the relationship between the sexes is relatively egalitarian and (b) both women and men are important actors in the economic and ritual spheres.<sup>38</sup>

In her attempt to offer more weight to the term, Tanner rejects Raymond T. Smith's male-centricity and his normalisation of the nuclear family in his definition of matrifocality. Most notably, Tanner refuses to regard matrifocality as a fragmented system. She argues that the matrifocal family is not 'characterised by the absence of, say, the husband/father [...] In a matrifocal kin unit, whether an elemental mother-child unit, the nuclear family, or a large unit such as the extended family, the role of the mother is ideologically and structurally central.'<sup>39</sup> Raymond T. Smith asserts that matrifocality is not characterised by missing men, but he does make strong connections between male marginality and the prevalence of matrifocality in the region. Tanner rejects the correlation to male marginality and advocates for the woman's centrality within the matrifocal unit.

The rise of feminist anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s also coincided with a rise in Caribbean feminism. Caribbean feminists began to reconsider the family and matrifocality in a manner that was resistant to the Eurocentric and male-centric attitudes of previous studies, and Olive Senior and Christine Barrow are two such feminist academics whose research in the 1990s was particularly informative. In her book *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives* (1996), Christine Barrow critiques the earlier perspectives of research on the Caribbean family, wherein scholars concluded that conjugal relationships were 'promiscuous' and 'brittle', and family structures were 'deformed' and 'dysfunctional'.<sup>40</sup> Barrow positions herself within a tradition of Caribbean scholarship that actively resists negative stereotypes about the Caribbean family, and 'challenged the interpretation of Caribbean family relationships as "unstable" and matrifocal structures as failed attempts to imitate the Western ideal'.<sup>41</sup> *Family in the Caribbean* offers a summary of existing debates

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<sup>38</sup> Nancy Tanner, 'Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans', in *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, & Louise Lamphere (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 129-156 (p. 131).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>40</sup> Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1996), p. x.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

about family structures in the region, and works towards dispelling negative attitudes and highlighting the limitations of using a Eurocentric approach when analysing a society with its own culture and set of unique ideologies. Barrow critiques Eurocentric perspectives on the Caribbean family, particularly in relation to the analysis of male roles in the domestic space. In her essay 'Caribbean Masculinity and Family: Revisiting "Marginality" and "Reputation"' (1998), Barrow argues that the focus on and normalisation of the nuclear family, and the emphasis on men as financial providers within that nuclear family, limit the understanding of the role of men within the family. Barrow suggests that 'within the extended family, the real man strikes a balance between potentially conflicting roles and relationships'.<sup>42</sup> It is necessary, according to Barrow, to think beyond the normalisation of the nuclear family in order to adequately analyse family structures in the Caribbean.

An equally important addition to Caribbean feminist anthropology is Olive Senior's book *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English Speaking Caribbean* (1991). Senior explains that the book arose from the multidisciplinary Women in the Caribbean Project (WICP), a project she argues was the 'first to attempt woman-centred research, i.e. to involve women in defining their own reality.'<sup>43</sup> Senior recognises that, by the late twentieth century, Caribbean women were 'only just beginning to find their voices, to speak for themselves', and her book explores the links between 'early childhood experiences and socialisation and later adult behaviour [...] in the Caribbean female consciousness.'<sup>44</sup> As well as considering socialisation, access to education and economic roles, Senior also examines women's domestic and familial roles. She recognises that nuclear family models are not always applicable in the Caribbean, and challenges the universalisation of heteronormative assumptions that underpin the work of many researchers with Eurocentric perspectives.<sup>45</sup> Senior also criticizes the Eurocentric bias of the earliest tradition of research on the Caribbean family, and recognises the necessity of considering the region in isolation, and not comparing it with European cultures and

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<sup>42</sup> Christine Barrow, 'Caribbean Masculinity and Family: Revisiting "Marginality" and "Reputation"', in *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*, ed. Christine Barrow (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1998), pp. 339-360 (p. 356).

<sup>43</sup> Oliver Senior, *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English Speaking Caribbean* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.



norms.<sup>46</sup> *Working Miracles* is also important in that it centres women and their voices. Senior's conceptualisation of the Caribbean family does not focus on men, whether present, marginal, or absent. Instead, Senior's research is based primarily on interviews with women, and she references their perspectives generously.

Whilst feminist perspectives were focused on centring women's voices in their studies of the family and matrifocality, I propose that the next generation of thought, from researchers with post-matrifocal perspectives, is more interested in broadening definitions of the family, resisting existing definitions of matrifocality, and further exploring women's relatedness. Towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, debates about matrifocality have continued to conceptualise the phenomenon in a variety of ways that actively critique and resist the Eurocentric and male-centric traditions. Evelyn Blackwood's recent work on matrifocality has been particularly innovative and influential, and her essay "Wedding Bell Blues: Marriage, Missing Men and Matrifocal Follies" (2005) is resistant even to the term 'matrifocal' because of the heteronormative assumptions that inform its very definition. Blackwood argues that 'anthropologists have relied on the trope of the dominant heterosexual man to create and sustain concepts of "marriage" and "family"', and her article suggests that the trope of the 'missing man' is in fact central 'to the construction and perpetuation of the matrifocal family'.<sup>47</sup> Though Blackwood endorses the research of Nancy Tanner and Christine Barrow for critiquing earlier studies and their 'assumption of the universality of the (Western) nuclear family and the normality of middle-class marriage',<sup>48</sup> Blackwood ultimately argues that the very concept of matrifocality, and its focus on the role — or lack thereof — of the 'Dominant Patriarchal Man', limits our understanding of alternative kin and household structures, and restricts possibilities of broadening our understanding.<sup>49</sup> She concludes that it is necessary to look beyond the matrifocal, and all the heteronormative assumptions it encompasses, and suggests that researchers look instead for 'webs of meaningful relationships in their historical and social specificity [...] Rather than assume the centrality of marital relations, anthropologists need to demonstrate in particular cases whether marriage constitutes the focal relationship

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<sup>46</sup> Senior, p. 97.

<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, 'Wedding Bell Blues: Marriage, Missing Men and Matrifocal Follies', *American Ethnologist*, 32.1 (2005), 3-19 (pp 4-5).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

or not'.<sup>50</sup> In her work, Blackwood draws attention to the normative assumptions and suggests that, rather than reconfiguring the definition of matrifocality to capture nuances, we do away with the term altogether. She suggests that, instead of critiquing matrifocality, it might be more useful to consider community networks, and the centrality of women within these networks. Indeed, scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins prefer terms such as 'women-centred networks' to matrifocality, though they similarly describe the centrality of women fulfilling mother roles.<sup>51</sup>

More contemporary scholars have focused on understanding Caribbean matrifocality in a variety of ways, and consider how matrifocality offers women autonomy, both within the family and in the wider community. For example, Carin Tunåker draws connections between matrifocality and the practice of Santería in Cuba. Tunåker argues that Santería is a 'female-normative religious system',<sup>52</sup> where women make up the majority of practitioners and two of its most widely known deities are feminine spirits (Oshún and Yemayá). She continues that, because African-derived Caribbean religions are largely practiced in the home, 'due to lack of presence of a formal church', women become the 'perceived owners' of said space.<sup>53</sup> This perceived ownership, Tunåker contends, results in the empowerment of women within the home space, which she suggests forms part of the reason for the occurrence of matrifocal households in Cuba. Tunåker draws on critique set out by Blackwood and extends the conceptualisation of matrifocality in a way that offers nuance.<sup>54</sup> She theorises matrifocality in such a way that centres Caribbean religions, and moves beyond the popular 'missing man' trope.

Though not all contemporary research agrees that 'matrifocality' is a problematic term, there is a continued need to consider the normative assumptions that informed its conception. The notion that matrifocality exists alongside patriarchal ideologies and the rejection of the 'missing man' trope are ideas that are prevalent amongst more contemporary scholarship on matrifocality. Laura Herlihy, for example, argues that, 'most all of the characteristics that researchers note for matrifocality revolve

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<sup>50</sup> Blackwood, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 179.

<sup>52</sup> Carin Tunåker, 'The Matrifocal Household: Santería Religious Practices and Gender Relations Explored', *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 8.2 (2011) 137-148, (p. 141).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp 141-142.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

around the central role of the mother where there is a “missing man”<sup>55</sup>. Like Blackwood, she agrees that the study of matrifocality has been informed by heteronormative assumptions and often ignores ‘women’s other forms of relatedness’.<sup>56</sup> Helen Safa argues that matrifocality ‘has deep historical roots in all regions of the Caribbean as an alternative family pattern originating in the black lower class’.<sup>57</sup> Thus, I suggest that Safa is making a correlation between matrifocality and economic status, as with Eurocentric perspectives. However, Safa criticises negative interpretations of the family structure, and argues that, because Caribbean matrifocality is embedded in societies where the ‘patriarchal hegemonic order continues to view marriage and the nuclear family [...] as the only viable family structure’, negative assumptions about non-nuclear families continue to prevail.<sup>58</sup> Her contentions echo those of Janet Momsen, who outlines the paradox of ‘patriarchy within a system of matrifocal and matrilocal families; and of domestic and state patriarchy coexisting with the economic independence of women.’<sup>59</sup> Momsen suggests that patriarchal attitudes are prevalent and championed even within matrifocal families, and also that patriarchal ideology is widespread regardless of female economic independence.

There is a longstanding and well-established tradition of research about matrifocality within anthropology and the social sciences; one that continues to develop. Definitions of the term keep evolving, and there continues to be interesting and innovative debates emerging about matrifocality in families and communities. Because they regarded the family structure as a problem, early studies were particularly interested in determining the roots of matrifocality in the Caribbean in hope that this understanding would help solve the perceived problem. Eurocentric research emphasised what was missing from matrifocal families, in a bid to find solutions, instead of considering its possible merits. Feminist anthropologists began to reconsider matrifocality, and re-define it in a more positive manner. Matrifocality, both in the Caribbean and globally, continues to be of interest to social science

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<sup>55</sup> Laura Herlihy, ‘Matrifocality and Women’s Power on the Miskito Coast’, *Ethnology*, 46.2 (2008), 133-150, (p. 137).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> Helen Safa, ‘The Matrifocal Family and Patriarchal Ideology in Cuba and the Caribbean’, *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 10.2 (2005), 314-338 (p. 314).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>59</sup> Janet Momsen, ‘The Double Paradox’ in *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*, ed. by Patricia Mohammed (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), pp. 44-55 (p. 45).

researchers, and contemporary scholarship is interested in the autonomy that matrifocality potentially offers women, and how it exists within Caribbean communities, whilst paying attention to the paradoxes of female-centeredness within patriarchal societies. Since, as Blackwood posits, the Caribbean was the 'testing ground' for scholars to play with the conceptualisation of matrifocality, I would argue that it is important to continue exploring what matrifocality means in that particular region.

For all the interest in Caribbean matrifocality within the social sciences, there has yet to be a book-length study dedicated to how it is represented in fiction from the region. Within sociological fields, definitions of matrifocality continue to evolve, and within the study of Caribbean literature, there has not yet been much written about fictional representations of Caribbean matrifocality. By analysing fictional representations alongside social science debates, this thesis addresses the limitations in both fields of study, and offers an evaluation of fictional representations of matrifocality in the Caribbean, and attitudes towards the family and community structures.

## **Reading and Writing the Caribbean Family**

Representations of matrifocality within families and communities have been present in Caribbean literature since the mid-twentieth century. Both men and women writers from the region have a tradition of representing the family structure in their works of fiction. Though the representation of the Caribbean family is one that has received critical engagement, there remains gaps, and despite its regional prevalence, matrifocality has not yet been sufficiently analysed within cultural and literary critical discourse.

Critical engagement with family dynamics in the work of Caribbean writers started with discussions of the fictional representations of mothers and mother-daughter relationships. This coincided with the rise of Caribbean women's writing in the 1980s. Sandra Pouchet Paquet suggests that many Caribbean women's narratives undertook the 'quest for a female ancestor', often represented by an absent mother, or a strained mother-daughter relationship, and this relationship has

long been of interest to literary critics.<sup>60</sup> Given what Lorna Burns describes as the colonial implications of the notions of motherlands, and the feminisation of colonial land as an object to be conquered, the symbolism of mothers in Caribbean women's writing provides a rich space for analysis.<sup>61</sup> Simone A. James Alexander compares the mother-daughter relationship to the act of colonisation in the Caribbean, arguing that both of them are 'crucially formative', and thus concludes that the daughter's relationship with both mother and land is 'fraught with fear, alienation, and ambivalence'.<sup>62</sup> Susheila Nasta's edited collection *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (1991) offers insights into the layered symbolism in the representation of mothers by black women writers. In her introduction, Nasta suggests that questions surrounding motherhood were a universal concern for women writers, but for those writing within a postcolonial context, mothers provide 'potent symbolic force'.<sup>63</sup> Nasta also argues that black women writers — including those from the Caribbean — use the imaginative space to 'demythologise the illusion of the colonial "motherland" or "mother country"'.<sup>64</sup> Mothers, then, are significant figures in the work of Caribbean women writers because they can symbolise the fraught relationship to motherlands — be that the home island, the colonial metropole, or Africa.

Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn argue that, for the Caribbean woman, the notion of the motherland 'is especially complex, encompassing in its connotations her island home, and its unique culture as well as the body of tropes, talismans and female bonding that is a woman's heritage through her own and other's mothers'.<sup>65</sup> A motherland should feel like a woman's home, a site of their heritage, but given the turbulent colonial history of the region, Caribbean women in particular find themselves at odds with their island motherland. As such, writers often symbolise

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<sup>60</sup> Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 12. ProQuest eBook.

<sup>61</sup> Lorna Burns, 'Landscape and Genre in the Caribbean Canon: Creolizing the Poetics of Place and Paradise', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 17.1 (2008) 20-41 (p. 20).

<sup>62</sup> Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 20-21. ProQuest eBook.

<sup>63</sup> Susheila Nasta, 'Introduction' in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: The Women's Press, 1991), pp. xiii-xxx (p. xix).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>65</sup> Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn, "'The Bloodstream of Our Inheritance': Female Identity and the Caribbean Mother's Land' in *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, ed. by Susheila Nasta, pp. 219-237 (p. 219).

their relationship to the motherland through a strained mother-daughter dyad, in order to articulate the ambivalent and precarious relationship between African Caribbean people and the land they inhabit. Morris and Dunn suggest that connections to both mother and land are essential to the self-development of Caribbean women in fiction, and argue that if a woman is denied a 'developmental bond with her own mother, then the "mother's land" itself may provide a surrogate'.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the relationship between the daughter and the mother, and the relationship between daughter and motherland, become symbiotic and interchangeable in Caribbean women's writing. If the female protagonist is deprived of one, the other must take its place: the mother and motherland act as surrogates for one another.

Arguably the most theorised example of a strained and ambivalent mother-daughter relationship in Caribbean women's literature is that which is depicted in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), a postcolonial female bildungsroman set in twentieth century Antigua. Nicole Willey argues that Annie John 'speaks directly to the problems facing women of colour in their relationship to the state or the coloniser, and how that relationship affects their roles as mothers and daughters'.<sup>67</sup> Willey, like other scholars who have analysed the mother-daughter dyad in *Annie John*, positions the mother figure alongside that of the coloniser, arguing that the protagonist's narrative details her movement away from the mother — and thus colonial influence — and towards self-definition. The mother-daughter relationship in Kincaid's novel is central, and Willey argues that this relationship is 'fraught with (largely rhetorical) violence because it cannot be separated from colonial discourse and violence'.<sup>68</sup> Annie's love-hate relationship with her mother, Willey contends, is symbolic of the ambivalent and changeable relationship between colonial subjects and their colonisers.

H. Adlai Murdoch has also read the mother-daughter relationship in *Annie John* as central, and suggests that it can be analysed through the 'prism of the feminine Oedipus', whilst simultaneously considering the 'nature of the West Indian family, whose paradoxical form has implications not only for Annie's recognition of and

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<sup>66</sup> Morris and Dunn, p. 219.

<sup>67</sup> Nicole Willey, 'Colonialism's Impact on Mothering: Jamaica Kincaid's Rendering of the Mother-Daughter Split in *Annie John*', in *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O'Reilly (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 273-286 (p. 273). ProQuest eBook.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

identification with a maternal power structure, but for the particular operation here of the feminine Oedipal paradigm as well'.<sup>69</sup> Murdoch goes on to reference Edith Clarke's *My Mother Who Fathered Me*, and presents Kincaid's fictional family as matrifocal in nature. He highlights the paradox of maternal agency against a backdrop of patriarchal ideology, arguing that the matrifocal agency within the household 'is the locus of power with which Annie identifies, and which sets up the groundwork for the Oedipal paradigm to function as a means of maternal separation within the Caribbean cultural context'.<sup>70</sup> Murdoch offers a psychoanalytic reading of the text that prioritises the mother-daughter relationship, whilst pointing to the matrifocal nature of the family dynamic represented in the book. However, there is no direct consideration of matrifocality and its paradoxical existence outside of its effect on Annie's self-development.

Another example of a striking mother-daughter dyad in twentieth century Caribbean women's writing is Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), which tells the coming-of-age story of Sophie, who moves from Haiti to New York as a child to live with her mother. As with *Annie John*, Danticat's novel also depicts an unravelling relationship between mother and her daughter, who the reader learns was conceived by rape. Simone A. James Alexander reads women's bodies in the novel as nationalist tropes that are 'subject to the worst form of subjugation, colonisation, and bodily theft'.<sup>71</sup> Through this analysis, we once again see women — mothers and daughters — being read as symbolising the colonial history of the Caribbean.

Like *Annie John*, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* depicts the breakdown of a mother-daughter relationship as necessary in order for the daughter to find self-expression and, as Nancy Gerber argues, to break from the internalisation of her mother's self-hatred.<sup>72</sup> Unlike Kincaid's protagonist, however, Sophie is able to reconcile her ambivalence towards her mother by, as Gerber describes, using the art of storytelling to 'rewrite the script of the mother-daughter relationship', making their

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<sup>69</sup> H. Adlai Murdoch, 'Severing the (M)Other Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*', *Callaloo*, 13.2 (1990), 325-340 (pp. 327-328).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>71</sup> Simone A. James Alexander, 'M/Othering the Nation: Women's Bodies as Nationalist Tropes in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *African American Review*, 44.3 (2011), 373-390 (p. 373).

<sup>72</sup> Nancy Gerber, 'Binding the Narrative Thread: Storytelling and the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 2 (2000), 188-199 (p. 195).

tale one of empowerment.<sup>73</sup> Gerber argues that Sophie transforms the relationship with her mother from one ‘dominated by recrimination, loss, and violation to one marked by reconciliation, hope, freedom’.<sup>74</sup> Again, the family Danticat represents is matrifocal in nature: Sophie is, for the first twelve years of her life, raised by her Tantie Atie, and maintains a close relationship with her grandmother. Women inform her childhood and upbringing, and matrifocality in this novel occurs, in part, as a result of the missing man. Scholarly engagement with the text has pointed to the matrifocal oral traditions in the region, and how Sophie ultimately learns to find power in these customs, but there is little engagement with matrifocality as a community or family structure.<sup>75</sup>

Both *Annie John* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* can be described as daughter-centric, in that they both feature first-person narratives from their daughter protagonists, and the mother features as an obstacle in each protagonist’s bildungsroman. Other academics have noted the daughter-centrism of women’s writing, and have been working on branching away from this tradition through turning their attention to the representation of mothers, and mother-centred narratives. Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O’Reilly describe their edited collection *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts* (2010) as beginning with the mother, ‘foregrounding how she is represented in diverse literary traditions.’<sup>76</sup> The book draws attention to both ‘mother subjects and mother writers’, and examines how ‘authors use textual spaces to accept, embrace, negotiate, reconcile, resist, and challenge traditional conceptions of mothering and maternal roles’.<sup>77</sup> Podneiks and O’Reilly recognise the tradition of prioritising the daughter’s voice in women’s literature, and their edited collection signals a shift in analysis towards what they describe as ‘matrilineal and matrifocal perspectives’.<sup>78</sup> Their use of the term ‘matrifocal’ here describes the matrifocal narrative — the text centred on the mother’s perspective — rather than an

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<sup>73</sup> Gerber, p. 189.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>75</sup> Myriam Moise, ‘Vodou Symbolism and “Poto Mitan” Women in Edwidge Danticat’s Work’, in *Vodou in Haitian Memory: The Idea and Representation of Vodou in Haitian Imagination*, ed. by Celucien L. Joseph & Nixon S. Cleophas (London: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 125-144 (p. 125).

<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O’Reilly, ‘Introduction: Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives’ in *Textual Mothers/ Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O’Reilly (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), 1-28 (p. 1). ProQuest eBook.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 2.



engagement with the phenomenon of matrifocal families studied in the social sciences. The one Caribbean text discussed in the aforementioned collection is *Annie John*, and Nicole Willey's essay seeks to identify the mother in *Annie John* through the daughter-centric narrative. The collection prioritises the mother-daughter dyad, and foregoes the opportunity to analyse representations of the mother within wider family dynamics.

The shift in interest towards the mother is also evident in Kathryn Caccavaio's 2013 PhD dissertation 'Atlantic Moments: Mother/Child Relations and Hemispheric Migration in Late Twentieth Century Narratives by New World Writers'. Caccavaio's research moves away from daughter-centrism, focussing instead on how 'New World women writers envision motherhood, mothering and mothers in a hemispheric migrant context'.<sup>79</sup> Caccavaio's thesis re-reads the mother through the postcolonial lens, and she engages with matrifocality in her analysis of novels by Michelle Cliff. Caccavaio defines matrifocality as a 'rebellion from the homespace and into the wider social world', and suggests that it is a 'tradition of motherhood that runs counter to Eurocentric patriarchal (read: colonial) definitions of motherhood'.<sup>80</sup> Matrifocality is positioned as a direct act of resistance and Caccavaio explores what this act offers mothers within the context of Cliff's work, concluding that '[m]atrifocality is a tradition where the home and the family unit are transformed into a site where women can come together as women and rebel against these oppressions through their identity, not solely as women, but as mothers.'<sup>81</sup> She theorises matrifocality as tradition of rebellion, and is interested in what matrifocality offers to the women who, as mother-figures, are central to the family. Caccavaio's research moves away from that singular focus on the mother-daughter dynamic, though it is largely interested in that of mother and child. Thus, there is little consideration about wider family dynamics. She offers a reading of matrifocality in the work of Michelle Cliff, but matrifocality is not the focus of her thesis. Thus, the phenomenon, and the way it is represented in Caribbean literature, warrants much further attention.

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<sup>79</sup> Kathryn Caccavaio, *Atlantic Moments: Mother/Child Relations and Hemispheric Migration in Late Twentieth Century Narratives by New World Women Writers*, PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 2013 <<https://d.lib.msu.edu/etd/21>> [accessed 12 December 2017] p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-161.

As I previously suggested, a number of Caribbean writers since the mid-twentieth century have used the novel as a platform to represent a variety of family dynamics outside the mother-daughter relationship, and I include Shani Mootoo and Dionne Brand as examples, though their representations of family differ greatly. Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) has been described by Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef as a magic realist texts that explores 'lesbianism, betrayal, incest, rape and patricide'.<sup>82</sup> The representation of family in Mootoo's novel centres on the incestuous relationship between a father and his two daughters, the mother being absent. Meg Wesling suggests that in *Cereus Blooms*, as with *Breath, Eyes Memory*, the family becomes a site for 'the reproduction of state violence'.<sup>83</sup> She argues that Chandin's rape of his daughters becomes a 'ritualized form of patriarchal dominance [... that] mirrors the racialized, gendered and colonial framework of the state'.<sup>84</sup> In a similar manner to Annie John's mother, who is read as symbolic of the coloniser, Wesling reads Mala's father as symbolic of violent colonial ideology. Through this, Wesling contests the romantic notion of family, representing it instead as a site where postcolonial trauma is reproduced. Morgan and Youssef echo these contentions in *Writing Rage*, and argue that Chandin's acts of rape 'masquerade as a bizarre extension of his paternal right of ownership over his daughters and his paternal responsibility to discipline'.<sup>85</sup> In this reading of the family as a representation of the state, the daughters in *Cereus Blooms* represent the Caribbean island, and their father the colonising force, who assumes that the island is his property to do with it as he sees fit. Thus, as with readings of *Annie John*, *Cereus Blooms* can also be analysed as an analogy of the island state, and the overwhelming force of the colonial regime.

A wide range of Caribbean fiction is concerned with re-claiming and re-imagining lost histories, and in his book *Postslavery Literature in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (2000), George B. Handley argues that writers in America and

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<sup>82</sup> Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef, *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence through Caribbean Discourse*, (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2006), p. 141.

<sup>83</sup> Meg Wesling, 'Neocolonialism, Queer Kinship and Diaspora: Contesting the Romance of the Family in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*', *Textual Practice*, 25 (2011), 649-670 (p. 649).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 662.

<sup>85</sup> Morgan and Youssef, p. 189.

the Caribbean have a tradition of literary imaginings of the family as a way of reclaiming genealogies lost to slavery. Handley argues:

Writing about family history allows the authors to revise the metaphorical meanings of genealogy that have been assumed by the plantocracy [...] by following biological links across races, sexes and generations, family history exposes the genealogical ideologies that have concealed evidence of sexual contact across racial and class lines in order to protect a white elite patriarchy and to evade the widely syncretic and contestatory nature of plantation cultures.<sup>86</sup>

Handley argues that dominant plantation historical narratives actively avoided being honest about the nature of plantation life, and this included dishonesty about genealogy and families. Black writers in America and the Caribbean, as an act of resistance, have therefore chosen to write and rewrite the plantation and the family, in order to shed light on the syncretic reality of slavery. By re-writing family history, black writers are not only given an opportunity to imagine voices for their ancestors, but are also able to re-purpose genealogy, and grant it metaphorical agency whilst resisting the ideology of the plantocracy.

Dionne Brand is one such Caribbean writer who uses the novel to reimagine a family history, and *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999) is an example of this. The novel offers a multi-generational account of a Trinidadian family that reaches across the African diaspora. Lauren Gantz argues that Brand's novel represents the inherited trauma of slavery within its descendants across the globe, and reads the novel as a 'neo-archive' that reconstructs silent histories, though such reconstructions 'cannot always offer catharsis'.<sup>87</sup> Gantz suggests that, for Caribbean writers, imagining the family is a means of neo-archiving — a term that describes 'works of art and literature that create history in the face of its absence'.<sup>88</sup> In Brand's novel, writing the family represents writing the past, and engaging with the legacy of slavery in the Caribbean. Gantz's analysis focuses on the characterisation of Eula, and she argues that Eula's 'primary motivation for going through family history is to gain a clearer sense of who she is and of her place in the world [...] However, as the convoluted family tree that precedes *At the Full's* first chapter suggests, Eula's

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<sup>86</sup> George B. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> Lauren Gantz, 'Archiving the Door of No Return in Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*', *Meridians*, 13.2 (2016), 123-147 (p.123).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

lineage is riddled with gaps and silences'.<sup>89</sup> The notion that the Caribbean family is highly extensive and expansive is one echoed by other Caribbean writers such as Erna Brodber, who I return to in my consideration of her novel *Nothing's Mat* (2014), and Lawrence Scott. Scott's novel *Witchbroom* (1992) depicts the family history of a Hispanic Creole family through what Curdella Forbes describes as 'a series of "Tales" [... that are] interrupted by an autobiographical journal, which provides a bridge between the stories of the old century and those of the new.'<sup>90</sup> The Caribbean genealogy project, then, is difficult to trace through archival sources, and because of this, writers such as Brand and Scott turn to the neo-archival practice of writing fiction in their efforts to capture the complexity of the post-slavery Caribbean family.

Representations of the family have long been a staple of Caribbean literature. Since the mid-twentieth century, writers have, in a variety of ways, been engaging with family dynamics in the region. However, critical analyses of these representations have yet to capture the complexity of all of these family dynamics. As I have illustrated, analysis of literary representations of the family began with a focus on the mother-daughter dyad, and is slowly branching out. There has been a concerted effort to confront daughter-centrism in these texts, resulting in a rise of mother-focused analysis. There has also been consideration of wider family dynamics, and appreciation of the complexity of Caribbean families. However, this is not the focus of my thesis. I do not endeavour to solely analyse the representation of mothers in contemporary Caribbean literature. Rather, my thesis explores how matrilocality is defined and represented in the novels of five Caribbean writers. I will consider how my chosen texts engage with and contribute to interdisciplinary debates about matrilocality. I reflect on each author's portrayal of the matrifocal family or community as a literary device, and examine how each writer uses the novel space to subvert negative assumptions about the widespread Caribbean phenomenon.

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<sup>89</sup> Gantz, p. 129.

<sup>90</sup> Curdella Forbes, 'Witchbroom: Book Review', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 6.2 (1994), 97-111 (p. 98).

## Thesis Structure

My thesis will analyse the representation of matrifocality in five novels written by Caribbean writers in the twenty-first century: Jacob Ross' *Pynter Bender* (2008); Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009); Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* (2014); Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006); and Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003). Each chapter will engage with a different text, and I will identify and analyse the variety of manifestations of matrifocality that these texts offer, exploring the writers' attitudes towards the matrifocal, as well as considering the insights each text offers to the study of matrifocality through the different ways it is represented across the texts. My research is interdisciplinary, engaging with established and emerging debates in Caribbean literary criticism, cultural studies, history, and the social sciences. My research also engages with wider discussions within postcolonial studies. Through a multidisciplinary consideration of matrifocality in African Caribbean families and communities, engagement with genre, style, and emerging literary tropes, and through making reference to a number of academics who work within the wider field, my thesis contributes to the study of the cultural legacies of colonialism that is central within the field of postcolonial studies. For example, through an engagement with debates about the roots of matrifocality, all of my key texts conceptualise the lasting effects of the colonial encounter, and thus draw attention to colonial histories within the region.

I explore the relationship between contemporary Caribbean literature and academic research on matrifocality, considering how the imaginative space of the novel offers new conceptualisations of matrifocality and its place in the Caribbean region. I will map my primary texts onto the three schools of anthropological thought that I previously highlighted, in order to emphasise the varying attitudes towards matrifocality that my chosen novels represent. I align with Antonio Benítez-Rojo's reading of the Caribbean as a meta-archipelago that 'flows outwards past the limits of its own sea',<sup>91</sup> and thus have chosen to examine the work of writers living both within and outside the region.

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<sup>91</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 4.

My first chapter will analyse Jacob Ross' *Pynter Bender*, a novel about a young boy, born blind, growing up in twentieth-century rural Grenada. The novel can be described as both a postcolonial bildungsroman and a Caribbean nationalist novel that weaves together stories of familial drama and wider political struggle. Though the novel portrays a male protagonist, it features a strong, matrifocal family that is integral to the development both of the eponymous hero and the novel's plot. In this chapter, I will consider how the novel's formal elements contribute to the representation of gender dynamics and a fictional landscape wherein patriarchal ideology exists alongside female centrality. I suggest that Ross engages with matrifocality through the critique of Caribbean masculinity, and although he depicts the family structure as a result of the missing or marginal man — a trope that underpins the majority of anthropological research within Eurocentric perspectives — he does not suggest that it is a problematic family structure, and is ultimately celebratory of matrifocality.

In the second and third chapters of my thesis, I position the novels of Marlon James and Erna Brodber alongside research on matrifocality with feminist perspectives, because of their distinct focus on writing Caribbean womanhood, and exploring positive imaginings of matrifocality that benefits families and communities. Chapter two focuses on James' neo-slave narrative *The Book of Night Women*. The book portrays a community of women on a Jamaican plantation who plan and execute an ultimately unsuccessful rebellion against the island's plantocracy. I engage with the neo-slave genre, and explore how James uses fiction to contribute to historical debates about enslaved Caribbean women, and their acts of resistance. I suggest that James' representation of matrifocality positions the phenomenon as a network of support and an organising force, and by representing matrifocality on a plantation, James is offering insights into the origins of matrifocality in the region, which has also been of interest within feminist scholarship on matrifocality.

In chapter three, I analyse Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat*. In the novel, a nameless protagonist visits Jamaica to map her family tree as part of a social sciences project, and decides to base her genealogy project on the circular, fractal mat she creates with her relative, Cousin Nothing. Brodber's novel represents the Caribbean matrifocal family as expansive and fractal, directly opposing the Eurocentric contention that the family structure is 'fractured'. In this chapter, I analyse both the fractal and matrifocal nature of the family represented, the titular

mat, and the narrative structure of the novel. I argue that the use of the fractal as a model for the family destabilises patriarchal assumptions about genealogy, and offers an alternative and more inclusive re-imagining of the Caribbean family. By drawing extensively on existing anthropological research, Brodber offers a variety of representations of matrifocal families, highlights some of the paradoxes surrounding the phenomena, and centres women in her narrative, in such a way that resonates with feminist anthropological perspectives.

For my fourth and fifth chapters, I position the novels in relation to the post-matrifocal perspectives in the social sciences because I argue that the texts are more experimental in their conceptualisations of matrifocality. In chapter four, I examine representations of matrifocality in Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable*. The novel tells the interwoven stories of three generations of women from a family in twentieth and twenty-first century Dominica. The novel engages with such themes as trauma, healing, gendered postcolonial history, and marronage. In this chapter, I argue that John offers a potential site of healing for individual and shared postcolonial trauma through her representation of the matrifocal Maroon community. I engage with style and form in the novel, considering how it contributes to John's re-writing of women and Caribbean marronage. I also suggest that the novel positions the matrifocal Maroon community as queer in its subversive nature and aggressive resistance to the patriarchy of mainstream Dominica. I argue that it is the very queerness of the community that allows John to position matrifocality as a potential space for healing.

My final chapter engages critically with Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*, which I position alongside post-matrifocal perspectives in social science scholarship because it connects matrifocality to religion, completely foregoing the 'missing man' trope. The novel centres on three black women, living in three different countries and eras, connected by the floating consciousness of the Haitian goddess Ezili. Hopkinson's representation of her protagonists portrays black womanhood as strong and resilient, and I argue that this strength is rooted in African-derived matrifocal spirituality. In this final chapter, I consider the novelist's use of the speculative genre and nonlinear form, and suggest that these formal elements encourage readers to make connections between the novel's protagonists, recognising them as a community of women. I analyse Hopkinson's use of salt and water imagery as integral to the representation of the novel's trans-spatial community. I contend that,

as well as engaging with debates about the roots of matrifocality in the Caribbean, *The Salt Roads* experiments with the conceptualisation of community, and resists patriarchal notions of religion by imagining matrifocality as an integral component of African derived spiritual systems.

Each text offers a unique imagining of matrifocality in the Caribbean, and the wide range of genres, styles and narrative time-scales within these novels suggests that matrifocality can be regarded as a distinctively Caribbean family and community structure that has continued to be explored in the region's literature. My thesis will offer close readings of these representations of matrifocality in each text, and I will position my literary analysis alongside existing sociological and anthropological debates to advocate for an interdisciplinary approach when considering a phenomenon as culturally significant as matrifocality in the Caribbean.



## Chapter One: 'Men Walked': Constructing the Matrifocal Family in Jacob Ross' *Pynter Bender* (2008)

*Pynter Bender* (2008) tells the story of a young boy, born blind, growing up in a small rural sugar cane community in mid-twentieth century Grenada. Because the novel details Pynter's growth into adulthood alongside the island's movement towards independence from British colonialism, Jacob Ross' text can be described as both a postcolonial bildungsroman and a Caribbean nationalist narrative. His first novel, *Pynter Bender* weaves together stories of familial drama with wider-scale political struggle.

*Pynter Bender* has received no critical attention to date, but has been reviewed several times. Anita Sethi describes the book as a 'portrait of the physical and psychological effects of a nation's struggle towards independence,' and a 'powerful story about what it means to be a human being.'<sup>1</sup> Writing for the *Caribbean Review of Books*, Melissa Richards contends that the strength of the novel lies in its representation of humanity, in particular the Bender family, who provide the 'complex emotional heart' of the novel.<sup>2</sup> I would agree that Ross' depiction of the family is rich in its potential for interpretation, but would emphasise specifically its matrifocal nature. *Pynter Bender* offers a unique representation of rural matrifocality in the Caribbean, and it is this depiction that shall serve as the basis of my analysis in this chapter.

Janet Momsen suggests that, in Caribbean societies, there is an 'ideological unity of patriarchy, or female subordination,' that co-exists with a 'vibrant living tradition of female economic autonomy, of female-headed households and of a family structure in which men are often marginal and absentee.'<sup>3</sup> Momsen's essay examines this idea, which she defines as a 'double paradox,' and calls readers to question the 'rigidity of the public/private dichotomy underlying gender roles in the

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Sethi, 'Pynter Bender, by Jacob Ross', *Independent* [online] <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/pynter-bender-by-jacob-ross-1005505.html>> [accessed 4 May 2016] (para 5 of 5).

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Richards, 'Family Matters', *Caribbean Review of Books* [online] <<http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/19-february-2009/family-matters/>> [Accessed 11 March 2016] (para 11 of 11).

<sup>3</sup> Janet Momsen, 'The Double Paradox' in *Gendered Realities: Essays in Caribbean Feminist Thought*, ed. Patricia Mohammed (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), pp. 44-55 (p. 45).

region,' wherein men are dominant figures in public spaces whilst women are central in the domestic sphere.<sup>4</sup> The double paradox outlined by Momsen is described as 'patriarchy within a system of matrifocal and matrilocal families; and of domestic and state patriarchy coexisting with the economic independence of women.'<sup>5</sup> Momsen suggests that patriarchal attitudes are prevalent and championed, even within matrifocal families, and that patriarchy ideology is widespread, regardless of female economic independence. Momsen's theory is echoed by Curdella Forbes who writes:

Gender experiences were deeply inflected by socio-economic realities that constantly shifted authorities associated with masculinity between male and female members of society. As a direct result of this, West Indian society has been variously described as 'matrifocal' and 'matriarchal' [...] On the other hand, vestiges of the colonial education system in the form of ideas of the male as breadwinner, household ruler, public authority and social pioneer were valorised. This ideology continues to mediate West Indian thinking despite its increasing distance from lived reality.<sup>6</sup>

There is, Forbes suggests, a detachment between ideology and lived experience in the region. The patriarchal ideology put in place by colonial powers in the Caribbean is undercut by lived realities wherein there is a widespread trend of independent women in the region.

It is Momsen's paradox of patriarchal attitudes infiltrating matrifocal communities that shall be used as a starting point for my consideration of the representation of matrifocality in *Pynter Bender*. I will begin my chapter by reflecting upon the genre, form and style of the novel. I will analyse the text as a postcolonial bildungsroman, whilst also paying attention to Ross' employment of Caribbean nationalist fiction conventions and his unique narrative style, to examine how the formal elements of the text contribute to Ross' representation of gender identities and, by extension, matrifocality. The second section of this chapter will explore matrifocality through close engagement with anthropological research and an exploration of gender in *Pynter Bender*. I will consider the ways that the novel explores gender relations in twentieth-century Grenada, and think about what Ross achieves through his particular representation of matrifocality. Given that the novel's

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<sup>4</sup> Momsen, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Curdella Forbes, *From Nation to Diaspora: Samuel Selvon, George Lamming and the Cultural Performance of Gender* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2005), pp. 29-30. ProQuest eBook.

protagonist is male, the representation of masculinity in *Pynter Bender* warrants attention, and because of the narrative's focus on masculinity, Ross' representation of matrifocality resonates with Eurocentric anthropological perspectives that conceptualised the Caribbean matrifocal family as symptomatic of missing or marginal men. However, I will argue that, through his critique of Caribbean masculinity, and the novel's engagement with the idea of the 'double paradox', Ross moves beyond those early anthropological perspectives that problematised matrifocality, and offers a more nuanced, and ultimately celebratory, perspective of the family structure.

### **Nationalism and the Bildungsroman**

In *Postcolonial Literatures in Context* (2010), Julie Mullaney writes,

With its origins in German aesthetic traditions, the bildungsroman is customarily concerned with the social education and progress ('bildung') of its protagonist. It charts the initiation of the child or young adult into society and the challenges this process generates, often thematised in the protagonist's estrangement from family, community and nation, leading to fraught attempts to renegotiate relationships with place. Stressing the ideological awakening, reformation and assimilation of their protagonists, the genre is inescapable from notions of 'good' citizenship and nationality.<sup>7</sup>

Mullaney's definition of the traditional bildungsroman is one specific to the European tradition, and she goes on to suggest a number of ways that postcolonial writers have adapted the genre. Some of the aforementioned genre conventions are evident in *Pynter Bender*. The novel opens with its eponymous hero at the age of nine, having just begun his journey of social progress. Recently given his sight by local healing woman, Santay, Pynter is newly able to experience the world through blue 'baby eyes', and begins his journey of personal development.<sup>8</sup> Over the course of the novel, Pynter meets his father, receives a formal colonial education, leaves the family home, and becomes a key figure in the struggle for national independence.

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Mullaney, *Postcolonial Literatures in Context* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Jacob Ross, *Pynter Bender* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p. 7. (All future references to this edition will be marked in parentheses in the text).

Recognising the sugar canes, among which he grows, as a symbol of oppression, Pynter resolves, during his childhood, to burn the cane fields of Old Hope. He tells his twin brother, 'Dat's why I goin to burn it, Peter [...] S'why I goin to kill cane. For good. Don' know when. But before I dead I do it.' (161) Pynter recognises that the community's reliance on the cane for their economic welfare is symbolic of colonial influence and, unable to accept this, feels compelled to renegotiate his relationship with home by creating a new landscape. It is here that *Pynter Bender* departs from the European bildungsroman's tradition of ideological assimilation.<sup>9</sup> Pynter never resolves to be a good or compliant citizen. He seeks instead to rid the island of its colonial dependency and help build a newly independent nation, before moving to Germany to complete his formal education. Keja Valens contends that the traditional bildungsroman 'traces the singular account of a universal (read: white, male) protagonist who progresses from childhood into adulthood, where marriage consummates his self-realisation in community.'<sup>10</sup> Ross subverts the conventions of the traditional genre once again in Pynter's decision to leave the country without his girlfriend Tinelle.

Mullaney argues that the bildungsroman's 'emphasis on cultivation, coherence and maturity, often forged through the mediating structures of education, lends itself to the creation and reproduction of the justifications of imperialism' and 'motivates and sustains the project of colonialism'.<sup>11</sup> She suggests that postcolonial writers often subvert this genre convention. They turn to the genre 'because its focus on process and progress provide useful tools with which to deconstruct imperialism and its underlying ideals,' and are able to use the bildungsroman as a way of critiquing the justifications for and impact of colonialism.<sup>12</sup> Pynter's journey into adulthood coincides with the birth of the nation, making the bildungsroman the ideal genre with which to subvert the colonial project and celebrate Caribbean nationalism and independence. Because of its focus on self-formation and identity, Mullaney argues that 'the genre attracts writers keen to explore the trajectory of (national) self-formation in postcolonial locations'.<sup>13</sup> She continues by contending that many

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<sup>9</sup> Mullaney, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Keja Valens, 'Obvious and Ordinary: Desire between Girls in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*', in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 25.2 (2004), 123-149 (p. 123).

<sup>11</sup> Mullaney, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

postcolonial writers using the bildungsroman set their novels in the early days of independence, choosing to represent the nation as newly establishing its post-independence identity.<sup>14</sup> Ross, however, chooses to represent the decline of the nation's colonial identity as opposed to the ascension of nationalism, which is evidenced by the novel concluding in 1974, the year that Grenada gained independence. By ending the novel at this point, at the cusp of the independent nation, Ross offers the reader a moment that is ripe with infinite possibility. The independent nation, much like Pynter as he approaches adulthood, is yet to be realised and defined.

Though a twenty-first century writer, I would argue that, with *Pynter Bender*, Jacob Ross contributes to the tradition of nationalist fiction by Caribbean writers, some of whom have also employed the bildungsroman genre in their work.<sup>15</sup> Forbes argues that male writers from the region, particularly those writing between the 1950s and 1970s, were almost exclusively concerned with portrayals of masculinity, as evidenced by a lack of female protagonists, and represented the nation as symbolic of an 'iconic masculinity'.<sup>16</sup> She continues by contending that, within this tradition of writing, there are a number of repeated conventions employed in the representation of gender. Tamar Mayer also shares a similar theory in her consideration of nationalism, and states that '[t]he nation has largely been constructed as a hetero-male project, an imagined brotherhood.'<sup>17</sup> The masculine characterisation of Caribbean nations comes as a direct result of colonial influence, where, as Emily L. Taylor writes,

The transformation of land into woman became a means for colonisers to construct their conquest as a 'natural' one. Feminising the land extended the logic of heterosexual and patriarchal domination to the colonial encounter, and positioned the male, colonising subject as one ordained to rule by natural right.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mullaney, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Caribbean writers such as Earl Lovelace, Sam Selvon, and George Lamming have been credited as writing for 'political independence and cultural sovereignty' [Forbes, p. 4].

<sup>16</sup> Forbes, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Tamar Mayer, 'Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage' in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. by Tamar Mayer (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-24 (p. 6). ProQuest eBook.

<sup>18</sup> Emily L. Taylor, 'Rewriting the Mother/Nation', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 234-242 (p. 234).

The male protagonist of these nationalist fictions serves as an extension of the new masculine nation and as such, both men and women are often subject to stereotypical characterisation. Forbes, for example, suggests that in twentieth century Caribbean nationalist fiction, female characters often appeared as images of male desire. She contends,

It is true that female characters sometimes appeared, implicitly and explicitly, as various images of male desire: the much-vaunted, fetishized "Mother"; the golden hearted prostitute; the absent presence in the background of action; the abrasive, loud-mouthed shrew providing entertainment but also disturbing the peace. A widespread representation which transected many of the others was the strong, resourceful female who nevertheless either was not quite as strong as the male or became weak in relation to him.<sup>19</sup>

I would argue that, through his protagonist, Jacob Ross also seeks to define an iconic masculinity, but Pynter is raised and subsequently heavily influenced by the women in his matrifocal family. In some places, Ross employs some of the aforementioned conventions of writing women in the nationalist novel, but in others, he offers a more nuanced characterisation of his female characters. The shrew character in *Pynter Bender* is Pynter's maternal grandmother Deeka Bender who is an abrasive and aggressive matriarch. Deeka, a proud 'north-woman' with 'Carib blood' (19) acts as Pynter's antagonist for the first half of the novel. She is made uncomfortable by Pynter's presence, and believes her grandson to be the reincarnation of Zed Bender, who lived during 'Sufferation Time' (14) and was killed by his plantation's owner for attempting to flee his enslavement. Pynter tells Santay, 'He tell [Bull Bender] dat he put a curse on him an' all hi family, an' de seed of all hi family to come. He tell Bull Bender that is come he goin come back.' (15) Zed was but a child upon his death and, believing in the tale of the curse, Deeka almost wishes Pynter an early death. The narrator comments:

The idea that his body was a house to a man who had lived long before his time made perfect sense to Deeka Bender [...] Her problem was the way he had come [...] two days after his brother. She who had brought him out still talked of the way he fought her [...] And that cry [...] wasn't the cry of a child at all, but the raging of a young man. And then, of course, they saw the eyes (105)

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<sup>19</sup> Forbes, p. 30.

The Bender women are described by the narrator as having magic in them; of being able to 'unravel dreams and turn their hands to medicines'. (105) Her sensitivity to magic makes Deeka highly superstitious, and Pynter's particularly difficult birth, coupled with his being born blind, makes him a prime target for her accusations about his evil nature. Her antagonistic attitude reaches its climax early on in the novel when Pynter crosses the yard to sit on John Seegal's stone and Deeka attempts to kill him with a large piece of iron, only to be stopped by his mother Elena. (126) Her dis-ease with Pynter, her certainty that he is the reincarnation of Zed, propels Deeka to be unreasonably hostile towards her grandson, fearing that he will bring more pain to the family. It is perhaps because of this, and because she is fiercely protective of her daughters, that she would rather murder Pynter than see him bring them any misfortune. However, as the narrator observes afterwards, '[when] you kill a pusson for good reason or no reason, you add their weight to yours [...] To kill a child was worse. You add that child's weight ten times over.' (129) Deeka's characterisation as a matriarch is multi-faceted and often troubling. Far from being the 'fetishized "Mother"', Deeka is frightening and unforgiving, even to those within her family.<sup>20</sup> Yet, she is fiercely protective of her children, resolving even to kill Pynter to save them from suspected threat.

Patricia Hill Collins argues that 'the concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the philosophies of people of African descent',<sup>21</sup> but suggests that glorifying the mother has led to the perpetuation of stereotypes such as matriarch or mammy figures.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, no such stereotypes are pervasive in the representation of mothers in *Pynter Bender*. The relationship between Pynter and his mother is portrayed as complicated, and Elena displays a distance and level of animosity towards Pynter that she does not towards his twin brother Peter. Whilst Pynter is undoubtedly closer to his aunt Tan Cee, Elena does not allow him to forget that he is her child. When Pynter protests at being sent to live with his father, claiming that he wants to stay with Tan, Elena shares harsh words with her son:

'I'll never have to do this with Peter — but you, you different. I don' know what kind of child you is' [...] she took his hands and placed it on the small

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<sup>20</sup> Forbes, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

bulge on the left side of her stomach [...] 'is y'all signature. Is de writing dat y'all leave on me [...] Me, Elena Bender, I'z your modder. So!' (40)

Pynter is constantly reminded of his otherness by his mother and grandmother. Elena propels the superstition with which Deeka regards Pynter, and is often indifferent towards him. She keeps her distance from her 'Jumbie Boy' (4) and it is often only Tan Cee who jumps to Pynter's defence. Regardless, Elena is still protective of her son, and it is she who saves him from Deeka's murder attempt by threatening her own mother with death.

Forbes also highlights a strong and resourceful female character that often appears in male Caribbean nationalist fiction, who is never as strong as the male protagonist, and Tinelle fits this role in *Pynter Bender*. Pynter meets Tinelle in the third section of the novel, when Pynter travels to San Andrews to look for his nephew Paso and rescue his friend Arilon from the army barracks. Tinelle and her brother Hugo work with Paso in the fight for independence, and their house gets used as a safe haven for other revolutionaries. Pynter is told to make contact with Hugo but, after being escorted to the barracks by Tinelle, realises that 'S'not your brother, Hugo, who run things round here. Is you.' (340) Tinelle reveals her influence among the rebel men, and readers are introduced to a powerful character, but this power soon wanes after she is introduced to Pynter. The two of them quickly develop a relationship, and though small mention is made of Tinelle's 'nightly planning meetings' (398) with her brother, the narrative largely and quickly reduces her to the role of Pynter's lover. She fusses over Pynter making a good impression on her aunt (374), worries about his health, and fears his possible infidelity. Tinelle's strength and resourcefulness is subtly undermined by her love for Pynter. The characterisation of women in *Pynter Bender* is fraught with discontinuity, and through the characterisation of Tinelle, the novel reflects contemporary gender debates regarding the paradox of female agency existing in tandem with patriarchal ideology. Though Tinelle is largely independent, she is a victim of patriarchal ideology, and the novel demonstrates the diminishing effects of this patriarchy through her characterisation.

Though his characterisation of Tinelle adheres to the stereotypes established within the tradition of Caribbean male nationalist writing, Ross' overall representation of women is contradictory. Similarly, Ross' engagement with Caribbean masculinity is equally complex, since he chooses on some occasions to reject the gendered



stereotypes often found in twentieth-century Caribbean nationalist texts, and at other times to subvert them. *Pynter Bender* offers an interrogation of Caribbean masculinity, and Ross makes connections between colonialism and the walking away of men — walking away here being symbolic of male absence and marginalisation. Far from championing the traditional construct of masculinity, Ross offers a critique of it through his disruption of gendered typecasting — an idea that I will further explore in the next section of this chapter.

Ross' novel allows the reader to explore the interior lives of his characters in a manner that allows for a rich interrogation of the novel's central themes. *Pynter Bender* is split into three books, named 'Eyes,' 'Hands,' and 'Heart'. Sethi suggests that the named sections contribute to Ross' exploration of the way 'cane-cutting affects the perception, the body, the feelings'.<sup>23</sup> I would agree with Sethi's observation, as one of the themes prevalent in *Pynter Bender* is the consideration of the effects of colonialism, symbolised by the overarching image of the cane, on the people of Grenada. I would also contend that, as a bildungsroman, the novel's three sections highlight Pynter's personal journey of growth, and his evolving perception as he renegotiates his relationship with home.

'Eyes' opens with Pynter watching. The narrator describes the protagonist as 'feeding his eyes on the glitter and the green and on the throbbing reds and yellows [...] The glare hurt his eyes.' (3) Pynter's perception is newly broadened through his recently gifted sight. At the opening of the novel, with his eyes offering too raw and vivid a view of the world, Pynter complains to Tan Cee, 'Don' wan' my eyes no more [...] Wish I never have dem'. (7) Initially, Pynter is reluctant to see the world in a new way, which is further evidenced by his reluctance to live with his father, Manuel Forsyth. Seemingly content with being blind and remaining in the family home, Pynter is initially forced into beginning his journey of development, but his perception is once more broadened upon meeting his father. For example, Manuel teaches his son to read, a skill which Pynter uses to uncover his family history and thus learn more about himself. Pynter finds letters written by his mother, and describes the reading of these letters as 'rebuilding his and Peter's history'. (52) The narrator suggests that Pynter 'found his mother' (50) through the letters, suggesting that the ability to read affords Pynter a new perspective on his mother and, by extension, the

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<sup>23</sup> Sethi (para 2 of 5).

world. It is interesting that it is his mother's letters that offer Pynter this extra insight, as it once again reinforces the matrifocal nature of his family. Even when living with his father, through her letters, Elena is a central feature of Pynter's socialisation and development. He is offered an insight into his matrilineage, which serves as an important building block for his journey of progression.

The second book in *Pynter Bender*, 'Hands,' has a larger emphasis on the body, movement, and progress. The section opens with a description of the effects of cane-cutting on the body: 'The cane-cutting season, the long hot months they called the Stretch, brought with it some kind of labour that deadened the eyes and numbed the tongue [...] They came home each evening smelling of the heat and straw down there'. (157) This passage evokes the hardness of a life wrapped up in cane production, and the way that the cane affects the other senses. So severe is the feeling of cane on the hands that it blunts the ability to see, taste, or smell anything outside of it. This description also serves as an indictment of the suffocating reality of colonialism, a system that smothers indigenous cultures and impacts all facets of the daily lives of its subjects, similar to the way that the cane deadens the senses of all those working amongst it.

'Hands' details Pynter's experience in the school system, which serves as his closest encounter with colonial influence. Pynter takes pride in his colonial education, relaying to his aunt Patty the classic tales of Oedipus, Laius and Teiresias. (172) Initially his education alienates him from his family, whom he dismisses as being unable to understand him due to their lack of formal education. He is consumed by his school life, but his attitude gradually shifts as he recognises colonialism's overpowering effects. By the end of the second book, Pynter initiates the community's Guy Fawkes Night rituals, in spite of the state-sanctioned curfew, and establishes himself as a revolutionary in the face of impending independence.

'Heart' is the only book in *Pynter Bender* that does not open against the backdrop of Old Hope's cane fields. Instead, Ross describes Pynter as living in the town of San Andrews, where he resides until the novel's conclusion. Far from the 'bright morning air' and 'dark leaf tunnel of the bamboos' (3) described in chapter one, the final section of the novel describes Pynter sitting on a 'high-ridge road', looking down upon 'the three church towers on Cathedral Street; the dead lighthouse [...] the high dark place that was Fort Grey'. (329) Urban life is described as dull and lifeless, in complete opposition to the vibrancy of Ross' rural community. However,

despite its seemingly grey opening, 'Heart' brings to fruition Pynter's journey, and sees the birth of an independent Grenada. If the cane is representative of colonialism, then the town symbolises the resilience of Grenadian people as they move away from colonialism and towards independence. The narrator describes,

San Andrews was like no town in the world. It could not die. Its face was turned towards the sea. It took everything that the hurricanes that came in from the ocean threw at it, fell flat on its foundations, then rebuilt itself straight after. (392)

Like the island's inhabitants, who suffer through the indignities and injustices of colonialism, the town is able to build itself back up in the face of hardship. In this respect, then, San Andrews becomes the ideal backdrop from which to witness the rise of Grenada's independence. Pynter has to move from his rural village to a larger town in order to complete his bildungsroman narrative. Despite the vibrancy and liveliness of Old Hope, the inhabitants' dependency on the cane fields, and the inescapability of the colonial connection, mean that Pynter must leave this home behind in order to progress as an adult and in a newly independent nation.

In *Pynter Bender*, Ross employs a third-person narrator, but Pynter is the primary focaliser and this gives the reader access to Pynter's mind by revealing his thought processes. In 'Eyes,' for example, after leaving his father's home, the narrator describes the way in which Pynter resolves to remember Manuel: '[h]is father's words — *Remember me* — were like the drumming of fingers in Pynter's head. He patterned his walking to the rhythm of their syllables, searching those two words for meaning he knew was hidden there.' (104) The narrative then moves quickly and seamlessly to Pynter's thoughts about his grandmother Deeka, who is only tangentially related to his initial concern. This seemingly random movement in focus echoes the non-linear way in which the mind works. Thoughts of Deeka once again cause Pynter to reflect on his father, concluding within himself that 'people did not die. As long as memories lived they did not.' (104) This resolution then prompts Pynter to once again think about Deeka and the Bender family. Ross' style of narration is effective in evoking a sense of connectedness between Pynter and his family. Even when thinking of his father, the Bender women are recurring images in Pynter's mind, and Ross is able to demonstrate the ways that this matrifocal family unit affects Pynter's personal development. By giving the reader access to the mind of the protagonist and developing a narrative that, in parts, mirrors the non-linearity

of the mind, Ross is able to develop his bildungsroman by demonstrating how exterior events influence and affect Pynter's psyche, and highlight how significant the family is to Pynter's socialisation.

Ross' employment of orality, and the use of storytelling as a theme, offers itself as a means of character development, and as another lens through which matrifocality is explored throughout the novel. Denise Decaires Narain says of orality in the Caribbean:

'The oral', particularly as it is manifested in Creole speech, has become a key marker of cultural authenticity and is frequently invoked as metonymic of the everyday texture of women's lives. The emphasis on orality has its genesis in heated debates in the 1960s about the use of Creole speech in literary discourse as the appropriate vehicle for avoiding the cultural values inherent to Standard English and European literary forms.<sup>24</sup>

Though Ross' narrator speaks in Standard English, the dialogue is written exclusively in Grenadian creole which, in light of Narain's statement, enhances both the representation of rural matrifocality and the postcolonial bildungsroman by championing the many voices of the people. However, because the novel's most prevalent voice — that of the narrator — uses Standard English, I would argue that the narrative highlights another paradox prevalent in Caribbean society. Creole English exists alongside Standard English, similar to the way in which matrifocality is evident against the backdrop of patriarchy.

Writing about orality in Jamaica, Carolyn Cooper suggests that '[upward] mobility in Jamaica requires the shedding of the old skin of early socialisation: mother tongue, mother culture [...] the feminised discourse of voice, identity and native knowledge'.<sup>25</sup> Cooper suggests that Caribbean Creole and the practices associated with it — such as storytelling, creolised spiritual practices and social engagements — are feminised and stigmatised, and that, in order to progress socially, people are encouraged to shed native practices and embrace colonial cultures. I propose that the interaction between traditional and colonial cultural practices described by Cooper mirrors, in part, the paradox Momsen outlines about

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<sup>24</sup> Denise Decaires Narain, 'Writing "Home": Mediating between "the Local" and "the Literary" in a Selection of Postcolonial Women's Texts', *Third World Quarterly*, 26.3 (2005) 497-508 (p. 498).

<sup>25</sup> Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 2-3.

matrifocality existing alongside patriarchal attitudes. Creolised practices thrive in the Caribbean, whilst colonial cultures are simultaneously upheld and preferred.

Barbara Lalla argues that the use of Creole in their narratives is an act of resistance by Caribbean writers. She contends, 'simultaneously authoritative yet disobedient, the Creole in the literary discourse both manifests and resists language prestige in conveying the multiple and dissonant dimensions of Caribbean identity.'<sup>26</sup> By constructing a narrative partly written in Grenadian Creole, Ross suggests that such creolised practices are still important. Pynter's narrative of progression climaxes with him leaving Grenada, having received a colonial education whilst still engaging with his creolised upbringing. The narrative encourages an appreciation of creolised values and customs, including local language, and an understanding that they are necessary factors for progression in the Caribbean.

In *Pynter Bender*, the young hero's earliest experiences of socialisation are informed, almost entirely, by women and therefore practices heavily associated with Caribbean creolised cultures are integral to his childhood. One such practice that Ross repeatedly depicts is storytelling in the Bender home. The art of storytelling serves as both a form of instruction and a way for characters to engage with one another. It is Deeka, the head of the Bender household who is charged with the responsibility of being the Bender storyteller, and she uses her stories, not only as a source of entertainment, but also a way to covertly convey messages to her children. The narrator comments:

It was the way Deeka told these stories, the events the same, the messages different every time. It might be about daughters who disappeared in secret and returned home with children whose fathers they refused to name, in which case her eyes would keep returning to Elena [...] The first time Patty brought Leroy to the yard she spoke about girl children who came home with their men, locked themselves up in their bedrooms with them for days, doing *what* she just could not imagine. (21)

Deeka's stories become parables for her family, and Pynter's earliest lessons are conveyed through an oral tradition that colonial culture sought to destroy. Storytelling gives the Bender family the opportunity to learn from one another and connect through their shared history. Their relatedness becomes compromised when Pynter

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Lalla, 'Creole and Respec': Authority and Identity in the Development of Caribbean Literary Discourse', in *Caribbean Literary Discourse: Voice and Cultural Identity in the Anglophone Caribbean*, ed. by Barbara Lalla, Jean D'Costa and Velma Pollard (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), pp. 101-111 (p. 108). ProQuest eBook.

starts attending school and his level of communication develops to include reading and writing. With his ability to read, Pynter is given books of Greek mythology, and tries to take on the role of family storyteller by relaying Greek tragedies to his aunts. For example, he narrates the stories of Teiresias and Oedipus: 'He meet a woman one day [...] And 'twas awright until he find out that woman was his mother. Just thinking about it nearly kill him. He so shame he blind 'imself.' (173) Pynter chooses not to read the story straight from the book, but gives his own version, speaking in the creole with which his family is familiar. However, the stories unsettle the Bender women. He is unable to relate to them appropriately, which may be caused in part by the kinds of stories he chooses to tell, but also in part because storytelling is the job of the women, specifically Deeka. Pynter disrupts the ritual by allowing it to be infiltrated by a male voice telling European stories.

During the era of slavery in the Caribbean, African oral traditions were driven out of the public sphere as a subtle way for colonisers to undermine and illegitimise African cultures. As a result, Joan Anim-Addo suggests, storytelling was driven into the 'private domestic space,'<sup>27</sup> and women, in their new role as head of household, became responsible for the 'transmission of cultural information'.<sup>28</sup> The narrator describes Deeka as she tells one of her stories:

She spoke of the glittering black sand beaches of the north where she came from, of Atlantic breakers as tall as ships, collapsing at the feet of cliffs so high their foam looked like white lacing on a deep-blue dress. It was from the lip of one of those precipices that the pure-blood of her people — the first humans on these islands — had launched themselves and left the earth for good. (139)

Deeka's own history, her cultural legacy, is entwined with the Grenadian landscape. As Lorna Burns notes, 'Colonialism saw not only the radical redefinition of the Caribbean population but also the appropriation of the landscape itself by the colonial imagination'.<sup>29</sup> Historically, colonial writers feminized the landscapes of their colonies in order to further emphasize their patriarchal ownership over it. Ross' reference to the 'deep-blue dress' (139) of the sea evokes this colonial tradition of a gendered landscape. However, by referencing the first people on the island, Ross

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<sup>27</sup> Joan Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body: History, Language & African-Caribbean Women's Writing* (London: Mango, 2007), p. 143.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> Lorna Burns, 'Landscape and Genre in the Caribbean Canon: Creolizing the Poetics of Place and Paradise', *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 17.1 (2008), 20-41 (p. 20).

rejects the authority of the colonial powers. The description of the cliff Ross offers is a reference to a place known locally as Leaper's Hill in Sauteurs, Grenada. The cliff is made famous by the group of indigenous Kalinago people who, in their refusal to accept the rule of the French during the seventeenth century, jumped off the precipice to their deaths.<sup>30</sup> Deeka begins her story with the Kalinago people, and then her talk returns to Old Hope. The progression of her story suggests that the same spirit of independence in the Kalinago people can be found in the people of Old Hope, and prophesises another rebellion against colonialism on the island.

The autonomy that Anim-Addo argues that women gain from their roles as storytellers is reinforced by Ross' representation of Deeka. However, she largely takes advantage of this power to tell her family stories about her husband, John Seegal. She uses her authority as family story teller to uphold the patriarchal ideal of a dutiful and loving husband, even though the reality is somewhat different. Deeka boasts to her children and grandchildren of theirs being 'the greatest love story in the world' (19), and forces them to listen to her relay the story time and time again, without it ever being concluded. Tan Cee says of her mother, 'There were women like Deeka [...] who tied their lives to a man's too tight they forget they ever owned one. And when that man got up and walked, it was not just his life he took, he went with theirs as well.' (105) Christine Barrow suggests that the representation of women in Caribbean literature has expanded, and the 'respectable wife and mother' stereotype of the 1960s was replaced by that of the 'powerful matriarch'.<sup>31</sup> Ross' depiction of Deeka as being heavily influenced by her absent husband adds new insight into her characterisation and disrupts both of the stereotypes that Barrow highlights through characterising her as ultimately vulnerable, despite her position of authority and respect.

Through the postcolonial bildungsroman genre, and by engaging with the conventions of male Caribbean nationalist writing, *Pynter Bender* offers a unique lens through which the reader can consider Ross' representation of gender and, by extension, matrifocality. By setting Pynter's journey of progress at the cusp of Grenada's independence, Ross is able to symbolise the birth of nationalism through

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<sup>30</sup> Lennox Honeychurch, 'The Leap at Sauteurs: The lost cosmology of indigenous Grenada', *Lennox Honeychurch* [online] <<http://www.lennoxhoneychurch.com/article.cfm?id=392>> [accessed 2 March 2016].

<sup>31</sup> Christine Barrow, 'Caribbean Gender Ideologies: Introduction and Overview', in *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*, ed. by Christine Barrow (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1998), p. xi.

the novel's protagonist. Ross sometimes adheres to the genre conventions of Caribbean male nationalist writers that reduce women characters to stereotypical archetypes, and at other times subverts them. Though he writes complex female characters, the fact that the novel focuses on the development of a male protagonist often results in women being marginalised in the narrative, and Tinelle is a good example of this. All of the women in *Pynter Bender* are strong and take central positions within their families and communities, but an interrogation of masculinity is privileged in the narrative.

### **Matrifocality and Missing Men**

In writing a male protagonist as symbolic of the emerging independent nation, *Pynter Bender* is primarily concerned with representing and exploring Caribbean masculinity. Rhoda Reddock suggests that the origin of masculinity studies in the Caribbean is 'located in concerns about the Black family'.<sup>32</sup> She continues by arguing that 'the concept of matrifocality emerged out of this concern with the perceived "marginality" of men in Afro-Caribbean family forms'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the study of Caribbean masculinity is inextricably entwined with that of the family. Due to the emphasis on masculinity, the utilisation of the 'missing man' trope in *Pynter Bender*, and because of existing correlations between matrifocality and male marginality in the social sciences, I suggest that the representation of matrifocality in Ross' novel resonates with Eurocentric anthropological perspectives.<sup>34</sup> The novel's engagement with Caribbean masculinity is ultimately critical, and Ross creates links between colonialism, masculinity, and the male desire to walk away. However, *Pynter Bender* does not represent matrifocality as a non-normative family structure, nor does he suggest it is problematic. Thus, the novel does not perfectly align itself with the earliest Eurocentric perspectives regarding matrifocality. Rather, *Pynter Bender* is successful in engaging with critical discourse about Caribbean masculinity and celebrating the centrality of women in the fictional community of Old Hope.

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<sup>32</sup> Rhoda Reddock, 'Men as Gendered Beings: The Emergence of Masculinity Studies in the Anglophone Caribbean', *Social and Economic Studies*, 52.3 (2003), 69-117 (p.93).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Blackwood, 'Wedding Bell Blue: Marriage, Missing Men and Matrifocal Follies', *American Ethnologist*, 32.1 (2005), 3-19.



Matrifocality in *Pynter Bender* is represented as symptomatic of missing or marginal men in the novel, and for this reason I have determined it important to consider Ross' representation of Caribbean masculinity, and the effects upon his fictional family. Linden Lewis offers the following definition of masculinity:

Masculinity is both a set of practices or behaviours and an ideological position within gender relations [...] Ultimately, men seek the approval of other men in the performance of their masculinity [...] If at one level masculinity is about acquiring, maintaining or reproducing power, then it invariably comes into conflict with femininity, which is forced into struggling politically to claim a space — a right to co-exist — in this social matrix.<sup>35</sup>

Lewis suggests that power and control are particularly important in the construction of masculinity across the Caribbean, and scholars such as Sir Hilary Beckles emphasise that the desire for power might be related to the region's colonial history.<sup>36</sup> He argues that black masculinities 'were politicised within the context of white patriarchal ideological representations. In social relations, the black male and his offspring were fed, clothed, and sheltered by white men'. As such, during the era of slavery, African Caribbean men were feminised.<sup>37</sup>

One of the initial and most contentious studies published on the subject of Caribbean masculinity was Errol Miller's *Men at Risk* (1991), in which he suggests that the teaching profession in the Caribbean 'shifted from being male dominated to female dominated as a result of the intention of those holding central positions in the society to restrict black men to occupations related to agricultural and industrial labour'.<sup>38</sup> Though Miller's thesis was related primarily to his perceived marginalisation of men within the teaching profession, the concept, Reddock suggests, was 'attractive to men who were growing concerned over what they perceived as unacceptable transformations in the discourse of gender relations', and thus made the transition to being a mode of discourse within the popular imagination.<sup>39</sup> Miller's controversial thesis has since been challenged multiple times,

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<sup>35</sup> Linden Lewis, 'Caribbean Masculinity: Unpacking the Narrative', in *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean*, ed. by Linden Lewis (Gainesville, Florida: The University Press of Florida, 2003), pp. 94-125 (pp. 95-97).

<sup>36</sup> Hilary Beckles, *Black Masculinity in Caribbean Slavery* (St. Michael, Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Errol Miller, *Men at Risk* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jamaica Publishing House, 1991), p. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Reddock, p. 95.

but he makes an interesting point about the relationship between black men and the colonial patriarchy:

Crudely stated, the marginalisation hypothesis is that patriarchs, men of the dominant group, in defending their groups' interests from challenges from men of other groups in society, will relax their patriarchal closure over education, employment, earning and status symbols, thus allowing their women and the women of the challenging groups most of the opportunities that otherwise would have gone to men of the challenging group.<sup>40</sup>

According to Miller, black men in the Caribbean are marginalised by a patriarchal ideology that deems their masculinity as alien and in need of subordination. He argues that it is not only women who are victims of patriarchy, and Ross engages with this idea in *Pynter Bender*, which sees a number of men desperate to escape Old Hope and the colonial encounter symbolised by its cane fields.

In her essay 'Requiem for the Male Marginalisation Thesis in the Caribbean', Eudine Barriteau argues that 'Caribbean masculinities are yet to be adequately theorised', and suggests that Miller's theory of marginalisation 'creates an inaccurate, deeply flawed examination of the issues confronting Caribbean men'.<sup>41</sup> She looks at the conceptualisation of masculinity across a number of institutions and concludes that Miller's reading is one-dimensional, arguing that it 'does a disservice to understanding the many manifestations of Caribbean masculinity, and therefore it is inadequate in providing guidelines for further research and policy on issues affecting and affected by Caribbean men in relation to changing identities and rules'.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Barriteau argues that whilst theorising Caribbean masculinity is a necessity, it should be informed by the need to reveal evolving gender ideologies, consider how these evolving ideologies affect male and female gender identities, and thus reflect on the wider effects of these on society.<sup>43</sup> Ross' novel offers a space for a nuanced engagement with debates about Caribbean masculinity that does not reduce men to victimhood, but seeks to sympathetically represent some of the barriers faced by men in economically unstable, rural communities.

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, p. 166.

<sup>41</sup> Eudine Barriteau, 'Requiem for the Male Marginalisation Thesis: Death of a Non Theory', in *Confronting Power, Theorizing Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in the Caribbean*, ed. by Eudine Barriteau (Kingston, Jamaica, University of the West Indies Press, 2003), pp. 324-255 (p. 325).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 352.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

That the rural community of *Pynter Bender* is dependent on sugar cane for their economic welfare is significant to Ross' representation of both matrifocality and masculinity. By choosing to portray a poor black family living and working among the sugar canes — a powerful and recurring symbol of slavery and colonialism — Ross evokes the spirit of slavery in his representation of the family. The novel also draws correlations between poverty, marginal men and matrifocality, in a way that echoes the contentions of early twentieth century academics writing about matrifocal and female-headed households in the Caribbean. For example, in *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism and Politics* (1996), Raymond T. Smith finds connections between economic marginalisation amongst men and their inability to fulfil gender roles within the domestic space, and suggests this is one of the causes for the high rate of matrifocality in the region.<sup>44</sup> *Pynter Bender* does make this connection, and in this respect it echoes some of the ideas prevalent within Eurocentric anthropological perspectives. However, the text nonetheless offers a more nuanced portrayal of matrifocality than can be found in this phase of anthropology. It achieves this through an appreciation of the matrifocal family, and its critical engagement with discourses of Caribbean masculinity.

The third chapter of *Pynter Bender* opens:

The talk of women taught Pynter Bender one thing: men walked. The women spoke of it as if it were an illness — a fever that men were born with, for which there was no accounting and no cure. It could come upon them anytime, but more likely halfway through the harvesting of the canes in April [...] That was when their men started looking southwards at the triangle of blue between the hills [...] Over the months, the savings, the borrowed money towards the beige felt hat [...] And of course a coat. (25-26)

The walking away of men from Old Hope is wrapped up in sugar production. The novel's narrator reflects that it is usually during cane harvesting season that men begin looking for their escape. They are described as looking up 'from pulling ratoons from the earth and suddenly see nothing but the canes, stretching all the way to the end of his days [...] And he would imagine himself walking on streets with lights'. (26) Janet Momsen suggests that, in the Caribbean, 'matrilocal residential patterns' are linked to 'gender specific migration'.<sup>45</sup> She argues that the yard is

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<sup>44</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *The Matrifocal Family: Power, Pluralism, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> Momsen, p. 47.

primarily a female space, and that 'young girls are encouraged to stay within the yard while boys are allowed to wander.'<sup>46</sup> This notion of the privilege of freedom that boys are granted serves as a theory to help explain why, though it is both the men and women of Old Hope who work in the cane fields, it is only the men who feel compelled to walk away — they are raised with the knowledge that they can wander, whilst girls are encouraged to stay within the domestic space.

The men in *Pynter Bender* do not leave Old Hope without a coat, suggesting that they are following the patterns of Caribbean men migrating to America or Britain. Where they end up is inconsequential, and the narrator explains that ““There” was wherever in the world someone wanted a pair of hands to do something they didn’t want to do themselves. “There” was anywhere a man could turn his back on cane.’ (26) In this passage, Ross suggests that migration is about escape. It is about escaping the colonial legacy represented by the sugar cane, and it is about being free to leave the yard and wander. This is further evidenced by Ross’ hypothetical male character’s ambiguity when addressing his woman: ““Don’ know, jus’ following my foot.” And the soft pad of his shoes would melt into the night.’ (27) Men, Ross suggests, are looking for a freedom they are unable to find whilst living amongst cane fields, a constant reminder of the shackles of colonialism.

Kenneth Ramchand offers an interesting analysis of the manifestation of male marginality and insecurity in Earl Lovelace’s novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance* (1979), wherein he makes connections between Lovelace’s representation of masculinity and his male characters’ violent tendencies. Ramchand says ‘Notions of masculinity in Trinidad are historically linked to the figure of the bad-john.’<sup>47</sup> The bad-john is defined in the *Dictionary of the English/ Creole in Trinidad and Tobago* (2009) as a man willing to use violence, or one who likes being known as a dangerous figure.<sup>48</sup> While it is Fish Eye who most embodies the bad-john in Lovelace’s novel, Ramchand argues that the novel’s hero Aldrick also embodies elements of the archetype. He suggests that Lovelace neither completely condemns nor excuses the violence of his male characters. Rather, he attempts to ‘speculate imaginatively and

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<sup>46</sup> Momsen, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Ramchand, ‘Calling all Dragons: the Crumbling of Caribbean Masculinity’, in *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analysis*, ed. Rhoda E. Reddock (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), pp. 309-252 (p.314).

<sup>48</sup> Lise Winer, *Dictionary of the English/Creole in Trinidad and Tobago: On Historical Principles* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009). ProQuest eBook.

compassionately about what lies beneath the surface manifestations' and uses Aldrick as a character to express 'some of the ruling constructions of masculinity' whilst simultaneously pointing towards a 'viable reconstruction.'<sup>49</sup> Lovelace, Ramchand contends, is interested in examining some of the destructive masculine tendencies in Caribbean men, in order to work towards an alternative imagining of Caribbean masculinity.

I propose that, in *Pynter Bender*, Jacob Ross portrays crime in a manner similar to the way the Lovelace uses violence and the figure of the bad-john. Some of the novel's male characters are shaped by both their engagement with crime and a desire to escape Old Hope, and acts of crime in the novel are symbolic acts of resistance against a colonial regime that leaves its male subjects feeling powerless. Ramchand suggests that the bad-john in *The Dragon Can't Dance* represents, in the extreme, the black man's need to be seen and acknowledged as a person.<sup>50</sup> In *Pynter Bender*, Birdie's repeated return to crime functions in a similar manner because Birdie feels it is the only way he can be seen in an oppressive system that has left him feeling emasculated.

Pynter's uncle Birdie is Deeka's only son and, for the majority of the novel, his time is either spent in jail or as a wanted fugitive. At the beginning of the novel, upon his release, and when asked by Deeka when he'll be going back, Birdie promises his mother 'I goin straight this time, Ma. No more jail for me.' (35) The narrator comments, 'Birdie spoke of prison as if it were another country' (36), a sentiment which echoes the migration of the hypothetical man at the beginning of the third chapter of *Pynter Bender*. If prison is like another country, then it serves as a place that Birdie can escape to. Unable to save or borrow money to pay for his passage away from the island, Birdie resorts to crime in an ill-informed bid to escape from the yard, though it does not afford him the freedom to wander.

After his return from prison, Birdie promises his mother that he will live honestly, but returns to crime only a short while later. As well as stealing food and livestock for his family, Birdie sets himself another task. The narrator says,

Birdie sneaked off during the day and retuned home with ridiculous things: a couple of giant plants sitting in heavy, white stone pots; an iron gate;

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<sup>49</sup> Ramchand, p. 315.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

three beach chairs; an aluminium oar; the two back wheels of a car; a child's plastic bicycle. (109)

Finally, Birdie brings home a large piece of wood, and the narrator reveals that Birdie is trying to create a flying machine. Birdie knows that he is about to be arrested again for this most recent string of thefts. Having spent a lot of time with his nephews, it is at this point that Birdie realises that his performance of masculinity through acts of petty crime is not the best example to set. With this knowledge, Birdie sets about making the flying machine for his nephews and the other boys in the community. To Birdie, the plane then becomes the most viable way that the younger generation of men in his community can construct their masculinity away from suffocating legacy of colonial influence and corrupt state leadership.

The patriarchal colonial system championed the idea of the male as breadwinner, public authority and household ruler. However, the socio-economic realities of the region have meant that it has not always been possible for men to fulfil this construction of masculinity. Ross' engagement with criminality as a motif for his exploration of masculinity in the Caribbean contributes to the novel's representation of Momsen's gender paradox. His primary attention to the construction of Caribbean masculinity offers the novel the opportunity to engage with debates on matrifocality because he utilises the 'missing man' trope that Europocentric anthropological perspectives so often used when theorising Caribbean family structures.

The definition of matrifocality given in *The Encyclopaedia of Motherhood* suggests that 'Matrifocality is characteristic of a cultural cosmology that radically differs from the exaltation of the nuclear family as the most central building block of a society. Cultures that allow for matrifocality tend to be much more communal in nature'.<sup>51</sup> Jacob Ross' Old Hope is presented as having a strong sense of community, and being largely dependent on its women for continuity. This sense of community is informed by missing men, making Ross' representation of matrifocality paradoxical in that patriarchal attitudes are still prevalent.

Ross includes an illustration of the Bender family tree at the start of the novel that includes three generations of the protagonist's family. It is a linear family tree, including the names of the fathers of the Bender women's children. Where children's

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<sup>51</sup> Andrea O'Reilly [ed], *Encyclopaedia of Motherhood* (London: Sage, 2010), p. 736.

fathers are unknown, or not involved in their lives, they are omitted from the tree. For example, for Elena's third child Lindy, no paternal name is listed. (xi) The tree is an interesting addition to the text because there is tension between it and the content of the novel. Whilst the text successfully captures the non-linear and non-nuclear nature of the Bender family, the family tree is insufficient in explaining its matrifocal nature. For example, the names of Elena Bender and Manuel Forsyth appear on the same line, as equals. The family tree does not begin to capture the reality of Manuel's absence in his children's lives. The linear family tree does not support the non-traditional family structures found so often in the Caribbean, nor is it representative of female centrality. I engage with an alternative conceptualisation of Caribbean genealogy in my discussion of Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* (2014).

In *Pynter Bender*, Pynter and his twin brother Peter are brought up in a house of women: their grandmother Deeka, mother Elena, and fiercely protective aunts Tan Cee and Patty the Pretty. The family's matrifocality extends so far from the conventional mother-child unit that it is usually Pynter's aunt that runs to his defence. When a local woman, bothered by Pynter's presence at the river, calls him 'Jumbie Boy [...] ugly likkle mako-boy' (4), it is Tan Cee who confronts the offender. She says, 'Yes, he different. Lemme tell y'all what make 'im different: he mine [...] if dis ever happm again, I kill de bitch who cause it.' (9) Tan Cee taking ownership of Pynter suggests that matrifocality in the novel is not only about the mother-child unit, but the centrality of women within families and communities generally.

*Pynter Bender* opens: 'Saturday mornings, the women came down to the river. They were larger than their menfolk.' (3) The first sentence of the novel encourages a strong sense of community that places women at the centre. The second sentence however, makes reference to the men of Old Hope, suggesting that their presence is still important in maintaining the fabric of their community. The narrative continues:

Each woman had her own little acre of stones on which she spread her washing [...] Pynter knew them by the stories they told each other and laughed over: the illnesses of their children, the appetites of their menfolk, the little things they wanted for themselves that their men would never give them. (3-4)

Ross affords each woman her own little space at the river, her small space of dominion. Indeed, the river itself is a space that Ross gives to the women of Old

Hope. But even this space is informed by men through the women's chosen topics of conversation. Their talk starts with children, but it soon turns to the men in their community, and their wrongdoings:

He heard them even when their voices dipped; they seemed to bring their heads together, especially when their talking turned to terrible things. Like why pretty Miss Madrone no longer came to the river with them. She carried an illness between her thighs, which her man had brought home to her [...] Pynter learned about the child Sadi Marie's eleven-year-old daughter was carrying for Sadi Marie's man [...] the women would speak of what a man called Gideon had done to his mother a coupla months before Peter and he were born. (4)

Ross highlights infidelity, paedophilia and violence as being some of the wrongdoings that Old Hope men commit. The women's social interactions are informed by men who are, largely, missing or marginal figures within the community. It is because the men are missing that the women, in their roles as mother-figures, are central to the family and the community. Ross presents an array of male characters with negative traits. Far from championing these toxic constructions of masculinity, Ross challenges the reader to understand the root of these behaviours, and witness the damaging effects they have on the wider community. Ross is fairly sympathetic to characters like Coxy, or the hypothetical man of chapter three who walks away, because the novel is an attempt to lay bare the colonised male psyche at the eve of the island's independence. And even though he is a thief who becomes a fugitive to escape returning to jail, the narrative is similarly sympathetic towards Birdie. When there is community mobilisation, it is often to protect men. For example, when Birdie decides to flee the country, fearing that he will be killed rather than imprisoned, Deeka calls on the Old Hope community to help him escape. Men and women alike come to Birdie's aid: the men 'gather by the standpipe at the roadside' (187) ready for dispute, and the women warn the Bender family of oncoming soldiers. Old Hope, in this instance, is a matrifocal community because it comes together under the command of Deeka, but it only does so to help a man. This again speaks to Momsen's argument that patriarchy exists 'within a system of matrifocal and matrilocal families'.<sup>52</sup> Because of the patriarchal nature of Grenadian society, matrifocality is heavily informed by men, and thus the novel reflects this paradox within the narrative.

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<sup>52</sup> Momsen, p. 45.



In her consideration of Caribbean matrifocality, Marietta Morrissey contends:

Definitions of matrifocality need to be qualified to acknowledge the emotional and social contributions of fathers [...] Moreover, while male authority may be lacking in some matrifocal families, male authority embodied in the patriarchal family is often an ideal in so-called matrifocal families.<sup>53</sup>

Morrissey suggests firstly that matrifocal families can exist with a male presence, and also that, due to the patriarchal nature of Caribbean societies, a male-headed family is often an ideal scenario for matrifocal units. The Bender family is a literary example of the matrifocal model that Morrissey describes. John Seegal, already dead at the start of the novel, is an overwhelming presence throughout the narrative. During an evening of storytelling, Deeka first describes the Bender house as 'the yard his grandfather had blasted out of rocks [...] with every girl-child he gave Deeka, he carved out a place where one day they would build their house.' (17) Even though Tan Cee and Patty have their own homes, 'John Seegal's was the one in which the family always gathered.' (19) His paternal influence is always felt, regardless of the matrifocal structure of the Bender family. Deeka relays on to her family the words of her husband after Tan Cee is born: 'no man alive would ever rule his women.' (17) Though a matrifocal family, the ghost of the patriarch influences the Bender women

The Bender family often listen to Deeka tell stories about her husband, and the stories always end with good memories. It is not until later in *Pynter Bender* that the reader and the protagonist are told what happened to John Seegal:

Big John Seegal had wagered her, his house and his three girl children that he was going to cross the Kalivini swamps in the early hours of the morning and emerge from it alive [...] a stinking, bubbling tangle of mangrove where the sharks swim [...] Deeka fought all night to keep him: I every give you cause to feel you not a man? [...] There was something in John Seegal's decision that went beyond his drunkenness. That it had not been made over a glass of rum, but over time. (107-108)

Deeka blames 'this shallow valley' (108) and the sugar cane for driving her husband to suicide. It could be argued that John Seegal willingly leaves Deeka and his family, not only out of pride, but as a conscious decision to escape familial responsibility.

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<sup>53</sup> Marietta Morrissey, 'Explaining the Caribbean Family: Gender ideologies and Gender Relations' in *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*, ed. by Christine Barrow (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1998), pp. 78-90 (p. 82).

However, given Ross' focus on the impact of colonialism on the lives of the community I suggest that Seegal also wanted to escape the cane that was a constant reminder of the colonial power. Through the character of John Seegal, Ross is once again engaging with the notion that matrifocality exists in the Caribbean because of missing or marginal men. It is because of John Seegal's desire to leave that the women of the Bender family become central within the family.

Santay, the local herbalist, offers an example of matrifocality in Old Hope that is dependent solely on the connectedness of women in *Pynter Bender*. Patsy Sutherland argues that 'Grenadians are immersed in a cultural history that is abundant with spiritual and traditional healing practices which have helped to sustain them since the beginning of the slave trade.'<sup>54</sup> Santay is described as having the ability to speak to the dead, and having knowledge of 'every plant on earth that cured or killed.' (10) Her knowledge of natural and traditional healing rituals make her an important figure to the women of Old Hope. The narrator says, 'men never went to her, only the women [...] And there were those like Tan Cee who, every new moon, travelled to her place, lit a fire in her yard, danced and sang songs'. (10) Reference to the new moon suggests that Santay is a practitioner of an African- derived Caribbean religion such as Obeah or Shango, both of which are practised in Grenada. Through her rituals, Santay, like the women Sutherland references in her essay, provides women with 'an avenue to express and process their suffering, transcend everyday experiences of violence and trauma [...] and embark on a journey of recovering and reclaiming their sense of self.'<sup>55</sup> Sutherland also remarks, 'Grenadian women rely on their community as well as their networks of family, friends, ancestors and spirits as coping strategies.'<sup>56</sup> Through Santay, the women in *Pynter Bender* are given the space to express their connectedness to each other and the earth away from men — be they present, marginal, or missing — and patriarchal ideology. Santay creates a space where a matrifocal community can grow with the sole purpose of aiding the healing of women. Hers is the only space like this represented in the novel, and it points towards an imagining of matrifocality away from the trope of the 'missing man'. Though Ross' novel does not fully engage with

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<sup>54</sup> Patsy Sutherland, 'Traditional Healing and Spirituality among Grenadian Women: A Source of Resistance and Empowerment', *Canadian Woman Studies*, 29.1-2 (2011), 43-49 (p. 43).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

this conceptualisation of matrifocality as a tool for healing, it is a representation that I explore later in my thesis, particularly in my analysis of Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006).

Though *Pynter Bender* is celebratory of matrifocality and female centrality, this is inextricably linked to an interrogation of Caribbean masculinity, and therefore resonates with Eurocentric anthropological perspectives that regarded matrifocality as a non-normative result of missing and economically marginal men. Ross focuses on the construction of masculinity in the novel, and though he represents men as traumatised by the colonial encounter, he is ultimately critical of their damaging behaviour. In this respect, he moves beyond Eurocentric perspectives and offers a more nuanced analysis of gender relations in the region. Like Lovelace, Ross deconstructs the traits of toxic masculinity represented in Old Hope, and uses his eponymous protagonist as a figure that points towards a new construction. Because of this focus on masculinity, the novel engages with the paradoxical nature of gender relations in the region. Though the novel represents women with strength and influence, these spaces are often informed by men. Be they the river, where women complain about men's inability to fulfil gender roles, or the Bender household, where Deeka insists on keeping the memory of John Seegal alive, men are represented as a strong presence within matrifocal spaces, regardless of whether they are present or absent.

## Conclusion

*Pynter Bender's* representation of gender identities is entwined with the colonial narrative. Ross' novel charts Grenada's progression towards independence alongside Pynter's towards adulthood. As he matures, Pynter moves further away from Old Hope, which acts in the novel as a rural symbol of the colonial encounter; however, Ross' representation of Old Hope as a symbol is complex. Pynter's personal development can be credited largely to his matrifocal family and the rural community of his childhood. The novel's protagonist is able to leave Grenada to continue his development in Europe, having received both the formal colonial education, and the social, folk and cultural education afforded to him by his family and his life in Old Hope. His matrifocal upbringing is integral to his social development.

Nationalism in the Caribbean was largely understood as being 'the property of man [...] a hetero-male project'.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that Ross chose a male protagonist, whose own bildungsroman mirrors that of the nation. However, though masculinity is the focus of the novel, men do not escape the criticism of the author. *Pynter Bender* offers a nuanced and varied interrogation of masculinity, and Ross presents a number of men whose behaviour is damaging to their families and communities. He also suggests that masculinity can be reconstructed with the birth of nationalism, and uses Pynter as a figure of possibility in this new construction.

Women, too, are subject to varied portrayals in *Pynter Bender*, although their representations can be somewhat contradictory. With some characters, Ross perpetuates gender stereotypes whereas with others he challenges them. Ross' characterisation of Tinelle, for example, is particularly problematic, as the spark she is initially presented as having is quickly diminished as she enters a romantic relationship with Pynter. Ross, however, does move away from the stereotypical characterisation of the matriarch and presents three-dimensional characters such as Deeka and Elena, who are resilient yet vulnerable, and central figures within their family and the community of Old Hope.

Colonialism, and the European patriarchal ideology that was enforced upon the Caribbean as a result, is often cited as the cause for paradoxical gender relations in the region. Women are frequently recognised as exercising a level of power within the domestic space, but the patriarchal nature of public society places men higher in the social hierarchy, regardless of lived experiences of female centrality and autonomy. This paradox is explored within the narrative of *Pynter Bender*, particularly within representations of language and gender, both of which inform the representation of matrifocality which exists alongside patriarchal ideology in the novel. Ross' representation of matrifocality is positive in that women are characterised with strength and influence as a result of a phenomenon that is also successful in encouraging a sense of community. Indeed, the matrifocal family is an integral part of Pynter's narrative progression and thus, by extension, the progression towards independence for Grenada. However, Ross is less concerned with what Laura Herlihy calls 'women's other forms of relatedness', an idea that I will

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<sup>57</sup> Mayer, pp. 1-2.

come to later in my thesis.<sup>58</sup> Rather, his primary concern is Caribbean masculinity, and his contribution to debates about matrifocality are informed by this. Ross portrays matrifocality as a result of missing or marginal men, but he remains celebratory of the resilience of women who exist as central figures within their families and communities.

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<sup>58</sup> Laura Herlihy, 'Matrifocality and Women's Power on the Miskito Coast', *Ethnology*, 46.2 (2008) 133-150 (p. 137).

## Chapter Two: 'Every nigger story soon become a tale 'bout they mother': Slave Women and Rebellion in Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009)

With indigenous populations being practically decimated by colonisers, and the transportation of African slaves and Asian indentured labourers to the islands, slavery has shaped the modern Caribbean in a number of significant ways. Indeed, as explained in my Introduction, there has been a tradition of anthropologists suggesting the inextricable links between the prevalence of matrifocality in the region and its history of slavery. Edith Clarke, for example, contends that, under slavery there was 'no room for the family as a parent-child group in a home', and as such, family patterns were disrupted during this period.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, T. S. Simey argues that 'slavery left its mark deeply imprinted onto the family, and it is thus in the strengths and weaknesses of family life that the characteristic features of West Indian social organisation are most clearly displayed.'<sup>2</sup> Given the tradition of these debates, and as slavery marked the beginning of the history of African people in the Caribbean, it is appropriate to analyse the representation of matrifocal communities in contemporary literary re-imaginings of Caribbean slavery.

In this chapter, I discuss Marlon James' 2009 neo-slave novel, *The Book of Night Women*. There is limited critical material about *Night Women*, and existing perspectives have focused on such issues as the negotiations between sex and race,<sup>3</sup> 'horror poetics',<sup>4</sup> and the implication of Irishmen in plantation violence within the novel.<sup>5</sup> My analysis focuses specifically on the novel's representation of women and the matrifocal community on a Jamaican plantation. I analyse *The Book of Night Women* as a Caribbean neo-slave narrative by considering the way James uses style, form, and language innovatively to contribute to debates about Caribbean

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Clarke, *My Mother who Fathered Me* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Simey, *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Vasquez, 'Violent Liaisons: Historical Crossings and the Negotiation of Sex, Sexuality, and Race in *The Book of Night Women* and *The True History of Paradise*', *Small Axe*, 16.2 (2007), 43-59.

<sup>4</sup> Curdella Forbes, 'Bodies of Horror in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* and Clovis Brown's Cartoons', *Small Axe*, 21.3 (2017), 1-16.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Forter, 'A Good Head and a Better Whip': Ireland, Enlightenment, and the body of slavery in Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*', *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 37.3 (2016), 521-540.

identities and gender. As part of his writing process, James reads scholarly research, and recognises the limitations of historical studies due to the scarcity of material. Due to these limitations, I argue that he chooses to use fiction to re-write the lives of enslaved Caribbean women. In this respect, the novel acts as a neo-archive, a term coined by Erica L. Johnson that describes 'fiction that creates history in the face of its absence'.<sup>6</sup> James joins a tradition of Caribbean writers who engage with a lack of archival material regarding the experiences of enslaved women by offering fictional accounts.

What is particularly unique about James' novel is its representation of matrifocality on the plantation, and the centrality of this female community to the rebellion storyline. As I will demonstrate, through his representation of matrifocality as a strategy for both survival and resistance, James celebrates the unique family and community structure as a testament to the resourcefulness and strength of enslaved women in the Caribbean. He contributes to debates on Caribbean matrifocality by presenting a community that functions as an emotional support network, the driving force of plantation life, and the organising structure behind a mass rebellion. On the novel's fictional plantation, where families are often separated, the kinship network developed by the Night Women is held together by their shared lived experiences, the planning of the novel's mass slave uprising, and the strength of enslaved women.

### **The Neo-Slave Narrative**

James Olney has described the original slave narratives as autobiographical works, wherein the writer 'finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very premise and nature of his narrative which is to give a "picture of slavery as it is."'<sup>7</sup> Olney continues by identifying some of the key stylistic characteristics of a slave narrative. Examples of this include:

Interruptions of the narrative proper by way of declamatory addresses to the reader [...] a bewildering variety of documents — letters to and from the narrator, bills of sale, newspaper clippings, notices of slave auctions

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<sup>6</sup> Erica L. Johnson, 'Building the Neo-Archive: Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*', *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 12.1 (2014), 149-171 (p. 157).

<sup>7</sup> James Olney, "'I was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature', *Callaloo*, 7.20 (1984), 46-73 (p. 48).

and of escaped slaves, certificates of marriage, of manumission, of birth and death, wills, extracts from legal codes [...] and sermons and anti-slavery speeches and essays tacked on at the end to demonstrate post-narrative activities of the narrator.<sup>8</sup>

Slave narratives were largely written for the purpose of supporting abolitionist movements, and they were expected to encourage sympathy among readers. Frances Smith Foster argues that nineteenth century slave narratives were often 'informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels. The action moves from the idyllic life of a garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land.'<sup>9</sup> Slave narratives had to engage with Christian sensibilities and thus were restricted by form and style.

Whilst slave narratives were generally concerned with aiding abolitionist movements, the neo-slave narrative tradition has largely served as a means of re-imagining lost stories, and reclaiming the experiences of enslaved people. The neo-slave narrative is a historical fiction sub-genre that has been defined by A. Timothy Spaulding as a 'contemporary text that deals with slavery in its historical context [...] through its resonance in our contemporary moment [...] or through a reinvention of the formal characteristics of the original slave narratives'.<sup>10</sup> The slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often written by white writers, with the occasional black voice interjecting to support abolitionism. Contemporary black writers, recognising the relative voicelessness of black people during slavery, have found it essential to recreate the slave narrative in a way that adequately reveals, as Spaulding suggests, 'the complexities embedded within the slave experience and obscured by traditional historical accounts.'<sup>11</sup>

Initially, the neo-slave narrative emerged in response to the African American Civil Rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s. In his seminal study *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues that, through their re-imagining of the slave narrative, African American writers 'wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had

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<sup>8</sup> Olney, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> A. Timothy Spaulding, *Reforming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 4.



first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject.<sup>12</sup> The African American literary imagination turned towards the era of slavery as a way of grounding and contextualising contemporary debates and struggles regarding racial tensions.

Rushdy also suggests that, as well as serving as a political tool for the Civil Rights movement, the African American neo-slave narrative opened up debates about black subjectivity, and he argues that contemporary racial identities can be 'mediated through a reconstruction' of the slave experience;<sup>13</sup> an argument relevant not just to North America, but to neo-slave narratives written across the African diaspora. As Kalenda Eaton points out, the neo-slave narrative is a literary form that has allowed many contemporary authors to find their voices and make literary contributions to debates about diasporic identity 'through the process of re-writing early African Diasporic experience.'<sup>14</sup> Maria Helena Lima argues that neo-slave narratives often seek to 're-present unwritten history [... They are] part of a broader context characterised by the importance and necessity of remembering, testifying and passing on those parts of history that are so horrible, negative, and traumatic that they seem unreal.'<sup>15</sup> Through the literary re-imagining of slave subjectivities, writers are creating neo-archives, extending the work historians have done on slavery, and challenging the Eurocentric documentation of the history of slavery. The neo-slave narrative also allows writers from the African diaspora to establish and negotiate the significance of slavery in contemporary discussions about black subjectivity.

The re-imagining of slavery by black writers can be thought of as a revolutionary act of self-conscious 're-memory'. The term 're-memory' was coined by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* (1987), as she describes protagonist Sethe 'remember[ing] something she had forgotten she knew.'<sup>16</sup> Morrison reminds her readers that the past — specifically slavery — does not die, but is repeated. The act of re-memory can be attributed to contemporary writers who create fiction concerning slavery.

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<sup>12</sup> Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Kalenda Eaton, 'Diasporic Dialogues: The Role of Gender, Language and Revision in the Neo-Slave Narrative', *Language Value*, 4.2 (2012), 1-22 (p. 1).

<sup>15</sup> Maria Helena Lima, 'A Written Song: Andrea Levy's Neo-Slave Narrative', *Entertext*, 9 (2012), 135-153 (p. 144.)

<sup>16</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 61.

Spaulding argues that, by reconsidering the slave experience, and giving a literary voice to figures ill-remembered in history, writers of the African diaspora 'reinforce the belief that, in order to create a liberating present, one must first liberate the constraints of the past.'<sup>17</sup> Writers find it necessary to re-write the slave experience in order to negotiate their present. Much existing theory about neo-slave narratives centres on African American literature, but a number of Caribbean writers are amongst those of the African diaspora who have used and adapted the neo-slave genre to re-think contemporary cultural and racial identity. The fluidity with which Caribbean identity is conceptualised, coupled with the desire of these writers to articulate alternative histories, makes the neo-slave narrative an important platform upon which racial, cultural, and gendered identities can be debated and negotiated in a Caribbean context.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the Caribbean neo-slave narrative often focused on the horrors of the Middle Passage. Whilst African American writers were generally setting their neo-slave narratives on the Southern plantations, writers such as Fred D'Aguiar and David Dabydeen, both Caribbean writers who migrated to Britain, combined history with fiction in their works, and retold the lost stories of slaves travelling from Africa to Caribbean plantations.<sup>18</sup> The Middle Passage novel, generally speaking, acted as a mode of commentary about the subjectivity of African slaves, and Britain's complicity in their enslavement. Abigail Ward argues that these writers' need to return to slavery 'arises from an urgent need to understand racial anxieties in twentieth and twenty-first century Britain'.<sup>19</sup> She continues by suggesting that, as well as being concerned with analysing the damaging effects of slavery on contemporary cross-racial relationships, these writers also sought to highlight 'Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade'.<sup>20</sup> Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998) is a key example of this. The narrative is a literary representation of the atrocities that occurred aboard the *Zong*, the historic slave ship best remembered for the crew's murder of over 130 enslaved Africans.<sup>21</sup> The novel's

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<sup>17</sup> Spaulding, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Examples of this are Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts* (1998) and David Dabydeen's *Slave Song* (1984).

<sup>19</sup> Abigail Ward, *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar: Representations of Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Anita Rupprecht, "'A Limited Sort of Property": History, Memory, and the Slave Ship *Zong*', *A Journal of Slave and Post Slave Studies*, 29.2 (2008), 265-277.

emphasis on the Middle Passage resonates with the author's own migrant identity, and his search for home as a West Indian living in Britain.

More recently, the Caribbean neo-slave narrative, such as those written by Marlon James and Andrea Levy, has seemingly moved from the Middle Passage onto the plantation. *The Book of Night Women*, Marlon James' second novel, follows Lilith, an enslaved girl on a Jamaican plantation called Montpelier at the turn of the nineteenth century. A violent act of self-defence forces Lilith into the eye line of Homer and the Night Women, as they plot a nation-wide revolt. *Night Women* is an important addition to the Caribbean neo-slave genre. By positioning a matrifocal community at the heart of a slave rebellion, and fictionalising these women with strength and influence amongst other slaves, James asks that the reader question the prevalent assumption that it was mostly enslaved men who were the predominant figures and instrumental leaders in large and violent slave rebellions across the Caribbean. Barbara Bush argues:

The specific contribution women slaves made to organised slave uprisings is a contentious area of study. As most recorded history is male-biased, contemporary descriptions of slave rebellions focus largely on individual male slaves who were titular leaders; the mass of slaves are depicted as a faceless and genderless mob [...] But the absence of the names of female slaves from official records and contemporary accounts of slave uprisings and conspiracies does not constitute proof that they played no active part.<sup>22</sup>

James uses the neo-slave narrative to expand upon previous historic and literary representations of enslaved Caribbean women, and draw the reader's attention to the existence and influence of the matrifocal community in plantation society. The novel thus acts as a neo-archive, not only for the immortalisation of enslaved women, but also for matrifocality in the Caribbean.

As well as *Night Women*, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010) acts as a neo-archive for plantation life and, more specifically, enslaved women, in the Caribbean. By moving the action of these narratives to the plantations, Caribbean writers have given themselves another environment within which to develop literary commentary regarding the slave experience. This shift in setting allows these novelists to write more extensively about the violent reality of the plantation system, and link the

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society 1650-1838* (Oxford: James Currey, 1990), pp 65-67.

history of slavery more closely to contemporary Caribbean society, rather than to the migrant experience of black Britons.

Critics have recognised several key identifying factors, both formal and stylistic, of the neo-slave narrative. Sherryl Vint suggests that there are three types of neo-slave narrative: 'the third person historical novel of slavery, the first-person narration of the life story of a slave, and the recounting of the traumatic legacy of slavery on later generations.'<sup>23</sup> Like *Night Women*, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* is a novel set on a nineteenth-century Jamaican plantation, detailing the life of an enslaved woman, and climaxing with a slave uprising. There are similarities and differences in the ways that James and Levy use the neo-slave narrative form. *The Long Song* is a first-person narrative, told from the perspective of enslaved mulatto woman July, with some editorial assistance from her publisher son Thomas. Levy's retrospective narrative asks the reader to explore how history and memory serve to offer new insights into contemporary understandings of Caribbean identities.

*The Book of Night Women*, like *The Long Song*, is a retrospective narrative, told by the protagonist's daughter. Arifa Akbar argues that through the 'distinctive voice' of James' narrator, 'he manages to make the story of slavery in the Americas, repeatedly recounted in fiction, new.'<sup>24</sup> Though a third-person narrative, because *Night Women* is written by Lilith's daughter, it has the kind of personal investment that one might expect from a first-person narration. At the end of the novel, Lovey Quinn tells her reader, 'The first time me write, me wanted to tell [...] a story 'bout me, not a story 'bout her, but such is she that every nigger story soon become a tale 'bout they mother, even the parts she didn't tell herself.'<sup>25</sup> Through this narrative admission, Marlon James makes key points, both about the power of the neo-slave narrative, and the central role of the mother. Lovey admits that she re-creates Lilith's experiences using both memory and imagination. Her account of her mother is neo-archival through its utilisation of imagination in the absence of recorded history, in a manner that is similar to James envisioning characters for his re-imagining of

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<sup>23</sup>Sherryl Vint, "'Only By Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives', *Science Fiction Studies*, 34.2 (2007), 241-261 (p. 241).

<sup>24</sup> Arifa Akbar, 'The Book of Night Women, by Marlon James', *Independent* [online] <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-book-of-night-women-by-marlon-james-1777983.html>> [accessed May 20<sup>th</sup> 2015] (para 5 of 8).

<sup>25</sup> Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), p. 417. (All future references to this edition will be marked in parentheses in the text).

Jamaican slavery. Lovey Quinn wanted to write about herself, but instead finds herself writing about her roots — her mother — perhaps in the same way that contemporary Caribbean writers have felt compelled to re-write slavery, and the lost experiences of their enslaved ancestors. Indeed, James himself had intended to write a novel set thirty years after the action of *Night Women*, but he was compelled to change course when he started writing what was intended to be just a chapter about Lilith.<sup>26</sup> In an interview, James said that he fought with his main character because hers wasn't the story he wanted to write.<sup>27</sup> This neo-slave narrative nevertheless demanded to be written, and his *Night Women*, the novel's central community of rebel women, struggled for their voices to be heard. Lovey's compulsion to write about her mother also speaks to the matrifocal nature of James' narrative, and indeed the Caribbean. Understanding your mother and having the ability to trace your matrilineage is integral to self-development. Lovey is unable to write her own story without first paying homage to her mother and the matrifocal community that was so central to her mother's life.

Bernard Bell offers a generalisation of neo-slave narratives in his assertion that they are always stories of 'escape from bondage to freedom',<sup>28</sup> and James subverts this definition through *Night Women* by imagining a failed revolt. In an interview, James says of the link between history and fiction:

I am a big student of history but I believe in following history in the bigger sense. A lot of the people I write about, and a lot of the people who are covered in fiction, you aren't going to find in history books. Or you aren't going to find in academic papers. Fiction has a unique gift in showing how people lived history, how people had to endure it, survive it, and come to terms with it.<sup>29</sup>

This quotation suggests that James uses the neo-slave narrative as a neo-archive that re-imagines subjectivities rather than events. There were no successful slave revolts in Jamaica, and James does not endeavour to re-imagine this, or provide any happy endings, but seeks instead to represent the daily struggles of figures who may

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<sup>26</sup> KenneyTV Online, *Marlon James – The Book of Night Women* [YouTube Video], 18 December 2011 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsGoRi7wWM8>> [accessed 25 January 2015].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts, 1987), p. 298.

<sup>29</sup> Kaitlyn Greenidge, 'Violently Wrought', *Guernica* [online] <<https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/violently-wrought/>> [accessed 28 April 2015].

have been left out of history. George B. Handley argues that ‘to kill off the slave owner in our literary imagination is to risk ignoring the vitality of those ordinary people whose cultures have survived the contempt of the slave owner’, and this statement holds true of *Night Women*, particularly when taken in the context of James’ understanding of the relationship between history and fiction.<sup>30</sup> James expresses his unwillingness to re-write events, and seeks instead to re-imagine lost subjectivities. By fictionalising a failed revolt in Jamaica, James pays homage to the many enslaved women who were unable to escape the plantation, but should be remembered regardless.

Bell defines the neo-slave narrative as a ‘residually oral, modern narrative of escape from bondage to freedom’, which pays homage to African oral traditions and Western written customs in a self-conscious manner.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, *Night Women* is an excellent example of textual orality, and through the construction of his narrative, and his considered use of language, James’ engagement with orality highlights a history of oral traditions in the Caribbean. Maureen Warner Lewis observes that the ‘authentic depiction of Caribbean life demands sensitivity to speech culture’.<sup>32</sup> In order to successfully use creolized language in Caribbean literature, writers must be able to grasp ‘the inner working of various sectors of the societies they delineate’,<sup>33</sup> and Marlon James was able to aptly reconstruct the language of the nineteenth century plantation in *Night Women*.<sup>34</sup> Though a written text, *Night Women* reads as if it were oral fiction. Oral storytelling traditions in the Caribbean not only pay homage to the African roots of the population, but also act as a means of remembering the largely undocumented history of African-Caribbean people. It is only fitting, then, that James chooses to mimic Caribbean orality for his re-telling of slavery in the region. A number of the chapters begin with the same two sentences: ‘Every negro walk in a circle. Take that and make of it what you will’. (32) The repetition of this phrase not only resonates with the circular, repetitive lives of enslaved Africans in the

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<sup>30</sup> George B. Handley, *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Bell, p. 298.

<sup>32</sup> Maureen Warner Lewis, ‘Language Use in West Indian Literature’, in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean Volume 2: English and Dutch Speaking Regions*, ed. by A. James Arnold (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamin’s, 2001), pp. 25-41 (p. 29).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> James makes reference to researching Jamaican slave vernacular in an interview (KenneyTV Online, *Marlon James – The Book of Night Women* [YouTube Video]).

Caribbean, but also reflects, to some extent, the oral traditions of the region. Throughout the Caribbean, African folklore and oral traditions have been kept alive as a means of continuing African legacies of cultural values and proverbial wisdom. Donald R. Hill argues that proverbs in the Caribbean are used to 'punctuate one's conversational points', to help aid understanding.<sup>35</sup> James' repetition of his own proverb suggests that *Night Women* can be read as a conversation between Lovey Quinn and reader. '[e]very negro walks in a circle' is reminiscent in style to the Jamaican proverb 'Every tub affi sit on it own bottom,' which means 'every person will have to take responsibility for his own life and actions,' and can be read as James' personal homage to Jamaica's oral storytelling traditions.<sup>36</sup>

I would posit that Marlon James writes *Night Women* in a Jamaican creole true to that which would have been heard on a Jamaican plantation, and he keeps the narrative's oral properties prominent through his rhythmic prose and the interspersed song throughout the narrative. The repetition of 'Every negro walk in a circle', and the paragraph that accompanies it, are examples of James' use of rhythm in his writing. Each of these paragraphs describes the changing nature of the circle; at first it is described as 'a circle like the moon' (32) and later as a circle squeezing in on itself, 'like a mark, or a head'. (218) *Night Women* is structured around the image of the circle, and the return to the circle mimics the rhythmic structure of a song that returns to its chorus.

James' decision to create a female narrator who recounts the lives of a matrifocal community is a significant narrative choice. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, scholars such as Joan Anim-Addo have argued that, whilst slavery prevailed in the Caribbean, and the African heritage of its slaves was demonised, the passing on of African cultural values and traditions became an act of resistance. Anim-Addo argues that, because 'family patterns [were] subverted by slave cultural practice in the Caribbean', oral storytelling, once a public source of entertainment, was forced into the confines of the domestic space, 'so that it emerges significantly in the wisdom of elder African-Caribbean women'.<sup>37</sup> Women became the primary sources of proverbial wisdom and traditional stories. The imposition of foreign

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<sup>35</sup> Donald R. Hill, *Caribbean Folklore: A Handbook* (London: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> Anon, 'Caribbean Sayings, Proverbs and Quotations', *WiWords* [online] <<http://wiwords.com/flavours>> [accessed 28 April 2015].

<sup>37</sup> Joan Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body: History, Language and African-Caribbean Women's Writing* (London: Mango, 2007), p. 143.

cultural values onto slave societies in the Caribbean meant that the 'transmission of cultural information fell significantly to women',<sup>38</sup> and by choosing to tell a story about influential and powerful women in a plantation community through a female narrator, Marlon James represents the earliest example of African-Caribbean female wisdom-bearers and cultural heroes.

The neo-slave narrative is an important genre for writers of the African diaspora, and its continued use calls for renewed analysis of the genre. It gives writers the opportunity to confront and challenge the dominant historiography of slavery, and through re-imagining the subjectivities of slaves, the neo-slave narrative allows its readers to access history through the fictional neo-archive. Recognising the limitations of history, James uses the genre as a means of remembering and re-imagining the past by representing characters that may have been forgotten by documented history, such as the enslaved woman in the Caribbean.

### **Remembering Enslaved Women**

The experience of enslaved people in the Caribbean was not researched in any real depth until the mid-twentieth century. Recognising the gaps in primary historical sources, a number of historians, particularly during the 1990s, turned their attention to the experience of enslaved women in the Caribbean. Hilary Beckles recognises that:

The tendency, then, has been for historians of Caribbean slavery to subject women's experiences to investigations with respect to caste, class, race, colour and material relations, rather than to explore how such representations and discourses are internally organised by patriarchal mobilisations of gender ideologies.<sup>39</sup>

Beckles calls for a deeper analysis of enslaved women in the Caribbean that takes into account the effects of patriarchal ideology. He suggests that, though it is important to consider how factors such as race and class affected the lives of these women, it is equally important to analyse the ideology behind these systems.

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<sup>38</sup> Anim-Addo, p. 143.

<sup>39</sup> Hilary Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1999), p. xv.



Beckles' call for nuance is echoed by Barbara Bush who argues that any previous representation or analysis of the enslaved Caribbean woman did not take into account the interior experiences of these women who, as well as being forced into servitude, were unable to fulfil the enforced gender ideologies of the patriarchal society that held power over enslaved Africans. At the height of Caribbean slavery, European moral and cultural systems did not recognise gender equality, and valued women only as wives, mothers, and homemakers.<sup>40</sup> Black women were unfavourable in comparison to white women and, as Beckles observes, 'comparisons between African women and female animals were not infrequent.'<sup>41</sup> He explains:

The predominant image associated with the representation of the black woman was that of great strength – the symbol of blackness, masculinity and absence of finer feelings. Her sexuality was projected as overtly physical [...] hence brutish and best suited to the frontier world of the far-flung plantation. Out there, social immorality, perversity and promiscuity were maintained by her on account of her possession of satanic powers that lured white men away from their association with their virtuous white females.<sup>42</sup>

The attributes that colonial societies deemed womanly were, in plantation society, completely unattainable for enslaved women. Stripped of the chance to 'nourish and care for their young, [show] loyalty and subservience to a male spouse, and [...] construct a binding and building culture of domesticity',<sup>43</sup> the enslaved African woman was trapped in a cycle of defeminisation and deplorable treatment. Because of their one-dimensional historical representation, and their stereotyping, some contemporary historians have felt it necessary to explore the everyday lives of enslaved women, whereas others have been particularly interested in their acts of resistance. Diana Paton argues that the everyday lives of women in slave societies were as important, and as 'full of political struggle as the lives of those who became rebels',<sup>44</sup> and her article speaks of the effects of slavery on women's labour and reproduction in the Caribbean. Scholars such as Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller have written about enslaved women and their acts of

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<sup>40</sup>Bush, p.19.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Beckles, p. xx.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. xxi.

<sup>44</sup> Diana Paton, 'Enslaved Women and Slavery Before and After 1807' *History in Focus* [online] <<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Slavery/articles/paton.html>> [accessed 1 May 2015] (para 2 of 24).

resistance, arguing that one of the most widespread and costly ways in which these women resisted their condition was in their 'refusal to bear children'.<sup>45</sup> These more recent studies extend the work of late-twentieth century historians such as Bush and Beckles, and challenge the stereotypes often associated with enslaved women in the Caribbean.

Marlon James contributes to ongoing debates regarding the historical representations of enslaved women by re-writing them fictionally. Christine Levecq argues that many black women writers have used the neo-slave narrative to produce stories about women in slavery, 'countering the stereotype of slave women as genderless'.<sup>46</sup> *The Book of Night Women* also seizes the opportunity to confront gender stereotypes, and offer a nuanced, multidimensional representation of a community of enslaved women who, whilst oppressed, victimised and objectified, are still powerful enough to survive on the plantation, and plan and execute a nation-wide uprising.

The Night Women are a group of seven enslaved women, six of whom are fathered by Jack Wilkins, a plantation overseer. The narrator explains, '[every] woman you see in this room come from Jack Wilkins seed'. (69) Homer, the African-born leader of the group, is the only exception, and functions as an 'othermother' for her community. In her book *Black Feminist Thought* (2001), Patricia Hill Collins defines the othermother as 'women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities', and goes on to comment on the importance of othermothers in contributing to '[organized], resilient woman-centred networks' within their communities.<sup>47</sup> I would suggest that Homer, in taking responsibility of Lilith and her fellow Night Women, acts as an othermother, and it is the organisation of her matrifocal community that is integral to plantation life, and the organisation of the novel's rebellion. The action of *Night Women* focuses largely on the life of Lilith, but her interactions with Homer are central to her character's development, and the development of the rebellion plot, which again points to the matrifocal nature of their

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<sup>45</sup>Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller, 'Introduction: Strategies of Women and Constraints of Enslavement in the Modern Americas', in *Women and Slavery Volume 2: The Modern Atlantic*, ed. by Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers and Joseph C. Miller (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 1-26 (p. 11). ProQuest eBook.

<sup>46</sup> Christine Levecq, 'Black Women Writers and the Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered' by Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu', *African American Review*, 35.1 (2001), 136-138 (p. 136).

<sup>47</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 178.

environment. James' characterisation of Homer provides an example of his rejection of gender stereotypes. As Beckles' work identifies, nineteenth-century European value systems generally regarded black women as hyper-sexual, physical beings; more akin to animals than to the European woman, whose femininity was weighed against her domesticity, subservience and mothering abilities. There are a number of occasions in *Night Women* where Homer voices her belief that she is less than a woman, which may be a reason why she cannot be easily stereotyped as one. Homer tells Lilith about her love for a slave named Benjy, and Lilith is surprised to hear Homer confess that at one time she enjoyed her sexuality. Homer says, 'what you think me keep down there, cobweb? Me used to be a woman you know. I know what you think. I know what all of you think, but there used to be one time when me was woman'. (212) Sexuality is an important component in Homer's definition of womanhood. But after her failed escape attempt with Benjy, Homer describes Jack Wilkins decision to 'make more mens rape two pickney out o' me' (214), and Homer chooses to relinquish her sexuality at the cost of her own femininity. Homer describes the brutal punishment she receives after she is brought back to the plantation by the Maroons:

Me get the worst whipping ever in Montpelier [...] Beat me with whip and tree branch and then brand me with iron across me back [...] When Wilkins run out of back she tell him to brand me front. Hear me own titty cook like a goose [...] The worst was when him set six man 'pon me to fuck me so that me can breed again. Two time he do it. You know how it feel to take out this mash-up thing to feed you chile? Every time me look down, me think me chile suckin' some animal (216)

Homer's severe punishment, her brutal reminder that her body does not belong to her, instils in her a belief that she cannot be a woman as long as she is enslaved. She is beaten and branded, and reminded that her masters value her only as they would an animal. Olive Senior comments on the 'highly esteemed place of the mother in many cultures, especially African cultures, and the strength of the mother-child bond'.<sup>48</sup> Because of this cultural esteem, Homer's understanding of femininity is entwined with her ability to mother, and the punishment she receives at the hands of the plantocracy detaches her from her own womanhood.

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<sup>48</sup> Oliver Senior, *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English Speaking Caribbean* (James Currey: London, 1991), p. 169.

Homer does not identify herself as a woman, and she maintains both feminine and masculine qualities. She is stripped of the chance to mother her own children, and it is the loss of her children that inspires her plans for the rebellion. Though a childless mother, Homer is the 'head nigger' on the Montpelier plantation, and serves as a stern matriarchal figure for the slaves beneath her. Homer becomes a mother figure for Lilith, hiding her from Johnny-jumpers, teaching her to read, and encouraging her to take advantage of what little control she holds.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, however, through orchestrating the revolt, Homer adopts traits that European value systems would deem masculine. Through Homer, James presents a character who does not fit either European or African gender stereotypes. By choosing to explore the dynamics of a plantation society through fiction rather than history, James challenges racialised gender stereotypes and is able to create characters who defy simple and reductive categorisation.

Homer instils in Lilith the belief that she has natural power, and encourages her rebellious nature. Lilith proves very early on in *Night Women* that she will not easily become a victim, and from childhood, rejects the gender and racial roles assigned to her. An example of this is a passage from the first chapter of the book, detailing events from Lilith's childhood:

People recall when she was still a little pickney [...] playing rounders with boys. She swing club, clap the ball clear 'cross the field and make one run to all four base and beat the boys but couldn't understand when the wet nurse slap her and say that a good girl supposed to make manchild win [...]. Then there was the time when she get a well-deserved thumping for telling a white playmate from Coulibre Estate that she be a damn fool [...] White pickney and black pickney play all the time when they little, as if they be combolo, one and the same. But Lilith too spirited (4).

Lilith spends her youth as a relatively free child, her adoptive parents being perhaps the only two enslaved people on the plantation not required to labour as field or domestic slaves. Lilith's unusual upbringing and her spirited nature make her a 'Natural Rebel'. Hilary Beckles defines the Natural Rebel as 'your typical "woman in the fields", who possesses no claims to distinct individuality and is therefore one of the masses [...] The everyday experience of her enslavement represents the basis of a culture of refusal and resistance through which she claims a "self" and an

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<sup>49</sup> The novel describes the high ratio of enslaved Africans to plantocracy, and the narrator explains Johnny-jumpers are a 'bunch of niggermens' that the overseers put in charge of other slaves. (10)

“identity”<sup>50</sup>. Whilst Lilith can in no way be described as a typical woman in the fields, she is nevertheless a Natural Rebel. Her spiritedness, and everyday resistance to her lived experience of enslavement shine through in her actions. Her instinct to survive, even at the cost of other lives, is emblematic of her desire to find herself outside of her slave status.

As well as the Natural Rebel, Beckles also points to another kind of slave woman. The ‘Rebel Woman’ is described as ‘essentially a cultural icon [...] She is therefore culturally invested with political leadership, and the community rallies around her magical and spiritual powers’.<sup>51</sup> The prime historical example of a Rebel Woman is Nanny of the Maroons, one of Jamaica’s national heroes,<sup>52</sup> ‘who inspired and helped lead the most formidable band of Maroons in the Blue Mountain area in their triumphant resistance against the government’ in the mid eighteenth century.<sup>53</sup> Though Homer does not manage to escape her enslavement, she is nonetheless James’ Rebel Woman. Her reputation as a Myal practitioner, her continued engagement with her African heritage, and her position as the head household slave make her the ideal figure to lead a rebellion. The Night Women have confidence in Homer’s ability to lead, and are drawn in both through fear and awe.

Though both Homer and Lilith invoke the rebellious spirit of Nanny, and share her spirit of freedom, they also differ from Nanny in important ways. Jamaica’s official narrative describes Nanny as an inspirational leader and a symbol of unity, ‘skilled in organising guerrilla warfare’, and as a wise woman who ‘passed down legends and encouraged the continuation of customs’.<sup>54</sup> Not much more is said of Nanny’s character, and because we know only of her strengths, Nanny is remembered almost as if she were a mythological figure. Similarly, Homer is characterised by James as a wise woman capable of orchestrating a mass revolt. However, *Night Women* differs from the mythical narrative of Nanny in that its heroes are three-dimensional characters, with as much attention paid to their flaws as their strengths. James’ novel also challenges the popular narrative of Nanny through his characterisation of the

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<sup>50</sup> Beckles, p. xxii.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Nanny of the Maroons is Jamaica’s only female national hero, and has a monument in Jamaica’s National Heroes Park.

<sup>53</sup> Alan Tuelon, ‘Nanny – Maroon Chieftainess’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 19.4 (1973), 20-27 (p. 20).

<sup>54</sup> Anon, ‘Nanny of the Maroons’ *Jamaica Information Service* [online] <<http://jis.gov.jm/heroes/nanny-of-the-maroons/>> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> May 2015] (para 3-5 of 8).

Maroons. Rather than depicting them as a community of freedom fighters, James' representation is not so simplistic. Having struck up a treaty with plantation owners, the Maroons send Homer back to Montpelier after her first attempt at escape. Homer describes the Maroon colony as more abhorrent than the planters, saying, 'Them Maroons make me feel like no nigger deserve freedom'. (216) James challenges mythical narratives of slavery through his characterisation of the Maroons, and uses fiction to tell an alternative story. The neo-slave narrative allows James to represent a more complex account of plantation life and slave uprisings than the national narratives in the popular imaginary allow for.

Gad Heuman argues that there were three major groups in slave society: domestic, skilled and field slaves. Heuman continues by asserting that slaves who were 'skilled, or worked as head domestics were the elite slaves, at least from the point of view of the slave masters.'<sup>55</sup> He also suggests that, while slaves helped to 'reinforce the categories established by their masters [...] slaves undoubtedly had their own hierarchies as well'.<sup>56</sup> In *Night Women*, James presents the reader with an established hierarchy amongst the enslaved, and he puts a woman — Homer — at the top of the community's social hierarchy. His narrator explains:

Truth be told, slaves in Jamaica have more ranking among themselves than massa [...] The number one prime nigga who would never get sell is the head of the house slaves [...] The head house nigger get charge with so much that she downright run the house, and everybody including the massa do what she say [...] Then you have the cooks who the backra trust the most, because the cook know that if the mistress get sick after a meal, there goin' be a whipping or a hanging before the cock even crow.(32-33)

James builds upon Heuman's historical analysis by focusing on the positions of enslaved women within internal hierarchies. James suggests that, because of their position in the master's house, women were given more access to the plantocracy, and thus were better positioned to commit acts of resistance, such as poisoning.

Despite the limited power and freedom that the slaves are afforded, the *Night Women* are able to dominate the slave community in small ways and even, to a certain extent, wield some small power over the plantocracy. Pallas, for example, is

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<sup>55</sup> Gad Heuman, 'The Social Structure of the Slave Societies in the Caribbean,' in *General History of the Caribbean Volume 3: The Slave Societies of the Caribbean*, ed. by Franklin W. Knight (London: UNESCO, 1997) pp. 139-168 (p. 140).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

given a gun by her father Jack Wilkins. The musket allows her to wield the threat of death over her youngest half-sister during their first night meeting after Lilith insults her, and this threatening accessory gives Pallas a means of asserting her higher position in the hierarchy of the community. However, the power Pallas brandishes through carrying the gun is undermined through her lack of bullets. She says of Wilkins, 'the sum'bitch only give me one bullet.' (73) Jack Wilkins equips Pallas with one bullet, one opportunity to subvert the plantation power relations by taking a life. Pallas' one-bullet gun is a fitting analogy for the power of the matrifocal community on James' Montpelier plantation. They are able to commit smaller acts of resistance — slow poisonings and illegal night meetings — but the freedom that they seek can only be obtained through a nation-wide slave uprising, similar to those that characterise the Haitian Revolution. Pallas fixates on the one bullet she was given for her gun, in a similar manner to the way the Night Women, particularly Homer, fixate on the looming uprising.

The power dynamics on the Montpelier plantation are fragile enough that they can be disrupted. During the era of slavery, the slave populations of Caribbean islands far outnumbered the population of white slavers, and the power of the slave masters was easily threatened. The relationship between Lilith and Robert Quinn is evidence of power relations in *Night Women*, and having Lilith fall in love with Quinn, rather than just engage with him sexually, is another example of James using fiction to reject racialized and gendered stereotypes. When Lilith moves in to Quinn's living quarters as his personal slave and concubine, Homer quickly advises Lilith to capitalise on her newly found hold over the overseer: '[take] power over the cocky. Then you have power'. (266) Homer's advice speaks to the problematic relationship between enslaved women and their own sexualities. Lilith has no choice in becoming Quinn's lover. Previously raped by multiple men, she is served with the brutal reminder that she does not have the privilege of owning her own body. She is reminded of her powerlessness, first when she is moved to the Coulibre plantation, and again when she is moved back to Montpelier and told that she will be directly serving Quinn. Homer attempts to empower her through this unavoidable certainty by telling Lilith, 'You good to remember now that you have Robert Quinn right where you want him'. (266) Though Lilith is still subject to punishment for any insubordination, Quinn's desire for her grants her a small level of leverage as their relationship develops.

In falling in love with Quinn, much to the disappointment of Homer, Lilith surrenders some of this newfound power back to him, and their affair affects her reaction to the slave uprising. Homer perceptively recognises the dangers of Lilith's love affair, and actively discourages her from regarding their relationship as anything more than sexual. She tells Lilith, '[if] white man want to fuck you, there nothin' you can do 'bout that, but don't make him fool you, that be your business'. (353) James portrays Quinn's intentions towards Lilith as genuine — or rather, as genuine as they can be given the volatile power dynamics. However, Homer's justifiable mistrust of her white enslavers means that she regards them all as natural enemies. Lilith, however, upon learning that her father is white, being responsible for the deaths of the Roget family of Coulibre plantation, and subsequently developing a relationship with Quinn, cultivates a more ambiguous relationship with her white enslavers. The difference between right and wrong become harder to define for her. As Sam Vasquez argues, in such a hostile environment, having been wronged by both enslavers and fellow slaves, Lilith finds herself 'caught between her loyalty to a slave community on the verge of revolt, her white ancestry and her white lover'.<sup>57</sup> Recognising darkness in herself, and seeing through Quinn the capacity for goodness, even within the plantocracy, she becomes less willing to participate in the ultimate rebellion. By representing this love affair, and exploring the dynamics of the relationship, James is able to nuance his characterisation of Lilith, and engage in the process of re-writing women. Through detailing the intricacies and contradictions of Lilith's affair, James once again rejects the stereotype of the brutish, hypersexual slave woman and offers a more complex, multidimensional characterisation of his protagonist.

Marlon James' narrative explores a number of intricacies, contradictions, and problems within the lives of black women in plantation society. *Night Women* makes no attempt to romanticise any aspect of their lives in nineteenth century Jamaica. He fictionalises the brutal reality of surviving as a slave, and makes no apologies for his characters' violence. James is not the first novelist to re-write women in a neo-slave narrative. His unique contribution to the genre comes from his depiction of matrifocality, as I will discuss more fully in the following section. James plays upon the complicated relationships that shape the lives of his female characters, and

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<sup>57</sup> Vasquez, p. 50.



through this creates a dynamic matrifocal community, one born out of necessity and sustained by powerful women. James exposes the fragile nature of a community bound by violence and connected through a will to resist.

### **Resistance, Kinship and the Night Women**

In its broadest sense, the defining criteria for matrifocality, according to Christine Barrow, is 'the mother/woman as the central focus of relationships and secondly, her authority and dominance within the family.'<sup>58</sup> Debates about the origins of matrifocality in the Caribbean are longstanding within the social sciences, with some scholars attributing this trend to the effects of slavery, whilst others argue that the female-headed family can be linked to matrilineal traditions in pre-colonial African cultures. Senior, for example, argues that, though the emphasis on motherhood is significant within African cultures, and a number of traits prevalent within Caribbean families such as child-shifting could be traced back to West Africa, 'the system of slavery did serve to give legitimacy to the centrality role'.<sup>59</sup> She suggests that, though many characteristics of the Caribbean family were practiced traditionally in Africa, the particular landscape of the plantation solidified these practices in the Caribbean. Christine Barrow argues that 'whereas the slave could, and did, practise his magic and divination in secret, he could not perpetuate his ancestral family forms in secret'.<sup>60</sup> Barrow continues by suggesting that, under the system of slavery, the 'authority of males as husbands and fathers was eroded',<sup>61</sup> thus resulting in the rise of matrifocal families. I align James' representation of matrifocality in *Night Women* to Senior's understanding of the family form because it is imagined in the novel as being influenced both by African traditions of matrilineage and the structures of Caribbean plantation society. His matrifocal community is brought together through the shared oppression of women on the plantation, and organised by Homer, an enslaved woman with a strong connection to her African heritage.

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<sup>58</sup> Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives*: (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1996), p. 73.

<sup>59</sup> Senior, p. 95.

<sup>60</sup> Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean*, p.7

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

Senior's extensive study on Caribbean women, *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English Speaking Caribbean* (1991), touches upon the importance of these extended networks among women. Senior argues that 'knowing people' plays a 'major role in the survival strategies of Caribbean women'.<sup>62</sup> These kinship networks, Senior argues, are essential because of the support they offer, and for this reason, matrifocality becomes a driving force of larger communities in the Caribbean. *Night Women* supports and reiterates Senior's understanding of kinship in the Caribbean by fictionalising a plantation society in which James' Night Women depend upon each other for survival. Barbara Bush argues that '[as] in West Africa, the extended kinship group was the integrating social factor in the slave community'.<sup>63</sup> These kinship networks usually centred around enslaved women, who played an integral role within their communities as both emotional support figures and figures of resistance on the plantation. Pre-colonial West African communities valued the matrifocal community as a deeply spiritual system of support, and these values were kept alive on Caribbean plantations. An example of this would be Homer introducing the Night Women to African deities and cultural wisdoms. After Lilith's rape, whilst the Night Women tend to her wounds, the narrator of *Night Women* describes the healing rituals they perform as the women sing. She says:

The womens light a secret fire and spirits dance on the way. Olokun, owner of the seas and god of water healing, and even Anansi, the spider god and trickster. The womens call on Oya, the river goddess of the Niger and wife of Shango. They call on the river mama to plead to the god of thunder and lightning to cast a thunderstone from the sky to the field and give them powers. The womens go to the river where Oshun be waiting (165).

In this passage, James references a number of West African gods and goddesses. Presumably, it is Homer who introduces the Night Women to these traditional deities, and it is significant that they call upon African figures for help. This passage demonstrates their dismissal of the Christianity forced onto enslaved communities. They reject the notion that Christianity can save them, and opt instead to honour their own matrifocality by extending their prayers to West African female deities such as Oya and Oshun, who in turn act as mother figures to them. In this communal act of kinship, in coming to the aid of Lilith, the women privately resist their slave

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<sup>62</sup> Senior, p. 139.

<sup>63</sup> Bush, p. 105.

condition by rejecting the European model of spirituality and reaching back to their African roots. Kinship between the women becomes an act of resistance, and James shows how important community was to slave revolts, and to the slaves' ability to reclaim their humanity.

There has been a lot of speculation about the roots of matrifocality on the plantation; however, due to gaps in the documented history of Caribbean slavery, there are relatively few studies focusing on matrifocal families and communities in plantation societies. Campbell, Miers and Miller, for example, suggest that matrifocality occurred as a result of women being 'trapped together in slavery', but do not expand upon this contention.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Bush offers an analysis of families on Caribbean plantations, wherein she argues that applying the classical and narrow concept of the nuclear family to slave society 'results in a number of serious misconceptions'.<sup>65</sup> Rather, Bush echoes the contentions of feminist anthropology by suggesting that there needs to be a focus on extended family structures, and cites matrifocality as an example of the 'more flexible concept of family' necessary to begin forming a nuanced analysis.<sup>66</sup> James' neo-slave narrative acts as a neo-archive through his representation of enslaved women and matrifocality in the face of historical absence. He also engages with anthropological debates about the function of matrifocality in the Caribbean through his representation of the Night Women. James encourages the reader to reconsider the lived experiences of enslaved people in the Caribbean, whilst representing the matrifocal community as an integral aspect of slave society. *Night Women* is an important novel because James creates a multi-faceted, well-researched depiction of a community of women who, whilst enslaved, are still strong and smart enough to be central figures in an island-wide uprising against European powers. He presents a community built upon tentative connections between women bound by their inescapable condition. This community is brought together by its acts of resistance. The Night Women could not be described as friends in the traditional sense, and there are many rivalries within the group, but their combined desire to resist slavery, and their shared rebellious nature, mean that their matrifocality, though fragile, is a strategy for survival and resistance.

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<sup>64</sup> Campbell, Miers and Miller, p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> Bush, p. 86.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

James' choice of names for the Night Women is relevant because their names are another way in which the community is bound together. Trevor Burnard argues, 'slaves were seldom allowed even the right to name themselves [...] Slaves recognized the humiliation implicit in the names that they were given.'<sup>67</sup> Burnard continues by arguing that Jamaican slave owners often 'ransacked classical literature' and gave their slaves names such as 'Apollo, Jupiter, Adonis'.<sup>68</sup> The use of such mythical names on a plantation, so far removed from the African ancestry of the slaves, would further disrupt the selfhood of Caribbean slaves. Robert Quinn observes, 'I thought every negro had a Greek name [...] I heard Jack Wilkins' father had a certain predilection for tragedy'. (92) Pallas, Iphigenia, Gorgon, Hippolyta, and Callisto are given the names of Greek mythological characters. Homer, however, is named after one of the first known authors in Europe. Her name suggests that, whilst Homer belongs to the community, she also has authority over it, similar to the way her namesake took authority over Greek mythology through writing its stories. This emphasises Homer's central position within the novel's matrifocal community. Lilith is the only enslaved person on the Montpelier plantation whose name is not Greek, but Hebrew. According to etymological study, the name Lilith means 'Night Creature'.<sup>69</sup> Within Jewish folklore, Lilith is the name of Adam's first wife, and her story is notably missing from the Bible. Ann R. Shapiro explains that, when Lilith 'refused to be submissive and lie beneath [Adam], he attempted to force her compliance, and so she flew away.'<sup>70</sup> The biblical Lilith has become a feminist icon because of her refusal to submit to Adam, and her belief that she was equal in all ways to her male counterpart. In James' novel, Lilith's Hebrew name sets her apart from the other Night Women, and the slave community generally. This suggests that her position amongst them is contentious. However, that Lilith's name translates to 'Night Creature' suggests that she has a natural place within the community of Night Women. As Lilith shares her name with the bible's first symbol of female

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<sup>67</sup> Trevor Burnard, 'Slave Naming Patterns: Onomastics and the Taxonomy of Race in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica' *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 31.3 (2001), 325-346 (p. 326).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 335.

<sup>69</sup> Anon, 'Lilith Meaning / Lilith Etymology', *Abarim Publications* [online] < <http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Lilith.html> > [accessed 20 May 2015] (para 15 of 16).

<sup>70</sup> Ann R. Shapiro, 'The Flight of Lilith: Modern Jewish American Feminist Literature', *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 29 (2010), 68-79 (p. 70).

empowerment, it emphasises her 'Natural Rebel' status, and suggests that she is a threat to the patriarchal order of plantation society.

As previously cited in my introduction, in response to Eurocentric perspectives regarding matrifocality that defined the family structure in negative terms, Nancy Tanner was among a tradition of feminist scholars who worked towards a redefinition of matrifocality and were appreciative of its uniqueness. Tanner argues:

Matrifocality is based on minimal differentiation between the sexes, is a matter of both cultural and structural centrality, and is normal and expected for the societies in which it occurs [...] Matrifocality is not to be defined in negative terms. It is not, for example, characterised by the absence of, say, the husband/father<sup>71</sup>

Tanner's definition of matrifocality rejects the notion of the universalisation of the nuclear family, and suggests that making connections between matrifocality and absent men results in a variety of misconceptions. I would suggest that, in *Night Women*, James' representation of matrifocality is a celebration of women and the networks they create, rather than an indictment of men as missing or marginal. Tanner suggests that matrifocality occurs where there is little differentiation between men and women. On the plantation, though men and women often had different roles, there was no differentiation in that both groups were oppressed and enslaved. Homer and the Night Women make it clear that they have a distrust of men (166), but I would argue that the novel's matrifocality is more a celebration of women than it is a maligning of men. This idea is supported in the novel by the fact that there are so few male protagonists, and also in the fact that the Night Women are immortalised in song after the rebellion. The narrator says, 'Hippolyta song quick and harsh. A song rise up against Hippolyta, a chant to keep her spirit away from the living and grant her peace [...] new songs rise up under the quiet, about *Callisto*, *Callisto*, *who bring backra down to so-so*'. (413) These women's songs pay testament to Caribbean folklore, and the ways in which oral traditions become embedded in the regional consciousness. The songs also serve to immortalise and champion a community of women for their acts of resistance. Through these songs, women are thus culturally central in that they are remembered through oral and folk traditions.

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<sup>71</sup> Nancy Tanner, 'Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans' in *Women Culture and Society*, eds. Michrelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, & Louise Lamphere (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 129-156 (pp. 132-133).

The complex nature of the relationships between the Night Women, their simultaneous contempt for and protection of each other, adds a tentative element to this representation of the Caribbean slave community. Celia Britton argues that a community is 'founded on exclusion and always requires a certain homogeneity of its members'.<sup>72</sup> James' Night Women hold in common their gender, a shared desire for freedom and, excluding Homer, their parentage. It is the mixed heritage of the women, 'who all have white and black in they blood with the power of two' (165), that holds the community together, but these ties are tentative. Their sole purpose as a community is to execute a successful rebellion at Montpelier, and because their community is borne out of necessity, tensions between the women arise easily. Fear of being caught or betrayed creates distrust within the community. Handley argues that post-slavery literatures 'move us away from a fixation on the moral formal manifestations of slavery and into the more complex social relations'.<sup>73</sup> Because the neo-slave narrative is not 'primarily aimed at moralising', like the original slave narratives were, authors have the freedom to avoid morality traps, and represent complicated relationships and characters.<sup>74</sup> *Night Women* is successful in offering nuance through a portrayal of characters that are neither inherently good nor bad, and through tentative communities built upon fraught relationships. Moral boundaries, like racial boundaries in an environment plagued by the rape of enslaved women by white men, are blurred. Lilith is the novel's heroine, but many of her actions are deplorable. Desperate to survive, and unwilling to give up all control, Lilith commits multiple murders, and it is her capacity for violence, her darkness, and her willingness to publicly act out her resistance, that binds her to the rest of the Night Women; a group of women that, by all accounts, do not like Lilith. Regardless, as Homer points out, 'Is negro life so easy that me have time to hate gal like you?' (69) Homer recognises that theirs is a community born out of desperation. Matrifocality, then, is a strategy for survival, a mode of organisation, and a space of resistance. Kinship becomes an unwanted side effect of their resistance.

Matrifocal networks of kin on Caribbean plantations, as stated in *Women and Slavery* Volume 2, were communities 'forged on both blood and fictive ties' that

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<sup>72</sup> Celia Britton, *Sense of Community in French Caribbean Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Handley, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

‘provided vital social and emotional support to all slaves.’<sup>75</sup> *Night Women* explores and dramatizes this argument. When Lilith kills the Johnny-jumper who attempts to rape her at the beginning of the novel, her adoptive mother Circe, Homer, and two other Night Women hide the dead body and protect her from vengeful Johnny-jumpers. (17) Homer’s ambivalence towards Lilith does not prevent her from providing support. Indeed, though Circe often expresses her contempt for her adopted child, and is clearly horrified at Lilith’s violent act, her first instinct is still to protect her.<sup>76</sup>

Lilith has relatively little interaction with the other Night Women in comparison to Homer, and the tempestuous relationships between them are played out in the women’s meetings, held under the cover of night. The first meeting that Lilith attends serves as a test of her suitability to their community. Homer leads Lilith part of the way to their meeting cave, and then leaves her alone in the dark to complete the rest of the journey. This can be read as an act of indoctrination; Homer is eager for Lilith to become an integral figure in the matrifocal community she leads. That Homer leads her part of the way, when the other Night Women would have had her travel the whole journey alone, can be read as Homer extending her own kinship, and offering Lilith support. However, since they are on a plantation, where withholding trust is often the key to survival, Lilith quickly misreads the act as one of malice. Wandering the plantation, she jumps to the conclusion that ‘Homer leave her loose in the field for a Johnny to jump her. She cuss herself that she didn’t see this coming’.

(64)

Homer’s insistence that Lilith join the community of Night Women is not without ulterior motive. In their first meeting, Iphigenia reminds Homer, ‘You one say so, Homer [...] Six nigger tell six nigger tell six nigger’. (73) Homer tells the women that only six of them are needed as part of the community to plan a successful rebellion. But, having been drawn to Lilith’s nature, she opens up the community for the young girl, breaking her own rules and causing tension within the group. Having seen her capacity for violence, and having knowledge of her parentage, Homer is certain that Lilith will be an asset to her rebellion force. Regardless, Homer’s desire to use Lilith’s darkness becomes inextricably entwined with her compulsion to protect

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<sup>75</sup> Campbell, Miers and Miller, p. 13.

<sup>76</sup> Circe calls Lilith a ‘stupid gal’, (9) and says she ‘too spirited... She did need a man to fix her’. (18)

her, and offer her a network of support. Homer recognises in Lilith the same rebellious spirit that first incited resistance in Homer, and led to her running away from the plantation. Homer's first attempt at escape results in her being caught and punished inhumanely. Not wanting the same fate for Lilith, Homer tries to convince her that her untameable spirit is best served by helping execute the national uprising, when the slaves are most likely to escape their enslavement, and threat of punishment.

Homer's confidence in matrifocality as an organisational tool for her rebellion is rooted in her African heritage. She explains to Lilith that, in Africa, 'womens be doing the thinking and plotting'. (337) Homer goes on to explain that, though men have physical strength, 'they don't have the bearing for planning and thinking and waiting, 'specially waiting. That be woman work'. (352) Through this assertion, James take this opportunity to re-write enslaved women within the rebellion narrative, and present Caribbean matrifocality as a phenomenon rooted in African traditions. Homer describes African women as pragmatic and smart, with merit beyond the domestic space. Matrifocality, then, is a natural means of organising the nation-wide uprising as, according to Homer, women are best suited to strategy.

In *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*, Barbara Bush writes extensively about the 'invisible black woman in Caribbean history',<sup>77</sup> and her acts of resistance, on both smaller and larger scales. Bush argues:

On a more mundane level [...] the slaves found many ways during their everyday lives to frustrate their masters [...] shirking work, damaging crops, dissembling, feigning illness. Unlike outright revolt, these unspectacular routine acts of non-cooperation did not involve actual violence against whites but persistently chipped away against the whole fabric of slavery. Occasionally, individual acts of violence such as arson, poisoning and murder were carried out by slaves, and planters arguably feared secret poisoning more than collective revolt.<sup>78</sup>

The women of James' novel, though working towards collective revolt, find ways to disrupt the day-to-day realities of the plantation, and *Night Women* offers many examples of smaller acts of individual resistance. Bush suggests that enslaved women were frequently accused of being more troublesome than their male counterparts, accused of 'insolence, shamming sickness, excessive laziness,

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<sup>77</sup> Bush, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp 52-52.



disorderly conduct, disobedience and quarrelling.<sup>79</sup> We see some of these traits exhibited by the women in James' novel. When Lilith, for example, is told that she will be beginning work in the fields, she feigns illness in order to escape her first day of work. It is this initial act of resistance, and her unwillingness to become another faceless slave subjected to hard field work, that results in Lilith murdering a Johnny-jumper, and sets her on her journey through the Montpelier rebellion. Had Lilith simply accepted that she was to become a field slave, she would not have become a Night Woman, and played such an integral role in the rebellion. This gesture becomes a communal act of resistance because it is at this point that Homer is first introduced to Lilith. Circe brings Homer to the hut to confirm that Lilith is truly unwell, and Homer confirms that Lilith should be left to rest. It is unclear at this point whether or not Homer knows that Lilith is not ill but I suggest that Homer, in all her wisdom, is well aware that Lilith is simply resisting the will of her enslavers, and chooses to enable her, seeing in Lilith a Natural Rebel that could become an asset to Homer and the Night Women.

When Lilith is raped by multiple men for her mistakes at the New Year's Eve ball, all of the Night Women, regardless of their personal opinions of Lilith, come to her aid. Whilst recovering, in and out of sleep, Lilith sees all of the women tending to her, and it is Pallas who offers a solution to any possible pregnancy. She tells Lilith, 'Plenty man rape you tonight. One of them seed must did get in you. So you goin' eat the green pawpaw until up in that womb clean out [...] And if anything leave you pussy, just catch it in a cloth and tie it up and hide it' (159). Enslaved women avoiding and aborting pregnancies is an act of resistance discussed by both Barbara Bush and Hilary Beckles. Though attempts to prove enslaved women's conscious decisions to terminate pregnancies would be futile, it is fair to assume that, given the conditions, some women would have taken steps to prevent child-bearing on the plantation. Furthermore, there is written evidence that proves that this was a concern to planters. For example, Reverend Henry Beame wrote of Jamaican slaves in 1826, 'The procurement of abortion is very prevalent [...] there being herbs and powders known to [slaves], as given by Obeah men and women.'<sup>80</sup> Barbara Bush suggests that 'abortion allows women the only real choice in societies where female

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<sup>79</sup> Bush, p. 58.

<sup>80</sup> Reverend Henry Beame, *Abolition and Emancipation: Black Slaves and the British Empire: A Thematic Documentary*, ed. by M. J. Craton, J. Walvin and D. Wright (London: Longman, 1976), p. 41.

reproduction is subject to strict patriarchal control'.<sup>81</sup> The Night Women are unwilling to allow this violent act to force Lilith into motherhood, Lilith's own mother being a victim of retributive rape, culminating with her death during childbirth. For their own sakes, and for Lilith's, the Night Women choose to end the cycle of unwanted pregnancy, and the chance that Lilith might give birth to a 'dutty stinking white pickney' (159) by giving her the green pawpaw. Lilith's termination becomes an act of resistance, not only for Lilith, but for all the women who look after her during this time. Her rape becomes symbolic of their collective oppression at the hands of their enslavers. Their outrage at the gross mistreatment of their kin spurs their rage, and acts as another propelling factor for the novel's ultimate violent rebellion. This incident acts as an example of kinship being borne from resistance. The Night Women's horror at Lilith's abuse increases their hatred of the 'backra' and strengthens their resolve for mass rebellion, whilst simultaneously encouraging their support of Lilith. (159)

Writing in 1989, Beckles comments on 'black women [...] as agents of the much written about multi-dimensional anti-slavery resistance', and the developing academic interest in this.<sup>82</sup> He argues that the 'social history of black women' had previously been studied with a 'lopsided approach', and that, although there might have been evidence of the importance and integrity of slave women, male-biased social historians have not 'attempted systematically to restore their importance within the historiography'.<sup>83</sup> The matrifocal community, according to various studies, was an integral part of Caribbean plantation society. Much has been said about the function of the kinship networks, often centred on women, as a support structure, and it can be argued that its centrality in plantation life must have extended into larger acts of resistance.<sup>84</sup> The lack of evidence about the roles of women in slave rebellions does not constitute proof that women were not important figures in the planning and execution of slave uprisings in the Caribbean. Marlon James recognises the gaps in the historiography of Caribbean slavery and, recognising the

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<sup>81</sup> Bush, p. 141.

<sup>82</sup> Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados* (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>84</sup> In *Women and Slavery* Volume 2, Campbell, Miers and Miller make reference to the matrifocal networks central to Caribbean slave societies, and the importance of these systems in 'sustaining cultural resistance' (p. 14). Olive Senior also comments on the slave women who, like men, 'plotted, conspired, murdered and became runaways and guerrilla leaders'. (p. 151)

power of women, chooses to create a fictional representation of a matrifocal community who are not only central to everyday plantation society, but are also elemental in the planning and execution of a nationwide uprising. James celebrates Caribbean matrifocality by presenting the Night Women as elemental figures in the uprising that shakes the core of James' Jamaica, despite their flaws and the tensions between them.

## Conclusion

Contemporary historians, recognising the biases of documented history, have consciously worked towards remembering and writing the lives of enslaved women in the Caribbean. Investigations into their lived experiences have been conducted, but lack of primary evidence has meant that history scholars are unable to fully understand and articulate the multidimensional representations of slave lives. Marlon James' *Night Women* joins a tradition of books from the African diaspora that seek to re-write the lives of black women ill-remembered throughout history. Recognising the shortcomings of historical studies, many contemporary writers have found it necessary and interesting to fictionalise the subjectivities of enslaved women in a bid to immortalise their legacies across America and the Caribbean. The neo-slave narrative has become a significant genre, through which writers have analysed various facets of their contemporary identity. Marlon James re-imagines the lives of women slaves in nineteenth century Jamaica because he is interested in presenting an alternative and fictitious account of resistance.

It is James' representation of a matrifocal community that sets *Night Women* apart as a unique and significant contribution to the neo-slave narrative. James' novel creates an environment wherein readers are introduced to a group of enslaved women with enough power to alter the events of history, regardless of the fact that their rebellion is ultimately unsuccessful. James centres his neo-slave novel on the matrifocal community, and his choice to place the Night Women at the core of a violent slave rebellion suggests that James recognises both that enslaved women were as capable as their male counterparts in orchestrating larger acts of resistance, and that matrifocality was a driving force in plantation society. James' neo-slave narrative does not try to fill the gaps in Caribbean history, but he reminds the reader

that although stories and alternative voices may have been left out of historical studies, they are still worth exploring. Matrifocality in the novel functions as a survival strategy, and James celebrates of a group of women who, though ambivalent towards each other, are resourceful enough to plan a nation-wide movement without male intervention.

### Chapter Three: 'The end linked with the beginning and was even the beginning': Fractal Poetics in Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* (2014)

Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* (2014) tells the story of a nameless protagonist (later nicknamed Princess by her husband) who visits Jamaica as a GCE student to map her family tree for a social sciences project. She spends an informative period of time with her father's relative, Cousin Nothing, who helps with her genealogy project, whereupon she decides not to use the 'straight lines and arrows that one normally sees in family trees,'<sup>1</sup> but rather models her family history on the circular sisal mat that she and Cousin Nothing spend their days making. The protagonist explains, 'at night I tried to put the data into a grid I had brought. No can do. I decided instead to focus on the never-ending circles that we were making that seemed like a mat of my family'. (14) As an adult, the protagonist settles in Jamaica, moves into Cousin Nothing's house, and decides to complete the mat, further exploring oral histories, familial ties, and alternative 'patterns of loving'.<sup>2</sup> Alongside Brodber's reimagining of the family tree, *Nothing's Mat* engages with such themes and ideas as Caribbean legacies of marronage, colonialism and indentureship, landscape, orality, and diaspora. Brodber's engagement with these themes contributes to what I would argue is Brodber's central thesis; one that is expressed in the novel through the protagonist's teacher, who remarks, 'The literature speaks of the West Indian family as "fractured"; you might be able to prove that it is a fractal'. (36) Brodber references here those earliest perspectives of anthropological study regarding the Caribbean family, wherein matrifocal and other non-nuclear family structures were described as 'disintegrate families'.<sup>3</sup> I will argue in this chapter that by engaging with the fractal, Brodber rejects the Eurocentricity of those early anthropological perspectives, and reimagines the Caribbean family as extensive and expansive.

Brodber credits 'a combination of family and a growing fascination with fractals and its relationship with African knowledge systems' as the inspiration for

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<sup>1</sup> Erna Brodber, *Nothing's Mat* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), p. 36. (All future references to this edition will be marked in parentheses in the text).

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Romdhani, 'Patterns of Loving', *Small Axe*, 21 (2016) [online] <<http://www.smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/patterns-loving>> [accessed 1 May 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Simey, *Welfare and Planning in the West Indies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), p. 83.

*Nothing's Mat*.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that, through its engagement with the image of the mat — based on a mat that Brodber's sister Dr Velma Pollard owns and photographed for the novel's cover page — the novel is successful in rejecting the hegemonic model of the family tree in favour of a fractal approach.<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Romdhani's review of the novel comments on its success in exploring the 'difficult legacy of colonialism and slavery [and offering] suggestions as to how to begin to heal it'.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Romdhani follows the intricate familial patterns mapped in *Nothing's Mat*, and credits Brodber for 'extending the concept of the collective Jamaican family,' she does not consider Brodber's use of fractals in the conceptualisation of the Caribbean family, nor does she examine the matrifocal nature of the narrative and the family represented.<sup>7</sup>

Erna Brodber's academic work as an established social scientist often emphasises the importance of recording oral histories, and her study *Woodside: Pear Tree Grove PO* (2004) pays testament to this. Born in Woodside herself, Brodber comments on the importance of promoting community development that has 'as its central motif the giving of information concerning themselves to the people. Knowledge is power and self-knowledge is greater power.'<sup>8</sup> Brodber recognises the importance of understanding local history, and uses 'oral and archaeological sources, as well as archival sources,' to create a cohesive narrative about the small Jamaican community into which she was born.<sup>9</sup> Though *Nothing's Mat* is fictional, I suggest that Brodber uses the novel to map out a methodology for social scientists interested in Caribbean genealogy. James Clifford argues that 'scientific anthropology is also an "art," that ethnographies have literary qualities' and that the 'literary or rhetorical dimensions of ethnography [...] are active at every level of cultural science.'<sup>10</sup> By aligning ethnography with fiction, Clifford controversially breaks down the assumption of objectivity within ethnography, and highlights the

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<sup>4</sup> Tanya Batson-Savage, 'Erna Brodber presents Something Big with "*Nothing's Mat*"', *Susumba* [online] <<http://www.susumba.com/books/reviews/erna-brodber-presents-something-big-nothings-mat>> [accessed 1 May 2017] (para 7 of 14).

<sup>5</sup> Mel Cooke, 'Brodber Presents *Nothing's Mat*', *The Gleaner* [online] <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/entertainment/20150615/brodber-presents-nothings-mat>> [accessed 1 May 2017] (para 3 of 15).

<sup>6</sup> Romdhani (para 10 of 10).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Erna Brodber, *Woodside: Pear Tree Grove P.O.* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2004), p. viii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths' in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford & George E. Marcus (London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 1-26 (p. 4).

tension between narrative voice and a desire for objectivity within the discipline. By writing a fictional account of the Caribbean family — specifically a matrifocal one — Brodber, like Clifford, challenges the boundary between literature and ethnography and broadens the number of ways matrifocality in the region can be understood.

I will split my chapter into three sections that will explore both the fractal and matrifocal nature of the family and the novel. A fractal is a repeating pattern that gradually and continually diminishes in size. In the first section, I will consider the fractal, and the qualities that make it an interesting model for the Caribbean family. I will analyse the fractal imagery present within the novel, as well as making connections with existing Caribbean cultural theories that also utilise the fractal in their reading of the region. In the second section of this chapter, I will examine the fractal structure of the novel and the titular mat, and consider both the possibilities and limitations of the model. In the final section, I will consider the fractal nature of the matrifocal Caribbean family as represented in *Nothing's Mat*. I will argue that, through the fractal, Brodber destabilises patriarchal conceptualisations of genealogy and offers an alternative, more inclusive imagining of the Caribbean family. I will suggest that Brodber draws on contemporary research about non-nuclear Caribbean family structures, and presents matrifocality as a starting point for her fictional family; one that allows for the blossoming of filial relationships that create the potential for an expansive and infinite imagining of the Caribbean family.

## Fractal Poetics

Ron Eglash's *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (1999) is an influential addition to the field of ethno-mathematics, and characterises a fractal as 'the repetition of similar patterns at ever-diminishing scales'.<sup>11</sup> Eglash explains that the 'presence of mathematics in culture can be thought of in terms of a spectrum from unintentional to self-conscious,' and his study points to a number of examples in traditional African architecture, art, and culture where fractals are not only evident but seemingly intentional.<sup>12</sup> The book is successful in drawing connections between

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<sup>11</sup> Ron Eglash, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

occurrences of fractals and traditional African knowledge systems — connections that Brodber cites as inspiration for *Nothing's Mat*.<sup>13</sup> An example Eglash uses is that of the Bembe mask, used in initiation ceremonies in the Western Congo. Eglash suggests that the use of a fractal pattern to decorate the mask is not only intentional but highly self-conscious in that it represents the 'scaling iterations of knowledge'.<sup>14</sup> Fractals, in this instance, are intentionally used to relay the importance of seeking knowledge as the recipient comes of age.

In *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber asks the reader to consider the wider appeal and application of mathematics when Cousin Nothing (also referred to in the text as Conut) and the protagonist begin making the mat. The narrator describes in great detail the macca plant that they use to create the sisal for the mat:

Conut intervened into my thoughts to inform me that some plants were particularly good. We could know them by the fact that their growth progression followed a natural path. And what was this natural path? One leaf would emerge, then another, then two — the sum of one and one — then three — the sum of two and one, then five would emerge — the sum of two and three, then eight — the sum of five and three, and so on, the number of leaves continuing to determine the next number of leaves, to infinity. (13)

Brodber first introduces fractal imagery as a natural occurrence, which suggests her endorsement of using fractal imagery to reimagine the genealogy project. The 'natural path' Brodber describes is the Fibonacci sequence. Lynn D. Newton describes the Fibonacci sequence as a recurring sequence 'in which each term is defined as some function of the previous terms'.<sup>15</sup> Nikoletta Minarova observes occurrences of the sequence in nature, pointing specifically to flowers such as roses and sunflowers. Though extensive research has been conducted by both scientists and mathematicians, Minarova concludes that there is no definitive explanation as to why the sequence appears so often in nature. She suggests, '[it] has been presumed that it is just nature's way of getting maximum resources available to it, and taking the easiest path to these goals'.<sup>16</sup> Minarova's contention that the Fibonacci sequence offers plants the 'natural path' to sustainability echoes Brodber's

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<sup>13</sup> Batson-Savage (para 7 of 14).

<sup>14</sup> Eglash, p. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Lynn D. Newton, 'Fibonacci and Nature: Mathematics Investigations for Schools', *Mathematics in Schools*, 16.5 (1987), 2-8 (p. 3).

<sup>16</sup> Nikoletta Minarova, 'The Fibonacci Sequence: Nature's Little Secret', *CRIS: Bulletin of the Centre for Research and Interdisciplinary Study*, 2014.1 (2014), 7-17 (p. 15).



description of the 'natural path' in *Nothing's Mat*. Eglash also references Fibonacci in *African Fractals* and determines that it is a variation of a fractal pattern. He argues that, although each generation of the Fibonacci sequence happens by using addition, 'because the amount to be added in each transformation requires a feedback loop or, as mathematicians call it, an iteration', it is indeed a fractal pattern.<sup>17</sup> The feedback loop, the repetition of a process, is a necessary component in the fractal. Because the Fibonacci sequence requires the same complex process to be repeated, it can be characterised as a fractal.

That the macca plant follows the Fibonacci sequence means that the plant is self-generating. That Cousin Nothing chooses such a plant as the primary material for her family mat suggests that there is also a self-generating and infinite quality to the Caribbean family itself. The macca plant has the potential to keep repeating the same patterns infinitely, and the protagonist describes the mat and her family as having the same potential. Upon returning to England after her first trip to Jamaica, the protagonist says, 'the mat was not finished. There was still a string hanging and it would continue to do so to infinity unless someone decided to stop the journey'. (39) Brodber emphasises the suitability of imagining a fractal genealogy through her inclusion of the macca plant in the text, which serves as proof that fractals occur naturally. The expansive nature of the fractal works well as a model for the Caribbean family, where instances of loving and kinship are often not so easily encapsulated in the linearity of the standard family tree. T. S. Simey studied 270 families in 1940s Jamaica and Mary Chamberlain notes that his research showed that 'not a single one consisted of only parents and their children. Every family included additional children and adults'.<sup>18</sup> Brodber's novel, as this chapter will continue to reiterate, champions a fractal approach, as she maps out a family tree that provides space for the inclusion of the extensive and extended Caribbean family.

There are a number of elements that Eglash cites as necessary to the creation and definition of a fractal. One of these elements is recursion, which Eglash defines as 'a circular process, a loop in which the output at one stage becomes the input for the next. Results are repeatedly returned so that the same operation can be

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<sup>17</sup> Eglash, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Chamberlain, 'Rethinking Caribbean Families: Extending the Links', *Community, Work and Family*, 6.1 (2003), 63-76 (p. 63).

carried out again'.<sup>19</sup> Brodber introduces the reader to the concept of recursion early on in the novel, as the protagonist describes the process of making the mat:

'Your end is your beginning,' Conut advised, so that we knew the initial set of strands had be to be long enough to make our circles and leave over to begin the next, which we could then gently and neatly supply with more strands as needed. (14)

The type of recursion Brodber describes is an iteration, a feedback loop, whereby 'each time the process creates an output, it uses this result as an input for the next iteration'.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Conut's mat, the already existing circle becomes the input for the next circle. The same can also be said of the structure of the novel, wherein each chapter leaves a 'strand' that is picked up and developed in the next chapter. For example, the novel's second chapter, named 'Maud', ends with a paragraph describing the moment Mass Eustace learns he has fathered a child — Nothing — with Clarise. (18) Chapter three, named 'Mass Eustace', picks up this narrative strand and offers the reader more details about the life of Nothing's father.

Eglash offers a literary example of iteration that is helpful when considering both the structure of *Nothing's Mat* and the way that orality functions in the novel. He describes a story 'in which one of the characters starts to tell a story, and within that story a character starts to read a passage from a book'.<sup>21</sup> *Nothing's Mat* is able to include a number of iterative stories within the narrative through its utilisation of orality. Renu Juneja suggests that, in Caribbean women's writing, orality 'often functions as a counter-discourse to the voicelessness [...] Telling of stories, listening to stories is an important element in the lives of these women for these stories embody the counter-culture and subvert the norms of the established culture'.<sup>22</sup> In Part One of the novel, which is narrated in the first person, the protagonist describes her first meeting with Cousin Nothing's ward Keith, who looks like 'a large version of a dasheen'. (10) Brodber creates a narrative iteration here in that she engages with orality to relay to the reader the story of Keith, as told by Cousin Nothing. Conut details the story of Keith's mother, who was poisoned by Conut's father for stealing the dasheen she craved while she was pregnant. The protagonist interjects to reveal to the reader, 'I did not have my tape recorder with me and, more important, neither

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<sup>19</sup> Eglash, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Renu Juneja, *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 27.

my grandparents nor my father, I was sure, knew this story'. (11) Nothing tells the young protagonist, 'my father must have poisoned the dasheen out of sheer frustration [...] I built what I told people would be a store house and I put Keith in it'. (12) The relationship between Nothing and Keith is one that would not be aptly explained through the straight blood lines of the traditional family tree. Similarly, his story might have been lost if Conut and the protagonist did not engage with the subversive counter-culture of orality during their time together.

Antonio Benítez-Rojo has notably engaged with the fractal in his seminal study *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1996), where he redefines the Caribbean through an exploration of Chaos Theory, and argues that the Caribbean is a meta-archipelago, 'a cultural sea without boundaries, [a] paradoxical fractal form extending infinitely through a finite world.'<sup>23</sup> Chaos Theory concerns itself with the unpredictability of systems and 'recognises there is a natural tension between order and disorder. Where one expects to find order, one finds chaos, and where one expects to find chaos, one finds order.'<sup>24</sup> Benítez-Rojo reads the Caribbean as 'a chaos that returns, a detour without purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feedback machine with asymmetrical workings'.<sup>25</sup> By defining the Caribbean as a feedback machine, Benítez-Rojo draws on fractal imagery and suggests that the region is a site where order and disorder come together.

Benítez-Rojo argues that the obstacles to the study of the Caribbean are 'exactly those things that scholars usually adduce to define the area: its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness'.<sup>26</sup> His critique that these terms present a hindrance to an adequate interpretation of the Caribbean echo the ideas in *Nothing's Mat* about the study of the Caribbean family. As Eurocentric studies often used such terms such as 'fragmented' and 'unstable', their understanding of the uniqueness of the Caribbean family was hindered by the very terms used to define it.<sup>27</sup> Benítez-Rojo suggests that Eurocentric studies have been

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<sup>23</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 314.

<sup>24</sup> K. Bradley Penuel, Mat Statler & Ryan Hagen [eds], *Encyclopaedia of Crisis Management* (Los Angeles, California: Sage, 2013), p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> Benítez-Rojo, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> M. G. Smith, *West Indian Family Structure* (Seattle, Washington: Washington University Press, 1962), pp. 260-263.

guilty of '[navigating] the Caribbean with judgements [...] the new (dis)coverers — who come to apply the dogmas and methods that had served them well where they came from, and who can't see that these only refer to the realities back home'.<sup>28</sup> Benítez-Rojo's criticism of the Western gaze of cultural studies resonates with the work of Caribbean feminist anthropologists and their attitudes towards dated, Eurocentric studies of the Caribbean family. For example, in her study *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (1991), Olive Senior characterises non-nuclear domestic settings as possessing 'fluidity'.<sup>29</sup> The use of the word 'fluid' suggests a rejection of negative perceptions of non-nuclear families, and creates a space for possibility and expansion.

Scientists agree that fractals adhere to the principles of Chaos Theory. The Fractal Foundation define fractals as 'infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop. Driven by recursion, fractals are images of dynamic systems — the pictures of Chaos.'<sup>30</sup> Benítez-Rojo alludes to the relationship between Chaos and the fractal in his assertion that 'Chaos looks towards everything that repeats, reproduces, grows, decays, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes,' and his engagement with Chaos Theory as a lens through which to read the Caribbean is particularly interested in the idea of repetition.<sup>31</sup> Benítez-Rojo argues that, in the Caribbean, within the 'historiographic turbulence and its ethnological clamour [...] one can sense the features of an island that "repeats" itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth'.<sup>32</sup> He explains that his use of the word 'repeats' aligns itself with the discourse of Chaos 'where every repetition is a practice that necessarily entails a difference and a step towards nothingness'.<sup>33</sup> Both the idea of repetition with a difference and that of nothingness resonate with *Nothing's Mat*, and Brodber's use of the fractal to navigate the Caribbean family tree. The narrator, in a conversation with her cousin, suggests that with regards to the mat and their family, '[the] structures were there

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<sup>28</sup> Benítez-Rojo, pp. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Olive Senior, *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (London: James Currey, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Anon, 'What is Chaos Theory?' *Fractal Foundation* [online] < <http://fractalfoundation.org/resources/what-is-chaos-theory/> > [accessed 1 September 2017] (para 7 of 7).

<sup>31</sup> Benítez-Rojo, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

and all we would be doing through our lives was replicating them'. (95) She believes in the repetition of pre-existing structures, but every repetition leaves space for possibility, something new, otherwise the family would just be repeating history, which would make for a bleak and unhopeful story. An example of this repetition with a difference is evident in Everard Turnbury's strand of family history. The son of a white father and black mother, Everard marries Cousin Nothing and moves into her house which had previously belonged to the Turnbury family before his father drank away the family estate. Fractal repetition sees Everard's return to this family land, but Everard observes that, as a brown man married to a black woman, the community shun him in a way that echoes their shunning of his white father: 'nobody came to my side. It felt like Turnbury all over again: black people unsympathetic to my cause'. (69) Everard's narrative continues:

My father once made a comment which suggested that he felt my mother was forced on him because she could bring to Turnbury some material things it needed. If this was my father's psychological path, his path to drunkenness, then my projected relationship with the girl was just a reliving of my father's relationship [...] I could not allow this to be my path. Its possibility is what took me to the church in Brown's Town. (69)

Everard recognises how easy it would be to repeat familial patterns, and end up a lonely alcoholic like his father. Because he recognises the fractal nature of his family, the repetition of circumstances, he is able to create a new path for himself. Repetition with a difference allows for the possibility of a complex pattern, and it is this possibility that offers the novel's family the prospect of continuing to infinity, like the macca plant.

Benítez-Rojo's argument that repetition with a difference generates a step towards nothingness is particularly interesting when considering the title of *Nothing's Mat*. Given that he defines Chaos as a continual flow of paradoxes, I read Benítez-Rojo's understanding of nothingness as a paradox. Tom McFarlane suggests that nothingness and infinity are two sides of the same coin because '[insofar] as the Infinite cannot be limited at all, it cannot be conceived of as any definite thing. Thus, it is indistinguishable from nothing.'<sup>34</sup> It is in light of this understanding that nothing and everything are indistinguishable that I read the title of Brodber's novel. *Nothing's*

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<sup>34</sup> Tom McFarlane, 'Is nothingness and infinity the same or completely different?', *Quora* [online] <<https://www.quora.com/Is-nothingness-and-infinity-the-same-or-completely-different-Why>> [accessed 1 September 2017] (para 3 of 5).

*Mat* positions the Caribbean family as having the potential to be infinite. As the infinite cannot be limited, it cannot be understood in definitive terms. Thus, it is simultaneously everything and nothing.

### **The ‘never-ending circles’ of the *Mat* and the Novel**

Existing criticism on Caribbean women’s writing has often taken into consideration the representation of families, though this has frequently been centred on the mother-daughter relationship as a representation of the writer’s own fraught relationship with the motherland. For example, Simone A. James Alexander, in her consideration of writing by Jamaica Kincaid and Maryse Condé, suggests that ‘the mother becomes one with the mother country, further enhancing her power [and] the daughter remains fractured’.<sup>35</sup> Within the social sciences, the Caribbean family has long been of interest, and early studies defined mother-centred families, and female headed households using terms such as ‘disintegrate’.<sup>36</sup> The use of terms such as ‘fractured’ in academic scholarship regarding Caribbean families is comparable with Alexander’s reading of mother-daughter relationships in Caribbean women’s fiction in that it highlights the limitations of existing scholarship on the Caribbean family across disciplines. The emphasis on the mother-child dyad has been read with negative connotations, and there has been insufficient consideration of wider family dynamics. Studies like those by Marietta Morrissey and Mary Chamberlain, have started to consider more thoroughly the dynamics of the extended family. Morrissey, for example, rejects the trope of the ‘missing man’ and argues that the definition of matrifocality needs to evolve in order to ‘acknowledge the emotional and social contributions of fathers’.<sup>37</sup> Chamberlain’s article focuses on ‘the roles of wider kin in child-rearing,’ and is particularly interested in the roles of grandparents.<sup>38</sup> She observes, ‘grandchildren often have a close relationship with, and responsibility towards, grandparents, extending what Brodber [...] described as their “perceptual”

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<sup>35</sup> Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 20. ProQuest eBook.

<sup>36</sup> Simey, p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> Marietta Morrissey, ‘Explaining the Caribbean Family: Gender ideologies and Gender Relations’ in *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*, ed. Christine Barrow (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1998), pp. 78-90 (p. 82).

<sup>38</sup> Chamberlain, p. 64.

field of family, and generating a sense of “emotional expansiveness”.<sup>39</sup> I suggest that, through her fiction, Brodber further broadens perceptions of what constitutes a family in the Caribbean. The structure of *Nothing’s Mat* supports its representations of the novel’s complex and extensive family, and Brodber employs such literary techniques as orality, polyphony and non-chronology to convey her fractal genealogy.

*Nothing’s Mat* features a variety of incarnations of matrifocality within the protagonist’s family, and I would like to suggest that the title and structure of the novel are also matrifocal. The novel is based on a mat representing a Jamaican family, a mat that belongs to Cousin Nothing and then the protagonist. Thus, Cousin Nothing, as a mother figure to the protagonist and as creator of the mat, functions as the narrative’s starting point, the seed from which the story grows. As a storyteller, Nothing is positioned as a mother figure, and that the narrative begins with Nothing’s oral account of her family’s history suggests that the narrative is matrifocal.

The mat itself, the physical representation of the family and the product of Cousin Nothing’s storytelling, can be thought of as matrifocal in a different manner. The production of the mat starts with the recollection of a story about Maud, Nothing’s adoptive grandmother. At the end of the chapter named after her, the narrator says, ‘the seed was a circular mat about the size of a side plate. In my mind, I called this Miss Maud’. (18) Maud acts as the starting point for the fractal mat and family tree. She is not at the centre of the mat nor of the family, but her story acts as the point from which the rest of the mat grows and develops. Given the structure of the mat, wherein existing circles create more circles, growing in a variety of directions, it cannot be assumed that Maud’s seed circle would have stayed in the middle of the mat. However, that Maud, in her role as a mother figure to Clarise and Nothing, takes her place as the seed of the mat is evidence of the matrifocal nature, not only of the family, but of the genealogical model that the mat represents. The story told in Maud’s chapter becomes the gateway for stories to come, and the end of this chapter, of this particular story, acts as the beginning of another. Stories create more stories, no one story more or less important than the last, much like the circles that make up Nothing’s mat, and the lives of people that are part of Nothing’s family tree. Cousin Nothing is able to use the ending of Maud’s story as the

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<sup>39</sup> Chamberlain, p. 65.

beginning of the next story in a manner that rejects the traditional family tree. Thus, the mat becomes matrifocal in nature.

Brodber has long been acclaimed for her experiments in form.<sup>40</sup> The distinctive recursive structure of *Nothing's Mat* helps Brodber make a case for fractal genealogies. The novel is split into three sections. In Part One of the novel, the protagonist reminisces about her trip to Jamaica as a teenager when she becomes acquainted with Cousin Nothing, Nothing's account of their family history, and the process of making the mat. Part Two of the novel is made up of three historical narratives from Maud, Clarise, and Everard Turnbury — all relatives featured on the mat. Each narrative is written in the first person, with narrative interjections from the novel's protagonist. Part Three brings the narrative into the present day, with the protagonist moving into Cousin Nothing's house after her death, connecting with her American cousin, and becoming a wife and mother, whilst keeping the mat an active part of her family's life. The three parts of the novel signify different stages in collecting family histories. Part One is made up of oral accounts, Part Two is informed by archival sources, and Part Three shows the importance of understanding histories and preserving their legacies.

Whilst most chapters in *Nothing's Mat* are named after a particular character who appears in the mat, some are named after particular moments in the protagonist's life. The novel's first chapter, for example, is called 'Making the Mat,' and when the protagonist moves to Jamaica as an adult, the chapter that details her new ownership of Cousin Nothing's house is named 'The Home'. Each chapter features a story that can exist both individually and as part of a collective, in the context of both the novel's structure and of the mat it represents. By naming certain chapters after objects or moments, Brodber is suggesting that they have the potential to exist as part of the family. For example, after learning about the very close relationship between Cousin Nothing and her own grandmother Pearl, and their success in business, the protagonist ponders how best to incorporate the produce that helped bring them so close together into the mat. She says, 'it would have been nice to put the sugar cane plant and the coconut in our mat but no one knew how to do this. Perhaps we could paint them on or embroider them on when

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<sup>40</sup> Carolyn Cooper, 'Afro-Jamaican folk elements in Brodber's *Jane and Louisa Soon Come Home*' in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc, 1990) pp. 279-288.



the mat was finished, was Nothing's suggestion'. (32-33) Édouard Glissant suggests that '[the] individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process'.<sup>41</sup> As sugar cane and coconut are integral features in the colonial history of the Caribbean, and indeed the family history represented in *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber suggests that embedding it within the ancestral mat would be important. Her reconceptualization of the Caribbean family considers the inclusion of landscape, though her narrator is unable to find a way to include it. This is an example of the differences between the physical mat and the text, and highlights the limitations of the fractal as a model for the Caribbean family. It suggests that the narrator's fractal genealogy is a work in progress, and also suggests that the Caribbean family, and the various patterns of loving and kinship found within, has room to extend beyond people.

Both the text and the mat are recursive in nature in that they both utilise the idea of a hanging thread that is used to continue and expand the stories they tell. Throughout the novel, chapters end by introducing characters that feature heavily in the next chapter. For example, at the end of Part Two, after the narrator muses over Everard's lost family history, she says, 'I shelved the issue and told myself that I would go right back to work, dealing with those I knew were my kin, putting my American aunt and uncle in the mat'. (72) The next chapter is thus named 'John and Sally' after said aunt and uncle, and begins exploring this new thread of family. In this instance, the text and the mat mirror each other. In this respect, the narrative is circular because each story creates more stories, and the narrative highlights this movement by mapping the movement from one circle of the mat to the next.

In *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber mimics the patterns of storytelling in that the stories are not necessarily relayed in chronological order, nor do they remain solely focused on the character named in the title of each chapter. Brodber uses the non-chronological narrative to represent a family mat that also rejects linear blood lines in favour of a recursive approach. In Part One, the protagonist recollects stories she heard from Cousin Nothing. After the first chapter, the others are subsequently entitled 'Maud', 'Mass Eustace', 'Everard Turnbury', and 'Euphemia'. These chapters give details about the characters' lives, but mostly, they convey their relationship to

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<sup>41</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 105-106.

Conut. As it is Nothing telling the protagonist these stories, it would follow that her recollections of these family members centre largely on their relationship to her. Chapter two, for example, is named 'Maud' after the woman who acted as Nothing's guardian upon the early death of her teenage mother Clarise. The chapter details events leading up to Nothing's birth, with both Maud and Clarise being unaware of the pregnancy. The short chapter interrogates stigma surrounding female sexuality in colonial Jamaica, and the narrator notes Clarise's ignorance about her adolescent body as being a symptom of the stigma, commenting, '[she] had told no one [about her period], for this was not the kind of thing that a decent girl talked about and all girls were decent so there were none to say to her, this happened to me too'. (15) Maud's chapter then, is not so much about Maud as it is about the ignorance of Clarise that leads to the conception of Nothing.

The structure of Part Two of the novel differs from the first, and I suggest that they represent two methods of collecting local Caribbean histories and genealogies; approaches that Brodber uses in her own social science research.<sup>42</sup> Part One ends with the protagonist considering the necessity of the mat, and the importance of finishing it:

I think I will just finish Cousin Nothing's mat [...] There is sisal left over from those days [...] I shall put in the details that Cousin Nothing did not know about. In my head, I will stick them around the circumference of the mat and give it and me closure'. (40)

The protagonist comes to the realisation that collecting oral histories can only take her so far. Part One has to end to make way for Part Two — the histories informed by archival research. As mentioned in my previous discussion of *The Book of Night Women* (2009), orality is a literary trope that has allowed Caribbean writers to engage with and critique established language hierarchies in the region. Carolyn Cooper argues that orality in the region, and the practices associated with it — such as storytelling, creolised spiritual practices, and social traditions — are feminised and stigmatised.<sup>43</sup> Because of the gendered stigma, some Caribbean women writers such as Merle Hodge have often chosen to engage with orality as a way of critiquing and resisting the colonial influences of the established language hierarchies.<sup>44</sup> In

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<sup>42</sup> In *Woodside: Pear Tree Grove PO*, Brodber credits the use of both oral and archival sources in her study.

<sup>43</sup> Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack Monkey*, (London: Heinemann, 1970).

*Nothing's Mat*, orality functions as the starting point from which the family history project unfolds. Oral histories are prioritised over archival sources, as the protagonist chooses to put the archival stories of Part Two around the circumference of the mat. Characters are placed within the context of Jamaican history, their narratives taking on significance beyond their relation to Cousin Nothing. For example, the chapter 'Maud and Modibe: Morant Bay, 1865' places Maud within Jamaican Maroon history. Not only are archival sources on the circumference of the mat, but so too is Jamaican history, reinforcing Juneja's contention that 'personal history is linked to group history' in the Caribbean.<sup>45</sup>

Part One and Part Two of *Nothing's Mat* circle each other, both in structure and content. Part Three of the novel further explores the fractal nature of the Caribbean family by representing repeating patterns within the protagonist's family as it spreads into the diaspora. The most notable instances of fractal patterns in Part Three lie in the relationship between the protagonist and her cousin Joy, and in the characterisation of the protagonist's daughter Clarise. Joy is the daughter of the protagonist's father's half-brother John. Since Joy was born in America, the protagonist only knows of her through photographs and letters until Joy travels to Jamaica to give birth to an illegitimate child. Joy is keen to immerse herself in the folk traditions of the island, and the narrator describes her desire to 'be shut in for nine days after the baby's birth; she wanted him or her bathed in a pan with silver money in it [...] she wanted to drink mint tea and wanted the after-birth planted under a tree here. She wanted folk things I had never heard of.' (88) As their relationship becomes increasingly close, the protagonist recognises this as a repeating familial pattern, one which mimics, for example, the close relationship between her grandmother Pearl and Cousin Nothing, distant blood relatives who shared the bond of sisters.<sup>46</sup> The kinships that extend beyond blood ties are further emphasised by the protagonist's sympathetic pregnancy upon Joy's arrival. She describes, 'if you hadn't been told that my cousin was pregnant, five months gone at that, you would not know [...] I, on the other hand, was having difficulty getting my skirts to hook and my blouses were gaping at the front'. (90) Brodber explains this sympathetic

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<sup>45</sup> Juneja, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> The protagonist's mother, talking to her husband, describes Conut as 'your mother's sister who isn't your mother's sister' (5).

pregnancy as a continuation of relationships between enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, who often took on each other's pain:

We feel for each other and carry each other's pain and blessing so much that if the designated one cannot or will not perform, we take on the task. Just so must we have cried and screamed when one of us fell beneath the lash too weak to cry out for herself. (103)

In *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber suggests that the protagonist carrying the burden of the physical symptoms of pregnancy is a fractal, a pattern that has repeated since African people came to the Caribbean. Brodber's protagonist is thus rewarded for her duty towards her cousin when Joy unexpectedly gives birth to twins, and insists that the protagonist take into her care the second child. The pervading imagery of fractals is once again revisited in the description of Joy's second child. The narrator asks, '[have] you ever peeled a tangerine and found at the top of the pegs a whole little set of tangerine pegs. This little set of pegs looks just like the normal set of pegs except for size'. (91) Brodber offers another natural image to illustrate fractal patterns, emphasising her endorsement of using the fractal as a means of understanding family dynamics in the Caribbean. The protagonist adopts the smaller child and names him Modibe, in honour of the Maroon Modibe that Maud was engaged to, replicating the pre-existing structures within her family.

The protagonist's preoccupation with replicating the patterns of her family is further emphasised when she names her second child Clarise, after the Maroon Modibe's younger sister and Cousin Nothing's mother. She chooses to name her Clarise in an attempt to give her the chance to 'live a normal and happy life this time'. (97) The narrator is actively repeating patterns but making the repetition different, as with Benítez-Rojo's understanding of Chaos Theory and the Caribbean as a repeating island. The protagonist recognises that there are pre-existing structures in her family that will continue to be replicated, but each repetition necessarily includes a difference, which means that they are not repeating history, but creating the possibility of mapping their family infinitely. The protagonist continues Clarise's traditional African beliefs in ancestral spirits, and offers a glimpse into Brodber's understanding of African knowledge systems. In his study of Igbo belief systems, Aloysius Eberechukwu Ndiukwu argues that 'in life and death, one is in association

with the family and the ancestors. We are in them and they are in us'.<sup>47</sup> Brodber demonstrates her understanding of ancestral spirits through the characterisation of Nothing's mother Clarise in Part Two of the novel, whilst simultaneously speaking to the theme of fractals. When she becomes gravely ill, Clarise muses, 'I was wondering whose body my spirit would get into and I was thinking that it would go into the little girl [Nothing] for why else did I have her?' (58) Clarise's understanding of the spirit as infinite means that she is able to recognise that death is not her end. Rather, it offers the possibility of new beginnings, much like the structure of the mat and the Caribbean family.

The protagonist describes a moment when she sees her daughter Clarise dancing that, in her mind, confirms her understanding of how fractals manifest within the Caribbean family.

I had once been privileged to see Nothing in a pose which I felt impossible, a skill that Nothing didn't want spoken about. I have never mentioned it to anyone, yet here was this child contorted like the bird into which I had seen Nothing turn herself, the bird into which Clarise's grandmother, the African, had perhaps turned herself to fly away home to wherever, and about which Clarise had told Nothing when she was just a baby [...] Clarise was also, somehow, Nothing. In her the circle was complete: the end linked with the beginning and was even the beginning. (102)

Brodber highlights that familial patterns repeat until they meet their natural ending, which also functions as a new beginning. Nothing's story is concluded in her successor Clarise, and yet the same story is repeating again. Brodber's conceptualisation of repeating ancestral patterns echoes the ideas of anthropologist Constance Sutton, who, in her study of the Yoruba tribe of West Africa, writes about their belief that 'New born children represented reborn ancestors, recent and distant. They in turn give birth to the future, and after their death become ancestors waiting to be reborn'.<sup>48</sup> The cycle of ancestors, much like the circles of the fractal mat, has the capacity to be infinite, the end of a life beginning the next. Brodber creates an innovative narrative and family structure through her use of fractal poetics. She draws on an existing tradition of Caribbean women's writing that represent the

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<sup>47</sup> Aloysius Eberechukwu Ndiukwu, *Authenticity of Belief in African (Igbo) Traditional Religion* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 196.

<sup>48</sup> Constance Sutton, 'Motherhood is Powerful: Embodied Knowledge from the Evolving Field-Based Experiences', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 23.2 (1998), 139-145 (p. 143).

Caribbean family in fiction, but rather than focus on the mother-daughter dyad, Brodber chooses to interrogate broader family dynamics. In doing so, she exposes the limitations of existing literature regarding the matrifocal family, and offers her readers a wholly unique conceptualisation of the Caribbean family. Through the novel, the linear, hegemonic family tree is successfully rejected in favour of a fractal genealogy that embraces openness, subverts hierarchy, and creates a space within which to offer a feminist representation of matrifocality within the Caribbean family.

### **The Fractal, Matrifocal Family**

In her essay 'Fiction in Scientific Procedure' (1990), Erna Brodber explains,

I still think of myself as a sociologist and my fiction writing as a part of my sociological method [...] My sociological effort and therefore the fiction that serves it, unlike mainstream sociology, has activist intentions: it is about studying the behaviour of and transmitting these findings to the children of the people who were put on ships on the African beaches and woke up from this nightmare to find themselves on the shores of the New World.<sup>49</sup>

Brodber positions her work as separate from that of traditional social scientists, highlighting her boredom with 'a methodology dedicated to "objectivity"'.<sup>50</sup> Brodber's sociological work puts community development at its core, as evidenced in *Woodside: Pear Tree Grove PO* (2004). That Brodber studies the community into which she was born suggests that she does not subscribe to the long-held notion that there should be distance between the sociological researcher and those they research. Godfrey Lienhardt, for example, writing in 1964, argues that the most significant advances in the field of anthropology are made by 'attempts to approach an ideal, absolute objectivity'.<sup>51</sup> By researching her own community, Brodber is able to centre community development. That she recognises her fiction as an extension of her academic research suggests that it offers the community another platform through which to access information, and is therefore more likely to aid in its development.

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<sup>49</sup> Erna Brodber, 'Fiction in Scientific Procedure', in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*, ed. by Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Calaloux, 1990), pp. 164-168 (p. 164).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>51</sup> Godfrey Lienhardt, 'On the Concept of Objectivity in Social Anthropology', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 94.1 (1964), 1-10 (p. 1).

By writing a social scientist as her protagonist in *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber is further able to interrogate the relationship between the social sciences and fiction. In Part Two of the novel, which is informed by the protagonist's archival research, the narrator details her process of researching Everard Turnbury, the first husband of Cousin Nothing:

Further confirmation came when I unrolled some papers knotted in cloth [...] Here I found baptism certificates for her children and herself and even for Everard. His father was listed as Samuel and listed as born in England. I went to the christening records in Spanish Town and found Alston Turnbury as the father of Samuel, he too being born in England and I saw that Samuel was baptized at age seven. I found in yet another place that there were but twelve years between the ages of Alston and Samuel. Perhaps not a father and son relationship at all. My 'little grey cells' started to work, as my favourite Agatha Christie detective would say. (71)

Though her archival work is extensive, and though she consults a variety of official written sources, the protagonist finds herself unable to paint a full picture from the available documentation or the oral account from Conut. It is here that the protagonist makes a number of imaginative leaps to fill in the gaps about Everard's father. She comes to the conclusion that Samuel Turnbury was 'kidnapped, blindfolded,' and forced to make the sea journey to Jamaica. (71) She confirms, in her mind, this version of events when she establishes that a Major Turnbury gifted his land to Alston and Samuel: 'These two young men captured in England and imported to Jamaica had been the major's playthings and had been rewarded the land'. (72) Brodber's inclusion of this episode is significant because it emphasises her attitude towards using fiction as a part of a research methodology. Brodber recognises that archival resources can only tell part of the story, particularly in the Caribbean, where official historiographies of the region suffer noticeable gaps. The protagonist of *Nothing's Mat* is required to use her imagination, and the reader is given no indication that she may be misguided in her assumptions.

Additionally, the inclusion of the Turnbury history is complex, and the protagonist ponders over their place in her family mat. (70) Antonia MacDonald

comments that Brodber's sociological work is 'data heavy, no detail too insignificant to mention'.<sup>52</sup> MacDonald also says of Brodber's study *Woodside*:

Brodber interweaves the social and economic interactions of white plantation owners who originally founded the Woodside community. In so doing, she provides the descendants of the enslavers with accounts of their history, for even though the large and general history of the colonisers has always been available, this day-to-day account of the activities of the coloniser in rural Jamaica helps personalise and humanize.<sup>53</sup>

This account of Brodber's sociological work ties in with *Nothing's Mat*, and the protagonist's decision to add the Turnbury family to the mat. By including Turnbury's genealogy, Brodber is able to make connections between personal and global history in an accessible manner. She refuses to shy away from the ugly nature of Jamaica's colonial history. By including in her mat both black and white victims of the slave trade and colonialism, Brodber points to the complexity of this particular historical moment. I suggest that Brodber does this for the benefit of her community. As she argues in *Woodside*, 'self-knowledge is greater power',<sup>54</sup> and it is important to be able to understand and accept all facets of their history, in order to learn from it and move forward.

I have established that Brodber's fiction draws on and expands social science research, and I suggest that she represents a matrifocal family in order to extend the study of the phenomenon in the region. The novel offers a number of representations of matrifocality within the protagonist's family, and by using the fractal mat as inspiration for her alternative family tree, Brodber positions matrifocality as being an integral element of Caribbean genealogy. As outlined in my Introduction, the study of matrifocality in the region began in the early twentieth century, with anthropologists from Europe being sent to observe and offer solutions for what Simey defined as a 'Disintegrate Family': families wherein fathers were marginal or absent.<sup>55</sup> This notion is embodied most aptly in M.G. Smith's introduction to Edith Clarke's *My Mother who Fathered Me* (1957), where he contends that the attention given to family structures

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<sup>52</sup> Antonia MacDonald, 'Erna Brodber: A Poetics of Redemption' in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 20-26 (p. 21).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Erna Brodber, *Woodside: Pear Tree Grove P.O.*, p. viii.

<sup>55</sup> Simey, p. 83.



in the Caribbean could be traced back to 1938, when the British Parliament appointed a Royal Commission 'to survey the social and economic conditions of this region and to recommend appropriate programmes for action' in regards to the 'disorganisation of family life'.<sup>56</sup> Smith's introduction demonstrates that family structures in the region were regarded as non-normative and problematic, and that research into the family structure was initially funded by Britain. Thus, Eurocentric approaches to the study would have been inescapable.

The study of matrifocality, and indeed the definition of the term, is continually evolving. Feminist perspectives recognised that matrifocality can and does occur even when men are present in the household. Nancy Tanner, for example, calls for a redefinition of matrifocality that is not 'characterised by the absence of, say, the husband/father.'<sup>57</sup> Contemporary scholars also recognise that matrifocality is not only a prevalent family structure, but also one that exists within wider communities. Cecile Jackson, for example, writes that matrifocality 'is not simply a quality of intra-household relations, but exists in contexts where women have extra-household economic, political, and cultural roles and opportunities'.<sup>58</sup> Expanding definitions of matrifocality allows academics to consider larger societal implications. Research following Smith and Clarke challenged the idea that the Caribbean family was fractured or broken, and presented the non-nuclear family as a unique structure to be celebrated. For example Senior suggests that 'these seemingly fragmented manifestations of family life mask much stronger bonds than first appear [...] Caribbean family ties are extensive [...] Through family networks, women especially can develop a resource base which enables them to cope with their child-rearing and economic responsibilities.'<sup>59</sup> Senior understands matrifocality as a structure that provides the opportunity to create family networks that extend beyond the nuclear, and thus have the potential to be far reaching and infinite, like the fractal.

In *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber uses fiction to provide a platform to emphasise the significance and widespread nature of matrifocality within the Caribbean. From the

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<sup>56</sup> M.G. Smith, 'Introduction' in *My Mother who Fathered Me*, Edith Clarke (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. iv.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Tanner, 'Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans' in *Women Culture and Society*, eds. Michrelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, & Louise Lamphere (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 129-156 (p. 133).

<sup>58</sup> Cecile Jackson, 'Modernity and Matrifocality: The Feminization of Kinship?', *Development and Change*, 46.1 (2015), 1-24 (p. 1).

<sup>59</sup> Senior, pp. 23-24.

opening chapter of the novel, Brodber signposts for the reader the areas of sociological interest to which her fiction aims to contribute. The protagonist describes the research she conducts as a university student in Jamaica:

We were to survey household heads in a depressed part of town [...] We were advised that as fieldworkers we should have no emotions. Having emotions and worse, displaying them while in the field was a methodological sin. I was a bad scientist; I broke the law, I sinned. (3)

The protagonist's own approach to research echoes that of Brodber's in their rejection of objectivity. In addition, it is relevant that the protagonist's research looks specifically at heads of household in Jamaica. Her fieldwork acts as a precursor to the genealogy project she undertakes, whilst acknowledging the extensive research already conducted in the twentieth century Caribbean about matrifocal families, a lot of which was largely concerned with the perceived problem of a high proportion of female heads of household. Sheila Stuart, for example, comments on the 'high incidence of female heads of households' in the Caribbean, and the tendency of early research to regard this as anomalous.<sup>60</sup> In this short passage, the novelist asks that the reader reconsider previous sociological studies of Caribbean families, and allow her to create a space for reconceptualization.

If Brodber's fiction serves as part of her research methodology, a way of enhancing the 'affective interaction between the researcher and the researched,' it would thus follow that one of Brodber's goals for *Nothing's Mat* is the expansion of our understanding of matrifocality.<sup>61</sup> In the novel, matrifocality is sometimes represented as a necessity, at other times represented as occurring in the presence of men within the household, and at other times represented as a means of continuing legacies and passing on cultural traditions. Matrifocality is first introduced to the mat and the story through Miss Maud. Maud's first person narrative in Part Two of *Nothing's Mat*, like Turnbury's, brings Jamaican history into the mat, and makes it accessible by linking it with one family's history. Maud's narrative details her memories of the Morant Bay Rebellion, a watershed moment in Jamaican history where 'several hundred Afro-Jamaican small farmers and sugar workers marched into Morant Bay, an important provincial capital, and unleashed violent retribution for

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<sup>60</sup> Sheila Stuart, 'Female Headed Households: A Comparative Perspective of the Caribbean and the Developed World', *Gender and Development*, 4.2 (1996), 28-34 (p. 28).

<sup>61</sup> Brodber, 'Fiction in Scientific Procedure,' p. 165.

the economic and political oppression they continued to endure despite the abolition of slavery a generation earlier'.<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Bilby argues that one of the more troubling aspects of the rebellion was the role of the Jamaican Maroons, who 'sided with the British rulers of Jamaica'.<sup>63</sup> As is the case with Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* (2009) and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006), *Nothing's Mat* rejects the quasi-mythification of the Maroons. Maud describes her fiancé Modibe and his parents as having 'plenty manners and they worked hard. Good people'. (43) After Modibe is killed during the massacre, Maud describes her rape at the hands of several Maroon men: 'I did really think those Maroon people did know more respect [...] the man throw mi down on the ground, lift up me dress and have his way with me and 'bout six more of them'. (47) Fiction allows Brodber a platform upon which to expand upon historical accounts and offer multi-dimensional representations of historical moments and figures. Lorna Milne suggests that the figure of the 'mythified Maroon [...] a hyper-virile super-male' has long been established in Caribbean literature.<sup>64</sup> That Brodber chooses to write a harrowing depiction of Maroon violence against an innocent woman suggests that she is resisting the mythic and romanticised narratives that are pervasive in local history and literature. It is because of the events in Morant Bay that Miss Maud becomes Clarise's carer and thus the seed of the matrifocal mat. Through necessity, Maud becomes financially independent and resourceful, taking advantage of the land she acquires to 'dig fi potato and tek to market'. (52)

In *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber asks the reader to question long held assumptions about the Caribbean family by representing a number of iterations of matrifocality within one family; iterations that move beyond class and racial classifications. Through this, I argue that her portrayal of matrifocality is feminist, in that she offers an active resistance to Eurocentric perspectives that regarded matrifocality as a problem to be solved, amongst lower-class Afro-Caribbean families.<sup>65</sup> One such

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas C. Holt, 'Review: "The Killing Time": *The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* by Gad Hueman,' *The American Historical Review*, 101.4 (1996), 1319-1320 (p. 1319).

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth Bilby, 'Re-Visioning the Maroons in the Morant Bay Rebellion,' *History and Memory*, 24.2 (2012) 41-72 (p. 42).

<sup>64</sup> Lorna Milne, 'The Maroon and the Marqueur: Physical Space and Imaginary Displacements in Patrick Chamoiseau's *L'Esclave vieil homme et la molosse*' in *Ici-La: Place and Displacement in Caribbean Writing in French*, ed. by Mary Gallagher (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 61-82 (p. 73).

<sup>65</sup> Scholars such as Raymond T. Smith and T. S. Simey regarded matrifocality as a problem amongst lower-class Caribbean families, and Simey suggested that the family structure was a 'symptom of disease in the body of modern society' (p. vi)

example of the complexity of matrifocality in the text can be found in the description of the household that Cousin Nothing grows up in. When Turnbury moves into Maud and Nothing's house after Mass Eustace's death, Maud agrees that 'it looked bad for a young man and a young woman to be living in a house and not be married'. (28) Though there is no romantic connection between Everard and Nothing, their marriage is motivated by an adherence to patriarchal values. After the birth of Nothing, Maud admits to feeling 'mother things [...] what she did envy was Nothing's demand for her mother's breast [...] The sense of a need to connect was what she wanted to feel'. (21) Maud initially desires to be a mother, suggesting that she places more importance on the connection between mother and child than a romantic connection. After Clarise dies, however, Maud sets her sights on creating a version of a nuclear family by getting Mass Eustace 'to understand she had feelings... Nothing now had a real family'. (23) Whilst the novel establishes alternative family patterns, for Maud, the patriarchal ideal of the nuclear family is informative. She subscribes to the idea that matrifocality, or a female-headed household is non-normative and, after a period of turbulence, finds solace in the institution of marriage.

The trope of missing or marginal men, which was once an important facet of the study of Caribbean matrifocality, is also taken into consideration in *Nothing's Mat*. Joy, the protagonist's American cousin, is described by the narrator as being 'seriously into Black Power'. (77) When asked about her interest in racial politics, Joy credits the unfair and racially motivated imprisonment of her cousin John, with whom she had grown up as close as siblings would. The protagonist recognises a pattern of the incarceration of men in the diaspora, her own brother Evan 'languishing in prison in England for the same reason that John has been imprisoned in Virginia — for being black in a white country'. (95) Caribbean men are marginal in these societies as a result of oppression and incarceration: as such, they become marginal figures in the family. In the case of Evan and John, Brodber represents a pattern that repeats with a difference — inasmuch as their parents choose to migrate to different countries — though it ultimately yields the same negative result of incarceration. Unlike the fractal iterations of the mat, wherein each iteration features a difference that allows the mat and the family to continue growing, patterns that feature no change, such as that of male incarceration in the family, limit the expansive nature of the fractal.

Another example of matrifocality in *Nothing's Mat* can be found in the representation of Everard Turnbury's family. Raymond T. Smith has been credited with coining the term 'matrifocal'. *The Matrifocal Family: Politics, Power and Pluralism* (1996) focuses on the households of 'lower status Negro groups,' and he argues that their complex colonial history, as well as 'economic and status factors,' are responsible for the prevalence of matrifocality in their communities.<sup>66</sup> By focusing his study on poorer communities, Smith asks that the reader make connections between family structure and economic deprivation. Brodber's representation of matrifocality in Jamaican families rejects the notion that the economic marginality of black men is at the root of the phenomenon, and this is exemplified in the representation of the Turnbury family. Everard's first person narrative begins, 'Even as a small boy, I knew that the Turnbury name was nothing to be proud of, though we named Turnbury were supposed to be proud and proud of it'. (60) This remark evidences Brodber's resistance to patrilineality and Eurocentricity, as she represents a boy's unwillingness to associate with the name of his white father. As the narrative continues, it is revealed that his father, Samuel Turnbury, was a drunk, 'pickled in rum,' who soon sold his family's fortune to maintain his addiction. (61) Regardless of his presence in the home, it is Everard's mulatto mother Doris who is central in the family. She is described as 'having more education in her thumbnail than they had in all their school, and she did teach us to read, to do sums and sing songs'. (62) In her role as mother, Doris Turnbury becomes the focal point of the family, and her mother-like attributes extend even to her drunk husband, the narrator describing an occasion where she holds his face, 'kissing it and talking her baby talk to him'. (62)

Samuel Turnbury marginalises himself through his alcoholism, and when Doris dies, the children are taken in by her mother. The extent of Samuel's economic mishandling is only revealed later in the narrative, when Everard notices that 'bits of furniture were missing [...] without the money my mother was giving him from what, I later discovered, was left to her personally in a bank account by her father, my father was selling off bits of furniture and of the house to pay for his alcohol'. (66) In the case of the Turnbury family, emotional and economic stability is provided by the mother, and Brodber uses this example to subvert the notion that economic deprivation occurs only in lower class African Jamaican communities. Through

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<sup>66</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *The Matrifocal Family: Politics, Power and Pluralism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 33.

fiction, Brodber is able to open up the representation of matrifocality, challenge early assumptions about the phenomenon, and subvert the stereotypes associated with it.

The final iteration of matrifocality in *Nothing's Mat* is represented in the protagonist's family that is introduced in Part Three of the novel. The protagonist marries a doctor named Junior after adopting Modibe, and has a second child with him. He gives the protagonist the nickname Princess, which has patriarchal connotations and conjures images of a young woman waiting to be married off. Junior and Princess' family is matrifocal in that the family is centred on both the mother and on the matrifocal mat. The protagonist describes introducing her children to the mat in their early years, and it is represented as an important part of their socialisation. The narrator describes Clarise at three years old as '[recognising her relatives] places on the mat and [she] took to talking to them [...] She knew her people and I think was incorporating into herself the best of what there was in them'. (101) The protagonist's family is also represented as matrifocal as it is the patterns that are established in the mother's family that find themselves repeating through her children. Clarise and Modibe, for example, maintain the sympathetic relationship with chickens that was established by their great-grandmother, (101) and continue being open to helping others 'feel and bear the pain' of those inherited traumas that Caribbean people are so often subject to. (103)

An area of specific interest in the study of Caribbean matrifocality has long been its origin, and two schools of thought have developed. Whilst some scholars suggest that matrifocality is a derivation of traditional African matrilineality,<sup>67</sup> others believe that matrifocality in the Caribbean is a product of slavery, which 'broke up patrifocal marriages and patrilineal households'.<sup>68</sup> In *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber explicitly engages with this debate in her consideration of kinship in the Caribbean. When the protagonist's son Modibe questions his sister's connection with the mat, and why she 'has to feel their pain', (103) his mother explains to him:

Modibe, when our people came to this part of the world from Africa we didn't come as blood relations. We didn't come as brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers already knowing and loving each other. We came as individuals [...] needing to love and be loved. In the absence of

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<sup>67</sup> Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> John Stuart MacDonald and Leatrice D. Macdonald, 'Transformation of African and Indian Family Traditions in the Southern Caribbean,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15.2 (1973), 171-198 (p. 171).

family, we loved anyone we could find and were grateful for the love that anybody gave to us. So we have a history of loving and being loved not because we are blood relations but because God has put us in each other's way and we find something in each other to preserve, admire and to care for. (103)

The protagonist is alluding to the alternative patterns of her own family, wherein there are repeating instances of relationships that are not aptly explained by bloodlines. We see these expansive patterns in the relationship between the protagonist and Nothing, Maud and Clarise, between Nothing and Pearl, the protagonist and Joy. The mat represents these expansive relationships that were established in the region as a result of slavery, an example of a longstanding fractal pattern. Given that the mat is matrifocal, I would thus argue that the text portrays matrifocality as a pattern that was established in the Caribbean during the era of transatlantic slavery. Matrifocality, and alternative patterns of loving that extend beyond blood relations, is not presented as a problem, but rather normalised within the text.

The matrifocal mat continues being an important and informative figure in the protagonist's life. In the novel's final chapter, the protagonist wonders, 'we have two houses and are constantly moving between them. Where should the mat live? I settle this question by putting the mat where we most often are: that is, in the car'. (104) Far from being a relic, the mat and the family that live within it are living members of the protagonist's family. The matrifocal seed, planted by Maud's brave act of taking Clarise across the island to avoid the conflict, is an active part of the protagonist's life, and her children are able to interact daily with this living memory.

With the final chapter named 'Re-Making the Mat,' Brodber drives home two very important points. As the first chapter is named 'Making the Mat,' Brodber highlights the circular structure of the novel, and the fractal nature of the Caribbean family, where patterns continue to repeat, and the end of one story acts as the beginning of the next. The second issue that Brodber re-emphasises is the importance of making community research accessible. The mat, with all the oral and archival history that it encapsulates, goes with the protagonist wherever she goes, and Brodber is suggesting the importance not only of learning one's own history, but carrying it with you, and allowing it to teach and influence future generations. Matrifocality, then, becomes incredibly important to the Caribbean genealogy project. Matrifocality serves as an example of alternative instances of kinship in the

Caribbean. Brodber does not seek to simplify its representation, and offers a number of examples of matrifocality in *Nothing's Mat*. Her fiction offers another way of accessing and understanding sociological research that she deems significant to community development.

## Conclusion

Through *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber highlights the importance of research into matrifocality in the Caribbean, and suggests that people in the region engage with it, not as an example of fracture, but rather as the possibility for understanding the fractal and infinite nature of the Caribbean family. *Nothing's Mat* is an important addition to a tradition of the fictional representation of the Caribbean family. Rather than continue to explore the mother-daughter dyad — a family dynamic that has often been integral to Caribbean women's writing — Brodber offers a new way of conceptualising the Caribbean family through the model of the fractal. In her use of fractal poetics, Brodber successfully re-imagines and celebrates the complex Caribbean family as expansive, extensive, and with the possibility of being infinite. *Nothing's Mat* represents family networks that are rooted in the legacy of slavery and extend beyond blood lines. Similar to the way in which Benítez-Rojo rejects readings of the Caribbean as fractured and re-imagines the region as an expansive meta-archipelago, so too does Brodber draw on the fractal as a model for the Caribbean family that directly addresses and subverts the Eurocentric perception of the family as unstable and broken. Through storytelling, and the iterations that orality allows space for, and by offering a number of family stories that would not have been adequately captured by the traditional family tree, Brodber makes a strong case for a fractal approach to Caribbean genealogy. Through the mat and novel's innovative narrative structure, she highlights the repetitive nature of the family, wherein patterns repeat with a difference, making space for infinite possibility.

As an academic who places greater importance on community development over traditional scientific objectivity, Brodber has long argued that her fiction is a facet of her sociological methodology. In writing *Nothing's Mat*, Brodber highlights the importance of communities in the Caribbean being able to trace and map family histories. As the family she represents is undoubtedly matrifocal in nature, it would



follow that Brodber positions the family structure as one that needs to be understood in order to capture the full complexity of the Caribbean family. Matrifocality is represented in a number of ways in the novel that suggest Brodber's awareness of established schools of thought. She rejects the contentions of Eurocentric scholarship that matrifocality is a problem associated with lower-class African Caribbean by representing the family structure across racial boundaries and within the diaspora. Scholars such as Edith Clarke and Simey suggest contemporary family structures in the Caribbean are broken as a result of the traumatic legacy of slavery, but Brodber rejects these arguments by focusing on the history of loving and being loved among African people forcefully brought to the region. (103) In the case of the novel and the mat, matrifocality is the seed of the family, a repeating pattern that reiterates those expansive networks of love within Caribbean communities, and facilitates the possibility of a family that continues to grow infinitely.

## Chapter Four: 'A Natural Aversion to Slavery': Matrifocality as Marronage in Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006)

Marie-Elena John's first novel *Unburnable* (2006) tells the interwoven stories of three generations of women in twentieth and twenty-first century Dominica. The novel follows protagonist Lillian's return to her home island from New York, as she searches for the truth about her mother Iris and grandmother Matilda, made infamous across the island for their reputations as a prostitute and mass murderer respectively. Through this text, John contributes to the tradition of Caribbean women writers who have used the novel space to interrogate and represent female histories in the region, the sexual agency of women, and gendered trauma. *Unburnable* is a unique addition to the canon of Caribbean women's literature in that it offers a potential site of healing for both shared postcolonial and individual trauma through its representation of matrifocal marronage.

Marronage is defined by Neil Roberts as 'a group of persons isolating themselves from a surrounding society in order to create a fully autonomous community.'<sup>1</sup> In the Caribbean context, Maroon communities were developed by Africans as a direct result of the slave trade. In his discussion of queer writing in the Caribbean, Ronald Cummings argues that, as a literary trope, marronage has the potential to 'offer another theoretical framework for exploring the politics of sexual difference,' and he positions marronage as a symbol used commonly by Caribbean writers to interrogate fringe cultures and communities.<sup>2</sup> Cummings continues by suggesting that 'the historical relationship between the plantation and the rebel communities established by the Maroons is referenced as a way of mapping the politics of contestation and the complex negotiations of spaces of difference that marks contemporary sexual politics.'<sup>3</sup> In the same way that Maroon communities were figures of resistance against the plantation, Caribbean writers have used the trope of marronage to represent 'countercultures', alternative communities and

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Cummings, 'Queer Theory and Caribbean Writing', in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. by Michael A. Bucknor and Alison Donnell (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 323-331 (p. 328).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

ideologies that are resistant to dominant culture.<sup>4</sup> In discussing depictions of gender and matrifocality in *Unburnable*, this chapter builds on this understanding of marronage as a literary trope that represents fringe cultures and communities in the Caribbean. Marronage functions as a trope in John's novel that both represents African and indigenous cultures on the island, and conceptualises resistance to the dominant, colonial culture of Dominica. I argue that John's representation of matrifocal marronage serves two main purposes: not only does it exist in parallel to the mainstream community as a symbol of resistance, but it also functions as a potential site of healing for the novel's protagonist Lilian. I argue that the counterculture of matrifocal marronage is queer in that it subverts a number of cultural hierarchies prevalent in the Caribbean, such as language and gender, and challenges the patriarchy of dominant society.

Though it is often largely associated with gay and lesbian studies, a broader definition of queer theory suggests that its overarching concern lies with challenging hegemonies and normativity. Donald E. Hall defines queer theory as 'putting pressure on simplistic notions of identity [and] disturbing the value systems that underlie designations of normal and abnormal identity.'<sup>5</sup> Noreen Giffney also rejects the notion that queer theory is synonymous with gay and lesbian studies, and defines 'queer' as 'a resistance to identity categories or easy categorisation [...] It functions to designate a political persuasion, which aggressively challenges hegemonies, exclusions, norms, and assumptions.'<sup>6</sup> I understand queering to be the practice of aggressively challenging and resisting patriarchal normativity established by the dominant society. Indeed, marronage and matrifocality become aligned in *Unburnable* because both are positioned by John as examples of active resistance against colonial patriarchy. Because of this, I read the novel's matrifocal Maroon community as a queering device.

This chapter will be divided into two sections: in the first, I explore John's contribution to the canon of Caribbean women's writing through her engagement with orality, African-derived spiritual practices, and marronage. I will discuss the novel's interaction with themes such as female agency and liberation, dominant

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<sup>4</sup> Erin Mackie, 'Welcome the Outlaw, Pirates, Maroons and Caribbean Countercultures', *Cultural Critique*, 59 (2005), 24-62.

<sup>5</sup> Donald E. Hall, *Queer Theories* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 14. ProQuest eBook.

<sup>6</sup> Noreen Giffney, 'Introduction: The 'q' Word', in *Queer Interventions: The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. by Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke (Oxon: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 1-16 (pp. 2-3).

discourse, women within historical memory, and the Caribbean diaspora. I will also consider the representation of marronage in Caribbean literature, and will suggest that John's representation offers a fresh perspective on Maroon communities. The novel's engagement with marronage as a literary trope affords John a space within which to imagine Caribbean cultural traditions as acts of overt resistance. By choosing to align matrifocality with the fictitious Maroon community, I will argue that John conceptualises the family and community structure as an act of overt resistance for women against a patriarchal society that is positioned in the text as a continuation of enslavement.

At its centre, *Unburnable* serves to identify a process of reconciliation and recovery after trauma, and John's representation of a matrifocal Maroon community acts as a symbol for this healing. John contributes to existing debates about matrifocality in the Caribbean by offering a literary representation of the family structure that can be aligned with feminist anthropological perspectives. In addition, through its connection to acts of marronage, John positions matrifocality as a wider community structure that functions both as a site of healing and an act of resistance for Lillian and the nation. The second section of this chapter will position *Unburnable* as a postcolonial trauma novel that offers a gendered perspective on shared trauma in the Caribbean through its representation of Lillian and her journey towards healing and recovery. I suggest that it is the queerness of the matrifocal Maroon community structure, and its active resistance against simplistic notions of identity and community, that allows John to represent matrifocality as having curative effects. Because the Maroon community actively challenges hegemony through championing the Africanness of Dominica's majority population, it offers a potential site for healing, both for Lillian and the nation.

## **Writing Women, Writing Marronage**

In *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (2006), Alison Donnell writes:

As I have discussed, the emergence of critical works devoted to women's writing as a tradition in its own right in the 1980s and 1990s, and the attention to the consolidation of Caribbean women's writing as an almost separate area of study, has generated lively and divergent critical

approaches to the issues of gender difference [...] It may be possible to argue that the feminist critical agenda with its focus on women's writing and women's sexual objectivities has promoted the focus on women's sexual autonomy in critical writings to date.<sup>7</sup>

Donnell suggests that the tradition of critical writing after the emergence of a Caribbean women's writing canon focused on female liberation through sexual autonomy, and goes on to suggest that, because 'questions of sexuality usually remain marginal', twenty-first century criticism has started to work towards a more inclusive reading of sexuality in Caribbean fiction.<sup>8</sup> I would argue that *Unburnable* is another example of women's writing from the region that, at its heart, seeks to imagine a means of liberation for its female protagonist. However, the text does more than position sexuality as a site of autonomy for Lillian. It is through community — specifically the matrifocal Maroon community — and matrilineage, that Lillian is able to journey towards autonomy and power, as well as find a source of healing.

Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003), the novel I will be discussing in Chapter Five, switches abruptly between the voices of Mer, Lemer and Meritet, with the goddess Ezili's emerging consciousness punctuating the novel. The fluidity of the narrative emphasises the connection between these women across the African diaspora, despite being separated by time and space. Similarly, the narrative of *Unburnable* moves between times, countries and perspectives as the stories of Lillian, Iris, and Matilda unfold. These characters serve as the authorities of their own narratives — a striking resistance to the historical dominance of male voices in Caribbean literature and history. Perspectives from fringe characters such as Lillian's stepmother and god-mother, Icilma and Mary-Alice, are also heard, but male voices in the novel are scarce and often misinformed. For example, Lillian's lover Teddy is the only male character with a substantial voice in the novel. He travels with Lillian to Dominica to offer support, and aids her search for the truth about her grandmother. However well-intentioned, Teddy is unable to correctly translate Lillian's history. For example, after spending some time conducting research into Matilda's murder trial, Teddy reaches the ill-informed conclusion that Matilda and the Maroon community she leads had a history of sacrificing humans: 'In the practice of some religions [...]

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<sup>7</sup> Alison Donnell, *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

human sacrifice often constitutes an important element.’<sup>9</sup> He is both American and male, and I would argue that for both of these reasons, Teddy is able to understand the truth about the Maroons, and recognise the steps Lillian needs to take to make peace with her lineage.

John’s novel moves from the 1920s, when Matilda meets her Carib husband Simon, through to the present day, with Lillian looking for answers about her ancestry. Both the changing female perspectives in *Unburnable*, and the non-linear narrative structure, work to emphasise Renu Juneja’s contention that women’s identity in the Caribbean is not a ‘solitary process of individualisation,’ but a ‘highly contextual process of construction with others’.<sup>10</sup> This contextual process is evident in the narrative, particularly in the way that the reader, and Lillian, uncovers the truth about Matilda’s trial. John offers multiple female perspectives in telling the stories of Iris and Matilda, and Lillian is charged with piecing the narratives together. The truth, as with female identity, is a contextual process. Iris, for example, is described in terms of her inherited features. The narrator describes Iris as having an ‘underlying red hue from her father’s Carib blood’ and ‘Matilda’s West African features’. (4) Her identity is constructed in relation to her parents. Similarly, Matilda’s identity is informed by the people around her, suggesting an interconnectedness in Caribbean communities. John suggests that it is impossible to understand singular identity without first understanding the community and in the case of the novel, that community is undoubtedly matrifocal. This idea is perpetuated by the fact that Lillian is unable to find peace until she finds out the truth about her mother and grandmother: her identity feels incomplete because she lacks context.

The contextual construction of Caribbean women’s identity is further emphasised by the multivocality of *Unburnable*. Juneja notes the ‘particular multivocality and emotional expansiveness’ of Caribbean women’s writing which ‘sometimes finds reflection in formal or genre configurations’.<sup>11</sup> Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido echo this contention by commenting on the tendency of women’s narratives to be polyphonic, and they draw connections between this trend and Caribbean women’s lived reality of ‘absence, of voicelessness, of

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<sup>9</sup> Marie-Elena John, *Unburnable* (New York City, New York: Harper Collins, 2006), pp. 266-267. (All future references to this edition will be marked in parentheses in the text).

<sup>10</sup> Renu Juneja, *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

marginalisation.’<sup>12</sup> *Unburnable* employs an omniscient narrator who inhabits the perspectives of a variety of female characters over the course of the novel. This multivocality offers a voice to women who are left out of official narratives, and also to women who have been only afforded limited representation in fiction by male writers. Not only does multivocality in *Unburnable* help offer varied representations of women, but it also serves to show the importance of community in telling women’s stories, shaping identities, and keeping cultural traditions alive. The perspectives of other women in her community are invaluable to Lillian as they offer her a chance to understand her history away from the demonising voices of the dominant narratives. That the polyphony of *Unburnable* extends beyond Lillian, Iris, and Matilda to other women in their community suggests a profound connection between women in the Caribbean. Lillian’s personal history is inextricable from the re-writing of an island’s history, with women at the centre. The centrality of women within the narrative once again points to the matrifocal nature of both Lillian’s family and, indeed, Dominica.

It is in John’s engagement with re-writing history, representing African and indigenous cultures, and themes such as orality, that she joins the tradition of Caribbean women writers resisting Eurocentricity in their narratives. For example, Barbadian writer Karen Lord’s novel *Redemption in Indigo* (2010) is an adaptation of a Senegalese folk tale. By setting her novel in Africa, and drawing on Caribbean mythology and orality, the text actively reaches back to the African roots of the majority population in the Caribbean and rejects Eurocentricity. Lillian travels back to Dominica because she doesn’t believe the stories about her murderous grandmother. She tells Teddy, ‘S’pose she didn’t do it? I don’t think there was any other evidence except her word. Suppose it was like the boys, the police interrogated her for hours and hours and eventually she surrendered like all the other people who give false confessions’. (123) The two dominant narratives about Matilda are found in official written documents — the court records, transcripts, and newspaper articles (225) — and the unofficial folk narrative that is spread through popular songs and Dominica’s oral tradition.

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<sup>12</sup> Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, ‘Introduction: Women and Literature in the Caribbean: An Overview’, in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 1-24 (p. 6).

Orality is a long established literary trope because it allows writers to critique and resist the colonial influence on language hierarchies. Carol Bailey reiterates this idea by arguing:

Caribbean scholars also suggest that as a consequence of its marginalisation and because it is a product of creole cultures, orality has emerged as a tool for writers to contest various hegemonies and as a means by which distorted stories of suppressed narratives are recovered in creative writings.<sup>13</sup>

Because the oral tradition in the Caribbean is feminised, and women are often regarded as the transmitters of this tradition<sup>14</sup>, Caribbean women writers often allude to orality as being a source of strength. In Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983) for example, storytelling is an important motif. Annie describes listening to her mother tell stories: 'I would place my ear against her neck and [...] all the sounds around me [...] would seem as if they came from inside her'.<sup>15</sup> Kincaid champions orality by making Annie's mother, her songs, and her stories, 'the source of language and storytelling' that 'makes accessible all the sounds of the world'.<sup>16</sup> I would suggest that John's use of orality in *Unburnable* as an act of resistance is more intricate than Kincaid's. Rather than simply subverting the language hierarchies established by colonial powers in the region, she engages with queering practices by destabilising the hierarchy entirely. Her representation of orality is not necessarily positive, and Bailey's insightful essay does well to interrogate the intricacies of John's representation.

Orality emerges as a tool writers use to engage with cultural hierarchies. In *Unburnable*, there is tension between the written and oral narratives of history, as evidenced by the multiple and conflicting accounts of Matilda's crimes. John subverts the dominance of written narratives by having the 'transcripts, court records of Matilda's trial, [and] newspaper accounts' destroyed by a hurricane. (225) Lillian and Teddy receive all the information about Matilda and Iris through oral accounts, which prove most helpful. From conversations with Mary-Alice, Icilma, and Bird, they are able to piece together an alternative version of events to the written records. It is

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<sup>13</sup> Carol Bailey, 'Destabilising Caribbean Critical Orthodoxies: Interrogating Orality in Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable*,' *Caribbean Quarterly*, 59.1 (2013), 31-49 (pp. 31-32).

<sup>14</sup> Juneja, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (New York City, New York: Plume, 1983), p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Juneja, p. 38.



largely through women's willingness to share their stories, through the inclusion of voices often omitted from the dominant narratives that the truth is realised and Lillian is offered the possibility of healing.

The subversion of language hierarchies is complicated by the inclusion of a demonising folk narrative that is complicit in spreading incomplete stories. Lillian's prior knowledge of her grandmother is informed by popular songs about her: "Matilda the Great" Lillian's grandmother was called in Dominica [...] a name coined by one of the *chantuelles* who "sang on her". (44) Similarly, Iris is equally well-remembered throughout the community through an unflattering folk representation, an example being a song named 'Bottle of Coke'. (228) 'Chantuelle' is the original name given to Calypsonians, who are musicians from the Anglophone Caribbean tradition. Calypso is a musical genre derived from the Griot tradition of West Africa, wherein stories are put to music.<sup>17</sup> That these calypso songs become the dominant form of remembrance for Matilda and Iris, and that their life stories are diminished to nothing more than songs for entertainment, gives the reader an opportunity to critique the voicelessness of women in the Caribbean. Though such oral traditions, as Carolyn Cooper suggests, are feminised, women are still hurt by their perpetration.<sup>18</sup> What John's representation of orality suggests is that, regardless of language hierarchies, orality in the Caribbean has an 'overpowering authority'.<sup>19</sup> By imagining a situation where written documentation is destroyed, *Unburnable* shows how the oral tradition remains dominant in local communities, despite its stigmatisation.

John's destabilisation of language hierarchies in *Unburnable* is further challenged and queered by the Maroons' decision to stay silent after Matilda is killed and their community collapses. It is only after being probed by Teddy that Bird admits his Maroon roots and agrees to shed some light on the truth about Matilda. The narrator of the novel, from Bird's perspective, describes how the Maroons, after being discovered by the police, committed mass suicide, preferring death over the ensuing enslavement at the hands of a colonial society:

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<sup>17</sup> Anon, 'The Evolution of Calypso Music', *Nalis* [online] <<http://www.nalis.gov.tt/Research/SubjectGuide/Music/Calypso/tabid/104/Default.aspx?PageContentID=73>> [accessed 20 October 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*, (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1993), pp. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Bailey, p. 39.

He would tell his wife how they had all jumped, all except the few who remained behind to prevent an abomination, because, according to their customs, an unburied body was the punishment for a shameful death. A few of the people of Noir had voluntarily postponed their home-going to give the thousand bodies down in the still-uncharted forest a proper interment befitting their noble lives and glorious deaths, and then they quietly waited out their time. (288)

The decision to remain silent, to entirely forfeit the opportunity to allow the Maroon story to become a part of any narrative outside of their own, is presented in *Unburnable* as the ultimate act of resistance. The Maroons do not simply disrupt the established language hierarchy. Rather, they offer a new alternative to the existing options, and position silence as the dominant and most powerful way of controlling their narrative. This silence ultimately allows them to retain their power. Their story cannot be misrepresented, as happens with Matilda, because it is never told.

More recently, the conversation about Caribbean women's writing has turned its attention to the representation of African-derived spirituality in the diaspora, and the possibility of freedom and power that it offers textual women. Through her representation of African-derived spiritual traditions and practices in *Unburnable*, John presents a Caribbean counterculture that offers women characters autonomy and power, and can act as a potential site of healing. In her reading of novels by Edwidge Danticat and Marysè Conde, Maha Marouan outlines four interlocking concerns in their writing: '(1) the preservation of African diaspora consciousness, (2) the celebration of black female spirituality, (3) historical recovery and revision, (4) intertextuality, creolisation, and transnational identities'.<sup>20</sup> I would argue that, whilst John engages with all of these themes in her novel, it is the preservation of African beliefs in the diaspora, and the celebration of female spirituality, that are most significant in the narrative. Through her characterisation of Matilda, a healer and community leader, John champions African-derived spirituality as a source of matrifocal power for women in the Caribbean. The narrator observes:

People said many things about Matilda. Above all, they said she had Obeah powers, which included the power to heal at will [...] She treated her patients with medicine and she treated them with prayers and sacrifice and ritual, because to her there could be no clear separation between the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. (10-11)

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<sup>20</sup> Maha Marouan, *Witches, Goddesses and Angry Spirits: the Politics of Spiritual Liberation in African Diaspora Women's Writing* (Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio University Press, 2013), p. 3.

Obeah is defined by Nathaniel Samuel Murrell as a ‘self-preserving religious magical art’ that originated in West Africa.<sup>21</sup> Matilda is unable to separate the physical act of healing from the spiritual, which supports Murrell’s definition of Obeah as being rooted in African-derived spirituality. Her connection to this spirituality functions as a ‘site of liberation’ for Matilda,<sup>22</sup> in that it grants her a level of respect within her own Maroon community, as well as among mainstream Dominicans, ‘who came to the bottom of the mountain, the base of Up There, to wait for her to climb down’. (11) Marouan suggests that there is an openness offered to women practising African-derived religions in the diaspora that ‘can be traced to West and Central African cultures that do not exclude women from the domain of priesthood and spiritual authority.’<sup>23</sup> Engagement with alternative models of spirituality not only allows women writers to offer an alternative to Eurocentric understanding of African cultures in the Caribbean. It also presents writers the opportunity to imagine and write multi-dimensional female characters in positions of authority, whilst simultaneously emphasising the inherent connections between Caribbean and African cultures. As with orality, John positions Maroon culture as a subversive alternative to mainstream, colonial Dominican culture. African-derived spirituality, and its matrifocal nature, is presented as a potential site of healing, an idea that shall be further interrogated in the second section of this chapter.

The Volta in *Unburnable* occurs upon the realisation that Lillian’s grandmother Matilda was the chief justice of a Maroon community that survived undetected in the Dominican mountains for over two hundred years. With the help of Bird, Teddy is able to confirm that ‘Noir was founded by the women who escaped from another Maroon camp — a place called Jacko Flats [...] Matilda was out-and-out Boss Man, openly so’. (281) This revelation allows Lillian to piece together the truth about her maternal lineage before the novel reaches its ambiguous climax.

Maroon communities existed in the Caribbean wherever there were slave communities. Marjoleine Kars writes,

The term “Maroons” refers to people who escaped slavery to create independent groups and communities on the outskirts of slave societies. Scholars generally distinguish two kinds of marronage, though there is

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<sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2010), pp 229-230. ProQuest eBook.

<sup>22</sup> Marouan, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

overlap between them. “Petit marronage,” or running away, refers to a strategy of resistance in which individuals or small groups, for a variety of reasons, escaped their plantations for a short period of days or weeks and then returned. “Grand marronage,” [...] refers to people who removed themselves from their plantations permanently.<sup>24</sup>

Scholars such as Richard Price have written extensively on the history of marronage in the Americas. Price has noted the tendency of Maroon communities choosing to settle in rural, almost inaccessible areas, as well as the African influence upon the organisation and cultural practices established in these communities.<sup>25</sup> Alvin O. Thompson argues that both men and women ‘played critical roles in maintaining the integrity of [Maroon] societies’.<sup>26</sup> Chantal Macfarlane echoes this notion by arguing that women were ‘pivotal in the clearing of land and performing agricultural tasks’.<sup>27</sup> Most Maroon leaders were male, and MacFarlane comments on the Leeward Maroons of Jamaica, whose leader Cudjoe ‘inherited his position from his father’.<sup>28</sup> However, that Nanny of the Maroons, who I reference in Chapter Two, was also a highly respected Maroon leader suggests that the Maroon communities were not necessarily patriarchal, and women were recognised as having influence.

Research into Maroon communities in the Caribbean often focuses on islands such as Jamaica, Haiti, and Suriname. In addition however, Dominica, the island setting of *Unburnable*, also boasts a well-documented history of Maroon resistance, and Bernard A. Marshall aligns the Dominican Maroons with those from Jamaica as being exceptional for their ‘effective and prolonged resistance to slavery’.<sup>29</sup> Polly Pattullo’s book *Your Time is Done Now* (2015) curates the history of marronage in Dominica by bringing together transcripts of the trials held during the Second Maroon War between 1813 and 1814. In his introduction to Pattullo’s study, Bernard Wiltshire traces the history of marronage in Dominica as far back as the sixteenth century, when Africans who had ‘escaped from neighbouring and already colonised islands,

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<sup>24</sup> Marjoleine Kars, ‘Maroons and Marronage’, *Oxford Bibliographies* [online] <<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0229.xml>> [accessed 20 October 2016] (para 1 of 1).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Price, *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Alvin O. Thompson, ‘Gender and Marronage in the Caribbean’, *Journal of Caribbean History*, 39.2 (2005), 262-290 (p. 262).

<sup>27</sup> Chantal MacFarlane, ‘Maroon Societies: A Political Perspective’, *Caribbean Quilt*, 2 (2012), 84-91 (p. 87).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard A. Marshall, ‘Marronage in Slave Plantation Societies: A Case Study of Dominica, 1785-1815’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 22.2-3 (1976), 26-32 (p. 30).

sought sanctuary there.’<sup>30</sup> However, after the British took control of the island in 1973, the nature of marronage changed. Whether or not these independent communities were established before the British takeover, or if they had fled slavery, they were automatically regarded as runaway criminals. Wiltshire contends:

The stage in Dominica was not so large but it was ideal Maroon country with its exceptionally mountainous landscape covered in rainforest and cut with rivers [...] The Maroons of Dominica were considered the best organised among Caribbean resistance fighters after those of Jamaica [...] They followed in the footsteps of their predecessors, the indigenous Kalinago, who had fought to maintain their independence from white tormentors.<sup>31</sup>

This mountainous terrain offers an ideal backdrop for John’s novel. Indeed, as the narrator points out, ‘Dominica’s mountainous terrain was so extreme that villages were established wherever flat land could be found, and until quite recently, twenty or thirty years, many villages were completely isolated, because the mountains were impassable.’ (245) John highlights her knowledge of Dominica’s landscape, and uses it to show why it allowed for the continued secret existence of the Noir Maroons.

Marshall argues that ‘the Dominica Maroons were rated second [after Jamaican Maroons] in organisation, discipline, strength, and unity of purpose’.<sup>32</sup> By using the element of surprise, the Maroons of Dominica were often successful in their attacks on plantations, and successfully evaded capture and death for thirty years. Lennox Honeychurch’s *The Dominica Story: A History of the Island* (1995) provides a detailed historiography of Maroon resistance. He argues that Dominica’s landscape, the ‘central mountains [...] terrain of deep valleys and puzzling ridges was an excellent hideout’, and pivotal in the success of the island’s Maroon communities.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in the acknowledgements for *Unburnable*, John directly thanks Honeychurch for his extensive research, as she acknowledges how heavily she drew on his book when writing her novel. (294) That *Unburnable* is so well researched suggests that the novel acts as a fictitious attempt to fill some of the gaps in the historiography of Dominica, particularly in regards to its history of

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<sup>30</sup> Bernard Wiltshire, ‘Introduction’ in *Your Time is Done Now*, by Polly Pattullo (London: Papillote Press, 2015), pp. 1-15 (p. 6).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Marshall, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Lennox Honeychurch, *The Dominica Story: A History of the Island* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 93.

marronage. John acknowledges that the Dominican Maroons, though a 'formidable force [...] didn't survive past the 1800s'. (298) Her novel imagines their survival late into twentieth century, but the detail with which she describes their organisation draws on a wealth of historical research.

Marronage is often included as a storyline, theme or literary trope in Caribbean fiction. Ronald Cummings argues that the 'history of anti-colonial resistance meant that the Maroons would become important symbols in the postcolonial Caribbean's construction and articulation of its identity sketched out largely in differential terms to the pervading colonial ideology'.<sup>34</sup> Using Marronage as a literary device allows writers the opportunity to represent fringe cultures and ideologies alongside dominant ones in a Caribbean context. Often, this has resulted in literary portrayals of African and indigenous values, cultures and beliefs that exist alongside those inherited from and perpetrated by colonisers. Juneja comments on the importance, particularly for Caribbean writers, of being able to 'describe yourself, your life experience, your ancestral voices, when the dominant culture is constantly denying your authenticity, attempting to reconstruct you, to demand [...] your individual and tribal silence'.<sup>35</sup> In this respect, the Maroons' refusal to accept their enslavement, and their success in carrying forward their African identities, makes them an ideal symbol of resistance against colonial ideologies in the postcolonial Caribbean.

Angelita Reyes argues that, as early as the 1980s, Caribbean women writers have used the literary trope of marronage to engage with issues centred on language, identity, gender, race, ethnicity and culture within the context of transnational migrations.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, novelists such as Michelle Cliff have used marronage as a means of interrogating identity formation in the region. In her novel *Abeng* (1984), Cliff uses marronage, specifically the story of Nanny of the Maroons, to offer an alternative history of Jamaica. In the midst of a chapter that details the church that the novel's protagonist attends, Cliff diverts the narrative to include a paragraph where she talks about Nanny's legacy, and her Obeah practice. Cliff writes, 'In 1733, Nanny, the sorceress, the Obeah-woman, was killed [...] Nanny was

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<sup>34</sup> Ronald Cummings, '(Trans)Nationalism, Marronage, and Queer Caribbean Subjectivities', *Transforming Anthropology*, 18.2 (2010), 169-180 (p. 171).

<sup>35</sup> Juneja, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Angelita Reyes, *Mothering Across Cultures: Postcolonial Representations* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 84. ProQuest eBook.

the magician of this revolution [...] she used her skill to unite her people and to consecrate their battles.’<sup>37</sup> In a chapter about the church and the way it brings the local community together, Cliff offers marronage as an alternative structure around which to organise. *Unburnable* uses the Dominican Maroon community as a literary device in a similar manner, by positioning them as an alternative community structure alongside the dominant one. However, John takes this trope further than Cliff through the detailed representation of the Maroons.

Bailey suggests that contemporary fictional accounts of Maroon communities, such as those in *Unburnable* and Marlon James’ *The Book of Night Women* (2009), offer a representation that is a far cry from their quasi-mythic historicisation.<sup>38</sup> In *Night Women*, as discussed in Chapter Two, the Maroons are mentioned in reference to their treatment of Homer when she escapes the plantation to join them. Homer explains that the Maroons agreed to a treaty with plantation owners, wherein they would be given supplies in exchange for returning any runaway slaves. She says of the Maroons, ‘Them Maroons make me feel like no nigger deserve freedom’.<sup>39</sup> James challenges the heroic representation of the Maroons by offering a stark contrast to this image through their treatment of Homer. As with *Night Women*, *Unburnable* builds on historical accounts of Maroon communities, and offers a multi-dimensional fictional representation.

*Unburnable* does an effective job of drawing on and recommending alternatives. As a Caribbean woman writer, John creates an alternative narrative of an island’s history that resists the dominance of patriarchal tropes and centres women in their search for autonomy and power. She subverts cultural hierarchies in the novel, and offers an alternative and subversive narrative to the reader. Ronald Cummings offers an alternative way of theorising the trope of marronage in the works of Caribbean writers in that he positions it as a queer literary device. His thesis argues that Caribbean writers use the trope of marronage to draw attention to ‘neo-colonial power structures, sexual hegemonies and the various strategies of social negation which curtail and regulate queer Caribbean lives.’<sup>40</sup> I also suggest that

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<sup>37</sup> Michelle Cliff, *Abeng* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Bailey, p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p. 216.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Cummings, *Queer Marronage and Caribbean Writing*, PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 2012, <[http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/3385/1/Queer Marronage and Caribbean Writing- Ronald Cummings.pdf](http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/3385/1/Queer_Marronage_and_Caribbean_Writing- Ronald_Cummings.pdf)> [accessed 7 May 2017], p. iv.

marronage is a queer literary device, and this chapter builds on the assertion that John's representation of marronage queers community dynamics. John uses marronage as a trope with which to engage and through which to problematize the hierarchies prevalent in Dominica, such as culture, gender, and language. By destabilising the dominant culture through the trope of marronage, John offers an alternative and matrifocal community structure that resists patriarchy and colonialism, and thus offers another way of working through postcolonial trauma.

## Trauma and Healing

At its heart, *Unburnable* is a novel about individual and shared trauma. Trauma theory gained traction towards the end of the twentieth century, when a number of academics turned their attention towards theorising the psychological state. Cathy Caruth is among leading voices in this field of study, and she defines trauma as a wound inflicted on the mind, as opposed to a wound of the body. Caruth continues,

the wound of the mind — the reach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world — is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.<sup>41</sup>

John's representation of individual trauma, as characterised through Lillian, echoes Caruth's definition. After discovering the truth about her mother and grandmother as a teenager, Lillian digs up Iris' grave and uses the shovel to slash open her wrist. (196) Her return to Dominica as an adult is undertaken solely for the purpose of finding a source of healing in the place where her initial trauma occurred. It is the shock of the truth, and its unexpected nature that makes the revelation traumatic for Lillian. She finds herself confronted with a damning narrative of the history of her ancestors that she is unable to recognise or understand, resulting in the post-traumatic stress that Lillian learns to live with. One of the manifestations of her trauma, alongside the nightmares that Caruth highlights as a recurring symptom, is the 'tonal sound of talking drums' (97) that Lillian hears at all times. She learns to

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<sup>41</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996) pp. 3-4.



cope with this insistent reminder of her trauma by 'pulling rhythms out of whatever noise she could find in the air' (97) in a bid to drown out the sound. Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje explains the importance of drums in the Maroon communities of Jamaica, often used during ceremonies and rituals. She notes, in particular, a form of healing that involves 'different kinds of water [...] beating of the drums, chanting of certain songs'<sup>42</sup>. That it is drums Lillian constantly hears might indicate that Lillian's healing will come from embracing her Maroon heritage and the cultural practices associated with it.

More recently, academics have noted the need to revise trauma theory, so that it is not singularly concerned with individual trauma. Indeed, there has been an established effort to theorise and understand shared postcolonial trauma. Stef Craps and Gert Buelen, for example, suggest that, traditionally, earlier twentieth-century trauma theory was Eurocentric in nature, and had a tendency to dismiss an intersectional approach, focussing solely on individual trauma.<sup>43</sup> Irene Visser shares this contention in her consideration of postcolonial literary criticism, and writes,

Postcolonial literature, almost by definition, dramatizes the trauma of colonization, as the disruptive and overwhelming invasion of a society's physical, moral, and conceptual realms, and reflects on its aftermath, engaging with cultural value systems and individual orientations towards power and oppression.<sup>44</sup>

Lillian's personal trauma in *Unburnable* is representative of Dominica's collective cultural trauma, caused by the island's history of slavery, oppression, and colonialism. Her fixation on discovering the truth about her ancestry in order to heal symbolises the island's need to form an independent national identity that takes into consideration its history. In order to move forward as nations, islands in the Caribbean need multidimensional narratives, however complex, about their national histories and, given the Eurocentric documentation of Caribbean history, this is not always an easy feat. John offers fiction as an alternative narrative, a neo-archive of the Dominican Maroons and their legacy, and thus an alternative source of healing.

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<sup>42</sup> Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje, 'Remembering Kojo: History, Music, and Gender in the January Sixth Celebration of the Jamaican Accompong Maroons', *Black Music Research Journal*, 18.1 (1998), 67-120 (p. 76).

<sup>43</sup> Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, 'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels', *Studies in the Novel*, 40.1 (2008), 1-12 (p. 1).

<sup>44</sup> Irene Visser, 'Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies,' in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 106-129 (pp. 113-114). Springer eBook.

Lillian is not truly able to begin her journey towards healing until she travels back to Dominica. However, whilst living in America, she attempts to find comfort and peace in Catholicism, the religion in which her stepmother raised her. Lillian is described as a minimalist, who spends little money on herself, ‘as if she were caught in a perpetual Lenten season, doing a lifetime of penance, as if trying to pay for a sin, in that Catholic way of hers’. (65) In a manner that echoes the Catholic practice of baptising babies to rid them of original sin, Lillian atones for the sins of her ancestors through the practice of material deprivation. The night before her return to Dominica, Lillian chooses to visit a church in a final bid to pray for peace. (109) Lillian looks for solace in the religion of her childhood. She remembers ‘the significance the church held when she was a small child. She recalled how much she loved everything about Sunday and its ceremonies’. (110) However, as Lillian inches closer to the truth about her past, her memories of childhood Sundays becomes sullied, and her stepmother Icilma later reveals the many fabrications associated with Lillian and her relationship with the church.

The Catholic church’s emphasis on atonement and guilt do not offer Lillian an opportunity to heal, and John makes this clear in the fact that Lillian feels compelled to return to Dominica to finally resolve her trauma. I would also suggest that Lillian’s religious beliefs are symbolic of the widespread Christianity in Dominica, where 77% of the population are Roman Catholic.<sup>45</sup> Christianity was brought to the Caribbean during the era of slavery, and was upheld strictly during the ensuing era of European colonial rule. Despite its long-established place in the Caribbean, John suggests that the process of healing postcolonial trauma does not lie in embracing Christianity, but rather in accepting an alternative. Lillian has to return to Dominica, specifically Noir, the home of Matilda and the Maroons, to gain the closure she seeks. I would argue, then, that John is suggesting that the healing of postcolonial trauma can be found by embracing the African and indigenous cultures and histories of the island.

Early on in the novel, John signposts for the reader the direction Lillian needs to travel to find healing after trauma. One of these early indicators is Lillian’s job. *Unburnable*’s protagonist works for a charity called Urgent Appeal that donates money to people in need. The narrator offers an example of the benefactors of

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<sup>45</sup> US Department of State, ‘Dominica’, *US Department of State* [online] <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2001/5629.htm>> [accessed 1 December 2016] (para 5 of 12).

Lillian's work in a hypothetical woman who 'found herself in trouble when she tried to stand up to the expectations of her culture, or the dictates of her government, or demands of the social order under which she lived'. (13) Lillian's work puts her directly in touch with women across the world, often from African nations. She treats her job as if it were another act of penance, and chooses to remain on call to help these women twenty-four hours a day. She sacrifices her personal life, working herself 'to the point of physical and mental fatigue'. (14) By helping others, Lillian believes she can heal from her own trauma and appease her Catholic guilt. By working with African women, she is reaching back into the African diaspora, and creating her own matrifocal network of trauma victims that are searching for the opportunity to heal. The narrative suggests that Lillian recognises the potential for strength that lies in connecting with other women, and with Africa. This idea is further reiterated in the novel's title. The narrator describes Lillian's pair of treasured gold cuff links as being in the shape of an Adinkra symbol: 'the design [...] in Twi [a Ghanaian language] was called *Hye won Hye*; in English, "that which does not burn"' (7). The meaning of the symbol relates directly to the name of the novel, and suggests that the undefeatable, unburnable spirit of the novel lies in its connection to Africa. Lillian's most valuable possession connects her to African and her Maroon ancestry. The cuff links and her job suggest that Lillian subconsciously seeks out a connection with the African-ness of her Maroon grandmother throughout her adult life. By drawing connections between Lillian and Africa, John is suggesting that healing for Lillian, and Dominica, may lie in embracing the truth about their African heritage.

Because the novel's central theme is postcolonial trauma and movement through it, the narrative presents matrifocality as an alternative source of healing to Lillian, who is unable to find solace, neither through Catholicism nor by living in America. Lillian is subconsciously drawn to African culture throughout her adult life, as evidenced by her job and treasured cufflinks. I propose that John positions a return to a traditional African world view as being a potential source of healing for Lillian. Matrifocality is also presented as having curative effects, and is positioned in the novel alongside marronage as a viable and alternative source of healing, both for Lillian and for the postcolonial nation. John's representation of marronage as a storyline and a literary device is particularly unique in that she makes the Maroon community matrifocal in nature. Using the example of Nanny of the Maroons,

MacFarlane draws attention to historical Maroon communities that were matrifocal in nature, and argues that women acted as 'the main source of stability and continuity' within these groups.<sup>46</sup> In the novel, matrifocality aligns itself seamlessly with marronage in that it queers male-centric communities through actively challenging and resisting patriarchal and colonial norms. By depicting a matrifocal Maroon community, John re-theorises matrifocality as a Caribbean tradition, and in doing so, queers and destabilises the dominant culture.

*Unburnable* positions the community structure of Matilda's Maroon community in opposition to that of mainstream Dominica. At the beginning of the novel, for example, John goes into some detail about the socialisation of children in Noir, who were not given individual attention, but rather cared for as a tribe. (4) The narrator explains: 'The main lesson of their childhood was that, outside of their protected world, they would only find a limited lower space within which they could exercise ambitions, and that they would be better off staying where they were'. (4) Whilst these lessons do not encourage any independence outside of their community, children are raised in Noir with a tangible sense of belonging. This practice of raising children as an integral part of a large community is oppositional to the isolated upbringing of Lillian. Raised by Icilma, a middle-class married woman who frantically sheltered her daughter from the truth about her matrilineage, Lillian is pushed into a lonely 'circle of untouchability' (46) in early childhood that follows her into adulthood, with detrimental effect. Icilma tries to shield her step-daughter from the inflammatory chanté mas songs about Matilda and Iris by asking the mothers of Lillian's class mates not to sing them. This results in the children ignoring her altogether, and Lillian learns to 'let go any hope for the privilege of friendship'. (46)

Similarly, although born in Noir, Iris' indigenous parentage sets her apart, and her 'unusual beauty' (4) grants her preferential treatment. The narrator describes Matilda's ignorance in that she 'didn't know that her daughter was worshipped, her every wish indulged. She had no idea that Iris suffered no consequences when she transgressed'. (4) The narrator suggests that the favourable treatment of Iris, and the individual attention she is afforded within her community, contribute to her later misfortune. Having being raised without any threat of negative repercussions for her transgressions, Iris believes that her unique beauty will keep her safe in mainstream

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<sup>46</sup> MacFarlane, p. 88.

Dominican society. By positioning the socialisation process of Lillian and Iris as oppositional to the norm of Noir, John suggests that there is merit in the African-derived worldview that informs the Dominican Maroons and positions this method of child raising that privileges a sense of community over individual attention as a viable alternative. Indeed, through the preferentiality of community in the socialisation of children, John is suggesting that identity formation should be informed by the people around you, echoing Juneja's contention that identity is a contextual process.<sup>47</sup>

In *Unburnable*, the Maroons' communal process of child rearing is described as 'sensible' in that it gives the children of Noir 'a clear understanding of who they were and where they belonged'. (4) A communal and contextual sense of identity, a sense of who you are and your place within a community, is something that Lillian lacks. She learns as a teenager that her sense of identity has been based on a lie. The revelations about her grandmother and mother constitute an event she is unable to fully comprehend, and it causes the trauma which compels her to leave Dominica. She is raised within the dominant culture of the island, but lives largely as a pariah, which affects her ability to maintain relationships in her adult life. The narrator comments on Lillian's habit of putting work before her personal life, noting her tendency to pick lovers 'who lived far enough away to necessitate a long distance relationship destined to be unsustainable for more than a few months'. (41) Her singular, lonely childhood, which was predicated entirely on lies about her parentage, becomes a model for the way Lillian chooses to live her adult life. Lillian's search for reconciliation climaxes in Noir, perhaps because it is in that mountainous terrain that she is finally able to connect with her ancestors, and understand the importance of community and belonging.

Another way in which the representation of Maroon culture in *Unburnable* destabilises the dominant community is by positioning African traditions within mainstream cultures, which helps to create a nuanced representation of cultural creolisation, whilst challenging colonial normativity. An insightful example of this in the text is the representation of the Mas — or carnival — tradition, and the way in which the Maroons' invasion of the celebration gives new meaning to the procession. Mas is first introduced in the novel as the setting in which Iris embarrasses John Baptiste's new wife, which subsequently leads to a brutal attack on her. The narrator

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<sup>47</sup> Juneja, p. 25.

describes revellers in masks and 'compulsory full-body coverage, that allowed people to get away with all kinds of badness in the band' (114). A more comprehensive description of the celebration is offered when, a year later, Matilda and her warriors infiltrate the proceedings in a bid to seek revenge for Iris' maltreatment. John imagines the people of Dominica as remaining 'theoretically anonymous' (130) in their masquerade costumes: 'The variety of costume options, and their similarity, ensured that anyone, so long as they could lay hands on a mask, could run'. (129-130) The narrator continues,

They did not know that thousands of miles across the Atlantic, there were a few men who, during the times of African festivals, during harvest celebrations, during religious and political and judicial ceremonies, initiations, births and deaths, would adorn themselves in exactly the same attire, wear their masks and horns, and for a time would become the embodiment of the gods of the savannas and forests, representations of the spirits of the ancestors, wherein lay the highest authority. (130-131)

John firmly roots the carnival tradition in the African heritage of the island's majority population. Interestingly, it is a colonial administrator who makes the connection between the Dominican Mas and African masquerade traditions. He comments to John Baptiste's mother-in-law Mrs Richard, 'if you imagine wooden masks instead of the wire things — those are exactly like the West African Masquerades'. (134) Mrs Richard, a Creole woman, rejects any notion that there are similarities between the Caribbean and African traditions, remarking, 'We don't have anything like that here [...] It's a long time since we could tell you anything about Africa'. (138) The inclusion of this conversation suggests that John is critiquing the ignorance of those who do not believe that the African ancestry of the majority population on most Anglophone islands has a direct effect on contemporary African Caribbean culture. This is further emphasised by the description of the Flying Masquerade, later revealed to be Matilda, which kills John Baptiste. The narrator, from the perspective of the colonial administrator, comments: 'There was one [mask] in particular he knew well [...] it was a masquerade that only came out to direct strong magic against those who had broken the law, perpetuated a taboo [...] the thing that flew three times around John Baptiste, was clearly not a human being'. (140-141) The flying mask that Matilda wears is associated with power, and her wearing it suggests that, in the Maroon community to which she belongs, women are autonomous and authoritative. Because of the associations between Maroon culture and the Mas tradition, Matilda

is able to gain access to the carnival and exact justice upon Baptiste. This suggests strongly that the African-ness which informs the Maroon way of life is not so different from the building blocks of mainstream Dominica. John queers the social hierarchy and challenges mainstream assumptions by, firstly, suggesting that they share cultural similarities and, secondly, by having the Maroons directly uproot and destabilise the Mas tradition.

This episode of *Unburnable* ends with the words of the colonial administrator. Recognising the similarities between Caribbean Mas and the traditions he observed in Central and West Africa, he comments, 'But on variation, one adaptation of significant note [...] is that, unlike in Africa, women also perform masquerades, even in masks imbued with the most authority and power. In fact, I am convinced [...] that the so-called Flying Masquerade was a woman'. (143) By highlighting the different roles of women in African and Caribbean mask traditions, John suggests here that matrilocality is a uniquely Caribbean phenomenon. Though John Stuart MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald suggested that the Caribbean matrifocal family was a 'truncated derivative of matrilineages' found in some African cultures, and a 'fitting compromise between African principles of lineage and the new environment', John's conceptualisation of matrilocality in the novel rejects this contention.<sup>48</sup> Rather, the novel echoes Christine Barrow's argument that, 'whereas the slave could, and did, practise his magic and divination in secret, he could not perpetuate his ancestral family forms in secret.'<sup>49</sup> Barrow continues by saying that, under the system of slavery, the 'authority of males as husbands and fathers was eroded,' thus resulting in the rise of matriarchal families.<sup>50</sup> Due to the history of slavery, it can be argued that matrilocality, as represented by John, is an act of resistance against slavery and colonialism. This passage also suggests that matrilocality is a queer practice in its subversion of both the African and Caribbean mask traditions. Matilda's violence acts as an aggressive attack on a patriarchal society that almost kills her daughter.

My argument that John positions matrilocality as a uniquely Caribbean phenomenon is substantiated by an earlier moment in *Unburnable*, where the

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<sup>48</sup> John Stuart MacDonald & Leatrice D. MacDonald, "Transformation of African and Indian Family Traditions in the Southern Caribbean", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15.2 (1973), 171-198 (p. 192).

<sup>49</sup> Christine Barrow, *Family in the Caribbean: Themes and Perspectives* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1996), p.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

narrator makes direct reference to the prevalence of matrifocality in the Caribbean, and the way it has been theorised:

For the next century or more, these Caribbean women with their disinterest in marrying their children's fathers, would generate a steady traffic in befuddled missionaries, curious sociologists, and excited anthropologists [...] Female-headed households and matrifocal societies — these were the catchwords with which the pundits would discuss the phenomenon of Caribbean women raising children without the yoke of men. Theories would be put forward as to why they did this, studies were undertaken, and the scholars would line up into two antagonistic groups [...] All the big-brained people with their theories, their arguments and counterarguments, should have just talked to the women to understand that the reason they did not marry was a simple matter. Descendants of slaves, of course, had a natural aversion to slavery. (71-72)

In this short passage, John addresses the history of theory regarding the prevalence of matrifocality in the Caribbean, and positions her own understanding of the family structure within the tradition of feminist anthropology. She recognises the anthropological interest in the region, and critiques the over-theorisation of a woman's choice not to marry. John's understanding of matrifocality resonates with that of Olive Senior, whose study *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English Speaking Caribbean* (1991) centres women from the region through a series of interviews. Senior's study addresses the phenomenon of matrifocality in a similar manner to John, in that it recognises women as proactive about the decision not to marry. As opposed to male-centric and Eurocentric studies which attributed matrifocality solely to male marginality, Senior, John, and other feminist scholars choose to centre their approach to matrifocality on women's perspectives.

The narrator's understanding of matrifocality in *Unburnable* supports these woman-centred theories in their insistence that the reason for the prevalence of the phenomenon in the Caribbean can be explained through conversations with women. More than this, the novel is not simply resistant to Eurocentric and patriarchal definitions of matrifocality, but it in fact suggests that matrifocality itself is an act of resistance. Matrifocality is a counterculture; a direct act of resistance against a European model of patriarchy. As a counterculture, John's representation of matrifocality also resonates with post-matrifocal perspectives in that it too concerns itself with the strength and autonomy matrifocality can offer women outside of the domestic space. John positions matrifocality as a Caribbean phenomenon by placing it within the context of slavery with the comment, 'Descendants of slaves, of course,



had a natural aversion to slavery'. (72) According to the narrator, the reason why Caribbean women so often choose matrifocality as a familial and community structure is because they want to actively resist the patriarchal societal model, which so closely resembles slavery. Therefore, it is a queering practice in that it subverts colonial and patriarchal ideologies and offers an alternative family and community structure. John's representation of the matrifocal Maroon community speaks clearly to this idea, and she allows readers to re-read matrifocality as a queer, resistant practice by aligning it with marronage. This again points to the idea that healing from trauma can be found in queer practices, as Lillian is unable to resolve her trauma until she understands her matrifocal Maroon ancestry.

*Unburnable* represents matrifocality in both the mainstream and Maroon communities of Dominica. Whilst both are queer structures, the reader is better able to recognise this in the Maroon community, given their resistant nature. For example, Lillian's upbringing is informed almost exclusively by women. The narrator describes Icilma, the wife of Lillian's biological father, as a woman 'determined to marry'. (163) She takes steps to ensure this, even using Obeah to 'tie him' (165), and it is at her insistence that her husband Winston acknowledges his illegitimate child. The last mention of Winston made in the novel is at the moment when Icilma breaks his jaw, because 'in Icilma's world of middle-class Caribbean society, a whore was a whore, but a man's child was ever his child'. (171) Winston is only mentioned in relation to his wife, which suggests that their household is matrifocal in nature. This is further demonstrated by Winston's absence in the raising of Lillian. Of all the stories about Lillian's childhood in the novel, there is no mention of her father, or the impact he had on her. It is only Icilma, who Lillian describes as 'the woman who'd spent her life protecting her' (85) who acts as a consistent and influential parental figure. Upon her return to Dominica, Lillian seeks out Icilma and Mary-Alice to help her uncover the truth because she recognises that men have been marginal figures in the construction of her own identity.

In addition to it lasting two hundred years longer than any other Maroon community in Dominican history, the matrifocal nature of the novel's Maroon community also adds to its uniqueness, and though this is not explicitly revealed until the latter moments of the novel, John hints at this throughout the text. Matilda holds a level of notoriety throughout Dominica for being 'good with bush medicine, a healer'. (81) Indeed, Matilda is introduced in the novel as being a greatly skilled

Obeah practitioner. The narrator comments on how 'Matilda handles all the physical afflictions — and psychological ailments, too — with potions of a scientific base'. (11) Though the reader is not made immediately aware of her position as head of a community, John makes it apparent that Matilda's 'power to heal at will' (10) grants her a level of authority over the many people with whom she has contact.

John is able to offer a multidimensional representation of Maroon women, and I credit this largely to the matrifocal nature both of the community and the novel. As Obeah practitioners, Matilda and the women before her only used their knowledge for the purposes of healing. The only instances of Obeah being used for malicious or profitable purpose occurs upon the arrival of Simon, whose imagination and ambition saw him 'taking people's money and making impossible promises'. (34) This ambition leads to the death of a man, echoing an episode from Matilda's youth, at which point Matilda asks Simon to leave Noir. As well as being healer, the women of Noir act as council members, making and upholding the laws of the community. The narrator explains that the council of Noir 'deviated sharply from African tradition' in its exclusively female composition, and Matilda served as Chief Justice. (286) Thus, again, matrifocality is represented as a uniquely Caribbean phenomenon, and not an example of an African culture exported to the region along with the enslaved. Bird describes to Teddy the incident from Matilda's youth where her attempts to improve a man's virility results in his murder at the hands of his exhausted wife: 'she simply could no longer stand it and went for the cutlass'. (285) Matilda is questioned extensively and relentlessly about her role in the incident, and the council spend 'several days behind masks in close consultation with the elders, debating the finer points of their legal system and the nuances of their culpability'. (286) The matrifocal community of Noir is represented as highly organised, suggesting that John is drawing on historical research into the organisation of Dominican Maroons. By following the rules and laws of its founding foremothers, the Maroons of Noir are able to survive in a self-sustaining manner for longer than many male-led Maroon communities in Dominica.

John also represents Maroon women as warriors as well as healers, which is evidenced by their attack on John Baptiste. After Matilda tends to her daughter's wounds for a year, 'drawing out the infections from every crevice in her body' (128), she infiltrates the masquerade and exacts justice. The description of the maternal care Matilda gives her daughter is juxtaposed with the act of violence she commits

soon after. By placing her in a position of power, John is able to represent Maroon womanhood as multidimensional, and offer a nuanced representation of women. Matilda's position as Chief Justice queers gender normativity and patriarchy in that she is afforded the space to be a mother, a wife, a healer and a warrior.

The scene in *Unburnable* where Matilda and Mary-Alice come face-to-face positions two distinct models of femininity against each other. It symbolises a confrontation between mainstream and Maroon matrifocality, where mainstream matrifocality exists within a patriarchal society. Mary-Alice, a white nun recently relocated from Texas, comes to Matilda to ask that she remove Iris from the community of concubines. She is appalled that, unlike other rural Dominicans, Matilda has 'no regard for her nun's habit'. (221) Mary-Alice's Catholic sensibilities take offence at Matilda's naked body, regarding her lack of clothing as immodest and immoral. The narrator suggests that Mary-Alice has never experienced 'a woman from a culture where fertility and sexuality were intertwined and celebrated [...] a culture where breasts were covered only for practical purposes'. (276) Matilda and Mary-Alice represent the extremes of the two polarising cultures that inform Dominican society — the ancestral culture of the island's majority population, and the culture of the colonising forces. Though John represents mainstream Dominica as being matrifocal, matrifocality exists as a paradox, because it is informed by patriarchal ideology, represented in this scene by Mary-Alice's Catholicism. She is confronted by a 'Black person who had never lived in that subjugated place under the double authority of the coloniser and the coloniser's religion: a Black person who knew herself to be superior to a white one'. (276) Mary-Alice, unfamiliar with a culture where nudity is normalised and women are authoritative, misjudges Matilda, which affects the later character-testimony she gives at Matilda's murder trial.

For Matilda, matrifocality is an effective way of organising and sustaining a community — one that allows women to outwardly express their dominance, rather than it being limited to the decision not to marry. In this scene, African femininity and spirituality physically overpower the Western model. As a result, Mary-Alice gives a character testimony that results in Matilda's imprisonment and death. As a symbol for cultural trauma, the engagement between Matilda and Mary-Alice works well to illustrate the diminishment of African culture at the hands of colonial powers on the island. African people in the Caribbean have always been surrounded by Western culture and Christianity. However, according to Stuart Hall, despite best efforts to

vilify and silence African traditions, they have remained 'the unspeakable 'presence' in Caribbean culture'.<sup>51</sup> Hall continues, 'in names and words [...] in religious practices and beliefs, in the spiritual life [...] Africa] is alive and well in the diaspora.'<sup>52</sup> Regardless of the effects of slavery and colonisation in the region, the African traditions remain present in the culture of the people. In *Unburnable*, although Mary-Alice's misconception of Matilda results in her death, she remains present in the island's mainstream culture through its oral tradition, and in Lillian's preoccupation with tracing her Maroon roots.

Healing in *Unburnable* is offered upon the revelation of the truth about Matilda and the Maroons. Through this, John suggests that queering practices, such as matrilocality and marronage, can offer some relief after postcolonial trauma. The novel ends in Noir, with Lillian contemplating suicide:

She had spent her whole life in atonement, practicing self-sacrifice and self-denial, in the hope that she would one day pay for her inherited sins. But now she was going to allow herself an indulgence: she would do this for herself [...] Should they find her floating face-up in a river, so they could finally agree that she, like her mother, had been a Mama Glo, the West African Mami Wata [...] Or should she just lie down across a mountain path dressed in Creole finery to rot, her wide-brimmed hat hiding her devil eyes, so they could say 'Yes, look [...] a La Diabless, we always knew, like Matilda.' (291-292)

Upon understanding the truth about her ancestry, Lillian realises that the Catholic preoccupation with atonement is not able to offer her any peace. She longs for death, to join her mother and grandmother in the afterlife, and wishes to be memorialised like them, in the island's folk tradition. Lillian finally stops the practice of self-denial, and is able to recognise herself in the stories of Matilda and Iris. She chooses to end the novel by identifying with a different mythological character: 'it made sense for her to go back to where the Maroons had jumped [...] she would be exactly what they wanted her to be: their nightmare come true, a soucouyant'. (292) John confirms the positivity of the novel's ending in the interview published with the novel, where she posits 'If Lillian jumped then [...] she finally was able to take control of her life and opted to go to her ancestors for answers and her peace. If she changed her mind, or if Teddy reached her before she jumped, then that's great for

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<sup>51</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity in Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237 (p. 230).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

the romantic souls'. (297) At the novel's close, Lillian finally gains a sense of identity, one that could only be found after reconnecting with her female and Maroon ancestors. She positions herself within and identifies with a legacy of misunderstood female mythological creatures, emphasising the importance of community, specifically a community of women, in the process of self-identification. Lillian recognises that her lifelong preoccupation with atoning for her ancestral sins is unhelpful, and regards the act of suicide as a one of self-care, an act that would make her happy.

In the case of Lillian's individual journey, matrifocality offers her the chance to heal, because the truth about her ancestry lies within a matrifocal community. On a collective level, matrifocality also offers a possibility for healing postcolonial trauma in its queer and resistant nature. *Unburnable* is a novel about recovery after trauma. John queers and destabilises mainstream patriarchal communities in the Caribbean, by representing Maroon and indigenous people, and offering matrifocality as an alternative community model. Irene Visser suggests that trauma theory is inadequate in addressing the colonial experience because it disregards the 'significance of religious belief systems'.<sup>53</sup> She also suggests that imposing a hegemonic, Eurocentric trauma model onto the postcolonial experience is counterproductive.<sup>54</sup> John uses fiction as a way of bypassing the issues associated with trauma theory. In *Unburnable*, she positions matrifocality as a distinctively Caribbean phenomenon, a point she emphasises by aligning it with marronage. By reading matrifocality as a potential site of healing, John suggests that trauma, be it individual or collective, might be resolved through a process of resisting dominant narratives and identifying personal truths.

## Conclusion

*Unburnable* is a powerful novel that speaks to childhood trauma, and Lillian's desire to reconcile this in adulthood. In many ways, Lillian's personal trauma is representative of a shared national trauma, wherein Caribbean islands work towards forging their national identities after the trauma of slavery and colonialism faced in

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<sup>53</sup> Visser, p. 279.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

their infancies. Marie-Elena John continues a tradition of Caribbean women writers who have offered gendered perspectives on the Caribbean experience in literature. She engages with themes such as orality, sexuality and diaspora, all of which feed into the characterisation of novel's protagonist and her journey towards identity and a reclamation of power.

With a substantial number of texts by Caribbean women detailing the mother-daughter relationship as fraught with tension and ambivalence, John extends this tradition by depicting a woman's search, not only for her mother, but for her entire maternal line. In this way, John also adopts the daughter-centric approach that Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O'Reilly suggest has permeated global women's writing.<sup>55</sup> However, *Unburnable*'s unique contribution to this tradition is her engagement with matrifocality as a community structure, rather than the mother-daughter dyad, as a potential source of healing for the daughter protagonist. Having discovered the truth about her mother and grandmother, it is significant, then, that the novel's climax takes place in Noir because it highlights the importance of community. John draws on Juneja's assertion that the process of self-identification is contextual by highlighting the need for community in the socialisation process. Indeed, I would argue, it is community that is at the heart of the novel, and the heart of healing for Lilian. That this community is matrifocal suggests that the family structure can be restorative.

John's alignment of matrifocality with marronage suggests that the author conceptualises matrifocality as a counterculture. Matrifocality offers women in *Unburnable* autonomy and power, influence and healing. Like the Maroon community, whose overt acts of resistance against Dominica's mainstream community are described in great detail, matrifocality is also positioned as a direct act resistance against Eurocentric patriarchy. And it is in this act of resistance that the possibility of restoration and healing can be found, for Lilian and the postcolonial nation.

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O'Reilly, 'Introduction: Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition: Daughter-Centric, Matrilineal, and Matrifocal Perspectives' in *Textual Mothers/ Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Podneiks and Andrea O'Reilly (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), pp. 1-28. ProQuest eBook.

## Chapter Five: Local and Global Communities of Three-Twist Women in Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003)

In her seminal study *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions* (2010), Ingrid Thaler defines speculative fiction as an 'umbrella term for all kinds of fantastic writing [...] which deliberately and explicitly disturbs mimetic notions of "realistic" representation.'<sup>1</sup> Thaler argues that speculative fiction, a genre largely dominated by white writers, intersects seamlessly with the Black Atlantic writing tradition, named for Paul Gilroy's 1993 book that marked a turning point in the study of diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Thaler suggests speculative fiction addresses 'not just the past and present but also the glorious mysterious future', whereas Black Atlantic writing has, 'for the most part, focussed on the intersections between past and present, claiming a legacy of the slavery past in the texts' present'.<sup>3</sup> She goes on to argue that, despite their differences, both share 'the particular concern with imagining time and alternative spaces in time'.<sup>4</sup>

It is, I believe, as Black Atlantic speculative fictional text that Nalo Hopkinson's work is best analysed. A Jamaican-born Canadian citizen, Hopkinson is very much a writer of the Caribbean diaspora, and is reputable for being one of a growing number of Caribbean writers engaging with the speculative fiction genre. As a black speculative fiction writer, a lot of Hopkinson's fiction 'brings together an imagining of the future via the present with an awareness of the past that permeates the present', a characteristic of Black Atlantic speculative fiction that Thaler identifies.<sup>5</sup> Hopkinson's fiction has often been the focus of academic interest, and Thaler herself uses *Midnight Robber* (2000) as an example of Black Atlantic speculative fiction. My focus for this chapter is Hopkinson's novel *The Salt Roads* (2003). A story about three women living in different centuries and locations who become connected to each other through the travelling consciousness of the Haitian goddess Ezili, *The Salt Roads* fictionalises the plight of women and serves as a testament to their ability to endure. Nancy Kang argues that Hopkinson's novel

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<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Thaler, *Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions: Octavia E. Butler, Jewelle Gomez and Nalo Hopkinson* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Thaler, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

portrays women of the African diaspora with strength, regardless of their position, and that 'this implied power of black women often relates back to the matrifocal spirituality rooted in continental or New World African diasporic experience.'<sup>6</sup> Kang chooses not to expand upon her theory of the power of matrifocal spirituality in her reading of the text, but it is this very idea that I will develop in this chapter. The novel is feminist, in that it not only portrays women within communities with strength and influence, but it also portrays a matrifocal world wherein the god consciousness that pervades is that of a female deity. In this way, I would also suggest that the novel moves beyond anthropological feminist perspectives of matrifocality because it explores mother-centredness beyond the confines of the family, and considers the wider implications of a matrifocal community structure through its rejection of a Western, patriarchal model of spirituality.

This chapter will explore the variety of ways that Hopkinson represents the connections between the women within both local and global matrifocal communities. I will argue that matrifocality is represented in *The Salt Roads* as a community structure that, though born in the Caribbean, has resonances across the African diaspora. By representing black and mixed race women in France, Haiti, and Egypt, Hopkinson's novel offers matrifocality as a viable model for female strength, autonomy and connectedness. I will first consider Hopkinson's employment of speculative fiction, and consider how her use of genre and style, and her understanding of Vodou and Ezili best allows her to explore and represent the trans-spatial connections that bind her global community of women. The second section of this chapter will analyse the specific representations of matrifocality in both the global and local contexts, and I will argue that, through her representation of Ezili, Hopkinson creates a matrifocal community, bound by their skin colour and acts of resistance, and locates it firmly in the African diaspora. I will build on Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's assertion that the pantheon of Ezili embodies 'the divine forces of love, sexuality, pleasure, femininity, maternity, creativity and fertility' and argue that, in these roles, she also binds global and local communities in Hopkinson's novel.<sup>7</sup> By inhabiting the bodies of women across the African diaspora, Ezili's mother-

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<sup>6</sup> Nancy Kang, "'Revolutionary Viragoes': Othered Mothering in Afro-Caribbean Diaspora Literature', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 42.6 (2013) 696-719 (pp. 701-702).

<sup>7</sup> Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, 'Songs for Ezili: Vodou Epistemologies of (Trans) Gender', *Feminist Studies*, 37.2 (2011), 417-436 (p. 420).



consciousness is central in individual lives whilst also being central within matrifocal communities across the diaspora.

### **Genre, Vodou, and *The Salt Roads***

*The Salt Roads* is Nalo Hopkinson's third novel and tells the stories of three women living on different continents in different centuries, all connected by the Vodou deity Ezili. Though the goddess is born in Haiti, her consciousness moves between the bodies of black and brown women throughout time, and she becomes the common thread that binds a trans-spatial matrifocal community. This movement suggests that, whilst matrifocality in the Caribbean has most popularly been attributed to the breakdown of familial norms during slavery, it may in fact be a community structure prevalent throughout the wider African diaspora — an idea that this chapter will later address. A number of critics have categorised *The Salt Roads* as speculative fiction and my own reading will take a similar approach. I will argue that Hopkinson uses the genre as a platform upon which to represent and explore matrifocal communities, and the strength they offer black women across the African diaspora.

Jewelle Gomez suggests that the phrase 'speculative fiction' is used to 'encompass the broad range of writing that includes science fiction and fantasy [...] But what is essential is that all such writers speculate a world that makes manifest more than is currently accepted'.<sup>8</sup> Unlike novels such as *Midnight Robber*, *The Salt Roads* cannot be categorised as a science fiction text. However, because the novel draws on elements of Haitian vodou, and fictionalises African deities as having influence in the material world, it can be argued that the novel fits Gomez's definition of the speculative. The experimental style and speculative form of *The Salt Road* give Hopkinson the space to explore and interrogate the idea of a trans-spatial, trans-historical community of women, and, in doing so, to bring the discussion of matrifocality out of the Caribbean and into the African diaspora.

Thaler draws significant parallels between the 'white genre' of speculative fiction and 'black tradition' of Black Atlantic writing.<sup>9</sup> Thaler argues that the term Black Atlantic is a 'critical paradigm for reading black cultural practice in Western

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<sup>8</sup> Jewelle Gomez, 'Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians', *Signs*, 18.4 (1993), 948-955 (pp. 948-949).

<sup>9</sup> Thaler, p.2.

modernity', and states that Black Atlantic speculative fiction 'successfully meanders the interrelations of colour-coded tropes, while highlighting its dependence on equally racialized conceptions of temporality about which the texts speculate.'<sup>10</sup>

Thaler continues,

Black Atlantic speculative fiction is more than a contemporary phenomenon grown from a Black Atlantic interest in white speculative genres. Instead, the speculative is expanded and is considered an intrinsic part of Black Atlantic cultural expressions in oral storytelling, African-rooted religious practices, such as voodoo, and the persistence of African deities and trickster figures, such as Eshu, Anansi, and the Signifying Monkey.<sup>11</sup>

Thaler argues here that black speculative writers should not be marginal voices within a largely white literary tradition. Rather, she proposes that the speculative has always played a role in storytelling and spiritual traditions in the African diaspora. Thus, it can be argued that Black Atlantic writers can use the speculative fiction genre to explore their own African diasporic identity because the genre can, in many ways, be understood as a continuation of oral African traditions. An example of this would be Hopkinson's portrayal of Anansi in her other fiction. Anansi, a 'clever forest spider,' is the 'leading character in Afro-Caribbean tales [...] that comes from the oral tradition of the Ashanti people in Ghana'.<sup>12</sup> By fusing speculative fiction with traditional African Caribbean folk tales, Hopkinson engages with the emerging canon of Caribbean speculative fiction. Her seamless referencing and invocation of the spirit of the trickster Anansi in *Midnight Robber*, a novel set in a future where time travel is possible, suggests that there is a natural progression between oral storytelling traditions in the African diaspora and the speculative fiction genre.

*The Salt Roads* is a rather different novel wherein Hopkinson uses her understanding of African derived Caribbean religions as the cornerstone of her fictive global community. The narrative of *The Salt Roads* moves between the voices of three women: slave woman and healer Mer, living on an eighteenth century Haitian plantation; Jeanne (also known as Lemer), the mulatto entertainer and mistress living in nineteenth century Paris; and Thais (or Meritet), the Nubian prostitute living in tenth century Alexandria, Egypt. Tying the narratives of these women together is

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<sup>10</sup> Thaler, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 11

<sup>12</sup> Lieke van Duin, 'Anansi as Classical Hero', *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 5.1 (2007), 33-42 (p. 34).

the voice of Ezili, the newly born goddess who grows stronger in her consciousness through her possession of Hopkinson's human protagonists. Because the three women are all related, even if tangentially, to real historical figures, Leif Sorenson argues that *The Salt Roads* 'samples and fractures historical narrative'.<sup>13</sup> Mer is an acquaintance of Makandal, the famous one-armed Haitian revolutionary and Maroon leader who 'claimed to have supernatural abilities' and led slave revolts in the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Jeanne Duval is a fictional representation of French poet Charles Baudelaire's famed mistress and muse, and as the novel closes, the reader learns that Meritet is in fact Saint Mary of Egypt, the patron saint of chastity. That Hopkinson feels compelled to re-write historical figures, Sorensen argues, suggests that *The Salt Roads* 'encourages scepticism toward any point of view that claims absolute authority.'<sup>15</sup> Through her use of the historical narrative, Hopkinson is able to re-imagine the subjectivities of women who were otherwise overshadowed by male voices — Makandal is one of a number of men who dominate the historical narrative of the Haitian revolution; Jeanne is only remembered through the words of Charles Baudelaire, and Saint Mary's story is recorded by Zosimus. As a speculative writer, Hopkinson is not compelled to remember these women in relation only to men, but is able to make global connections between them, both through the floating consciousness of Ezili, who creates a common influence between the women, and through the shared African heritage of her protagonists.

Hopkinson's narrative draws attention to the idea that black women have repeatedly been silenced in official historical narratives, and she uses Ezili as a way of writing women in all their complexity. Jeanne, for example, is remembered in history only as the mistress of Charles Baudelaire, and his poems and letters are the primary material for her representation. For example, Hopkinson reproduces Baudelaire's poem 'The Snake That Dances' in *The Salt Roads*. In it, he describes his mistress's movements: 'And your body stretches and inclines/ Like a fine vessel/ Which rolls side to side/ And thrusts its masts into the sea'.<sup>16</sup> The poem conjures up

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<sup>13</sup> Leif Sorensen, 'Dubwise into the Future: Visioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson', *African American Review*, 47.2-3 (2014), 267-283 (p. 271).

<sup>14</sup> Anon, 'François Makandal', *Slavery and Remembrance* [online] <<http://slaveryandremembrance.org/people/person/?id=PP024>> [accessed 2 April 2018] (para 2 of 3).

<sup>15</sup> Sorensen, p. 278.

<sup>16</sup> Nalo Hopkinson, *The Salt Roads* (New York City, New York: Warner Books, 2003), p. 128. (All future references to this edition will be marked in parentheses in the text).

images of a hypersexual, exotic and dangerous woman. Hopkinson's fictional account of Jeanne's life subverts this representation of her, by imagining Ezili as being in control of Jeanne while she danced: 'I wish to be free! Jeanne and I thump with our heels, toss our torso towards the earth, thrust back our hips. We shake our shoulders. And still I offer our breasts, promise their juices to someone, something, not him.' (124) Far from being a dance to seduce Charles, Hopkinson instead imagines it as a ritualistic dance. *The Salt Roads* offers its reader an alternative narrative for historical women through fiction; one that centres women through the mother-consciousness of a female deity.

Defining marvellous realism, Shalini Puri writes:

Marvellous realism's frequent turns to myth, spirituality, faith, ritual, the miraculous, practices such as vodun and spirit possession, are amongst its resources for exploring existing alternatives to dominant valuations of abstract rationality/ Reason and its primary incarnation, Science. Such alternative practices, obscure to Euro-American reason, are sites of the contradiction that classic realism would flatten out or render as colonial defect. In contrast, in marvellous realism, contradiction emerges as the palpable form of history.<sup>17</sup>

Though I would not categorise *The Salt Roads* as marvellous or magical realism, Puri's statement is nonetheless helpful when thinking about the way Hopkinson expands our understanding of the real. Hopkinson implores the reader to be sceptical of any historical narrative that presents itself as authoritative. By having the consciousness of a vodou goddess present and dominant at three distinct moments in world history, Hopkinson presents a historical narrative that centres African-derived religion and tradition and, in turn, redefines the present. For example, towards the end of the novel, Ezili references Dédée Bazile, a notable female figure in the Haitian revolutionary.<sup>18</sup> Dédée is remembered in the text as having being influenced by Ezili, who says, 'they will call you Défilée when you and I march with the Haitian soldiers of the revolution, urging them to keep moving.' (376) Hopkinson positions vodou and Ezili as central tenets of the successful revolution, and thus re-imagines history by centring it on the influence of African-derived Caribbean

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<sup>17</sup> Shalini Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism and Cultural Hybridity* (New York City, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> Jana Evans Braziel, 'Re-membering Défilée: Dédée Bazile as Revolutionary *Lieu de Memoire*', *Small Axe*, 18.9 (2005), 57-85.

spirituality. Thus, the novel becomes a space within which the past and the present can be re-written and re-membered through a female and African-inspired lens.

By fusing the conventions of speculative fiction with elements of African-derived oral cultures, including Vodou, Nalo Hopkinson encourages her reader not only to reconsider the definition of speculative fiction, but also to reflect upon how we define reality, and to consider the idea that this definition of the real might vary in different cultural contexts. Hopkinson energises the speculative fiction genre by drawing on theology and breaking down the dichotomy between real and spiritual worlds. One way that *The Salt Roads* encourages readers to critique their own understanding of reality is through the characterisation of Ezili, the Haitian Vodou goddess, the way she inhabits both the material and spiritual worlds, and the way she functions as the centre of Hopkinson's matrifocal community.

There have been many studies written about spiritual and religious traditions in the Caribbean, and a number of scholars are interested in its creolised nature. Though this is an expansive area, since religious practices vary greatly across the region, and are influenced by varying factors, there are a number of striking similarities between some of the more widely practiced African-based spiritual systems in the Caribbean. In their study *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* (2011), Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argue that, despite the many differences between them, 'African based Caribbean creole practices [...] share a number of fundamental features'.<sup>19</sup> The study goes on to identify eleven features common to the majority of African Caribbean religions, including 'a belief in a unique Supreme Being [...] complemented by belief in a pantheon of deities; [...] the principle of contact between humans and the spirit world,' and a belief that 'music and dance are also instrumental in strengthening the conscious sense of community and an institutionalised regrouping of Africans and their descendants.'<sup>20</sup> One such religious system is that of vodou, most commonly practiced in Haiti. Through the vodou pantheon of deities, Nalo Hopkinson is able to bring the novel's female protagonists together, build her global community through a shared god-

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<sup>19</sup> Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York City, New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

consciousness, and offer a unique conceptualisation of Caribbean matrifocality as a tool for diasporic connectedness.

Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert argue that 'Vodou, the most maligned and misunderstood of all African-inspired religions in the Americas, is also one of its most complex'.<sup>21</sup> Vodou was brought to Haiti from Dahomey (now known as Benin) most notably, as well as other West African tribes, at the height of the European slave trade, and is also significantly influenced by the Catholicism of the island's French former colonisers. Slaves from different tribes brought with them the belief in a supreme god, but worshipped this god through varying intermediary gods, or deities. George Eaton Simpson argues that, during the Haitian Revolution, 'revolutionary leaders, who had found rituals useful in promoting their cause, had brought about a religious compromise which included the essentials of the various beliefs.'<sup>22</sup> Eaton Simpson continues that the most notable or prominent figures within the Vodou religion are its pantheon or loas, or lwas.<sup>23</sup> Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert define lwas as:

A pantheon of spirits [...] who represent a fusion of African and Creole gods, the spirits of deified ancestors, and syncretized manifestations of Catholic saints. The relationship between the lwa and the spirits is one of reciprocity. The lwa offer help, protection and counsel; their devotees offer ritual service in return.<sup>24</sup>

Tinsley suggests that 'although the day-to-day practice of [Vodou] is dominated by women, few of its lwa are feminine (or women) spirits', and some of the most recognised loas in the Vodou pantheon are masculine spirits such as Papa Legba, Ogoun and Damballa. Despite this, Tinsley continues, the 'pantheon of spirits known as Ezili [or Erzulie] is the richly, expansively, powerful exception to this rule.'<sup>25</sup> Within this pantheon, Tinsley identifies Gran Ezili, Ezili Freda, Ezili Danto, Ezili Mapyang, Ezili Taureau, and Lasyrenn (the spellings of the names of each deity varies according to source) as 'immensely influential for those practitioners who embody

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<sup>21</sup> Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, p. 117.

<sup>22</sup> George Eaton Simpson, 'Haiti', in *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Christine Barrow & Rhoda Reddock (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2001), pp. 565-586 (p. 567).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 568

<sup>24</sup> Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> Tinsley, p. 418.

and/or desire femininity.’<sup>26</sup> Thus, the practice of women worshipping Ezili is a particularly powerful example of spiritual matrifocality.

Ezili is often thought of as a symbol for Haitian women, and Caribbean feminists have recently come to think of her as an appropriate representation of Caribbean womanhood. Melanie Otto contends that Ezili has become the female counterpart to Shakespeare’s Caliban, who has himself become ‘an icon of Caribbean self-assertion’.<sup>27</sup> Otto argues:

As the story goes, the dark, rebellious Erzulie refuses marriage with any of the other Voodoo gods who are regarded as her sexual partners, and she raises her daughter on her own. However, she frequently participates in ritual marriages with the living, and some of these marriages are with women. Thus she emerges as an independent child-bearing woman, who defies conventional sexuality and the authority of the patriarchal family [...] In doing so, she offers an alternative family structure — one which reflects the all-female households characteristic of many Caribbean societies.<sup>28</sup>

By theorizing Ezili as a symbol of Caribbean womanhood, Otto asks that readers reconsider what can and should be classified as normative behaviour in the Caribbean. Ezili has been characterised as breaking from gendered, sexual and familial norms, and is often associated with communities where women are either the majority or the most influential members. Because she is characterised as an independent mother, matrifocality is implied through Ezili’s characterisation, and I argue that, through Ezili, matrifocality can be understood as a distinctly Caribbean phenomenon. Because she defies any stereotype of femininity as subservient and timid, Ezili has become popular as a character or a symbol in women’s writing, both in the Caribbean and across the African diaspora, with writers such as Pauline Melville, Zadie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston invoking the spirit of Ezili in their novels.<sup>29</sup>

In *The Salt Roads*, Ezili can be read as the thread that brings together Hopkinson’s protagonists, and the novel’s global matrifocal community. Largely

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<sup>26</sup> Tinsley, p. 418.

<sup>27</sup> Melanie Otto, ‘The Caribbean’ in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by John McLeod (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 95-106 (p. 100).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>29</sup> Ezili is referenced in Pauline Melville’s ‘Erzulie’ a short story in her collection *The Migration of Ghosts* (New York City, New York: Bloomsbury, 1998), Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (London: Penguin, 2005) and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1937).

experimental in style, Hopkinson's narrative is effective in bringing together the community. Movement through the novel is non-linear, and the narrative switches abruptly between the voices of Mer, Lemer and Meritet, with Ezili's emerging consciousness punctuating the novel. *The Salt Roads* begins in eighteenth century Haiti, with Mer attending to the pregnant woman whose subsequent stillborn child brings about the birth of Ezili: 'A small life, never begun, lends me its unused vitality'. (40) The narrative moves swiftly to nineteenth century Paris, and introduces Jeanne in a scene that details an intimate moment with her close friend Lisette. Hopkinson's third female protagonist, Meritet, is introduced to the narrative much later on, but the novel ends with her coincidental meeting with Zosimus that results in her being sainted some 1500 years before Mer's narrative begins. Meritet says, 'I could hear the great huge stories he was inventing to tell about me [...] Me, a pious Christian saint, repentant of her wanton ways'. (392) The backwards and forwards motion of the narrative between Mer, Jeanne and Meritet suggests a fluid continuity and connection between these women across the African diaspora, despite being separated by time and space, and the reader is compelled to read these women as a community to aid their own understanding of the text. Sorensen argues that the novel's nonlinear narrative structure forces the reader to chase the story, and that to 'chase down these narrative fragments and echoes, the reader must cut against the literary historical grain and form new links'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the narrative not only coerces the reader to make connections between the women, but it also effectively places Ezili at the centre of the community by imagining her moving consciousness. Ezili says:

As Jeanne nods off, the rhythm of her breathing — of her brackish, beating blood — wash me to other places; often to that Hayti land, that Saint Domingue, where women, men, and children in all the polished wood colours of blackness dance at night around poles set in the ground (210).

Ezili's narrative forces the reader to make connections between Hopkinson's three protagonists, rather than read them separately. It is also interesting to observe that Hopkinson uses both water and music (her blood and her rhythmic breathing) to connect Jeanne to Haiti in the above passage. Indeed, as Sorenson has also recognised, the novel is broken into subtitled sections, the first four of which are

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<sup>30</sup> Sorensen, p. 269.



named: '**BEAT...**' (1), '**BREAK/**' (39), '**BEAT!**' (41), and '**ONE-**' (43) Sorenson contends that these subtitles 'invoke the kinds of rhythms that a producer might mix in a dub composition'.<sup>31</sup> However, there are other subtitled sections in the novel that invoke other styles of music such as '**BLUES**' (47), '**JAZZ**' (267), and '**SOUL**'. (59) There are also a number of subtitled sections that are easily associated with water: '**WATER**' (135), '**BLOOD**' (163), '**EBB**'. (211) I suggest that the subtitled sections work towards evoking a sense of diasporic connection between characters in *The Salt Roads*. In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy suggests that black music is an African diasporic sub-culture that allows us to map out 'cultural expressions'.<sup>32</sup> Gilroy cites Funki Dreds' song 'Keep on Moving' as being notable for 'having been produced in England by the children of Caribbean settlers and then re-mixed in a (Jamaican) dub format in the United States'.<sup>33</sup> He suggests that the trans-Atlantic process of re-mixing the song, and the popularity of the song across the Atlantic, 'encapsulated the playful diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity'.<sup>34</sup> The subtitled sections of *The Salt Roads* work in a similar way. By titling the sections with words associated with rhythm and water, Hopkinson draws on the Black Atlantic tradition of diasporic connectedness through both water and music, and again urges the reader to think not of each protagonist separately, but as a part of a global community that so happens to be matrifocal in nature.

Joan Dayan has commented on the way that vodou rejects the dualism that Western religions rely on, and argues that, rather than depending on 'dualisms such as matter and spirit, body and soul, for their perpetuation and power, vodun unsettles and subverts such apparent oppositions'.<sup>35</sup> Though a goddess of love, Ezili's characterisation is fraught with ambiguity. As such, Emanuela Maltese contends that Ezili also 'avoids any classical division between the good deity (belonging to the Rada family) and the evil one (belonging to the Petro family)'.<sup>36</sup> She resists dualism and simple categorisation, and the women whose bodies she inhabits in *The Salt Roads* share this quality. Jeanne — or Lemer — for example, is a beautiful ginger

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<sup>31</sup> Sorenson, p. 271.

<sup>32</sup> Gilroy, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Joan Dayan, 'Ezrúlie: A Woman's History in Haiti', *Research in African Literature*, 25 (1994), 5-31 (p. 6).

<sup>36</sup> Emanuela Maltese, "'What is the Truth?': Ezili, or the Power of Feminist Love', *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 16.1 (2010), 87-94 ( p. 90).

coloured woman living in nineteenth century Paris. An entertainer, and the mistress of Charles Baudelaire, Lemer most closely resembles Ezili Freda, 'the luxurious mulatta who loves perfume, music, flowers, sweets and laughter, but always leaves in tears.'<sup>37</sup> As a mulatto woman, often dressed in fine French attire, Ezili Freda is often thought of as representing the connection between vodou and the French colonising power. Ezili is born in Haiti, but the first body she inhabits is 'the ginger-coloured woman's body' (56) in Paris. That she also possesses a tenth century African woman suggests that the practices of Haitian vodou are equally indebted to African spiritual practices and the influence of the French colonisers.

Dayan identifies Ezili, the goddess of love, as being born 'on the soil of Haiti, who has no precedent in Yorubaland or Dahomey'.<sup>38</sup> Ezili is not one of the loas brought over from Africa, and Hopkinson explores this aspect of her identity in *The Salt Roads*. Ezili comes into consciousness at a gathering of three women at the river as they mourn the loss of a child in three different ways. Georgine, mother of the child, calls on Calliope, her adoptive mother: 'They gave me to her, to Calliope [...] I saw Calliope drown [...] Calliope, look after my baby, please'. (36) Tipingee chants a popular Haitian folk story, '*Colico, Pierre Jean, oh! If you could, you would fly, eh-heh!*' (36) And Mer calls upon the goddess Lasirèn: 'Ay Lasirèn, what a night [...] River Mumma [...] Why do we suffer so? [...] Lasirèn, take this child'. (36) It is the combination of prayer to an ancestor, prayer to an African god, and the recanting of Haitian folklore that brings Hopkinson's Ezili into existence. Mer is taken from the Ewe tribe, Tipingee from the Akan tribe, and Georgine, born in Haiti, identifies as a 'Christian woman'. (26) Ezili is a direct result of the creolisation process of African-based religions in the Caribbean. Her first words after her birth are, 'I am born from song and prayer [...] I'm born from mourning and sorrow and three women's tearful voices. I'm born from countless journeys chained tight in the bellies of ships'. (40) Dayan argues that Ezili 'dramatizes a specific historiography of women's experiences in Haiti',<sup>39</sup> and Hopkinson illustrates this idea in *The Salt Roads*. Meredith M. Gadsby describes Ezili's movement through time and space, 'growing in strength and consciousness until she is able to take her place among the pantheon

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<sup>37</sup> Tinsley, p. 420.

<sup>38</sup> Dayan, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

of New World African loas.<sup>40</sup> Ezili is brought into the pantheon of New World African Gods through the mourning process of three women, but she also recognises instantly that, on a larger scale, her birth is the result of the enslavement of African people. This idea is further dramatized as, straight after she is born, Ezili feels herself 'caught in myriad memories of dark shipspace, slotted in berths too narrow to let me move far'. (42) Dayan argues that Ezili articulates and embodies the memory of slavery, and in *The Salt Roads*, her first conscious thoughts are of the journey of slaves to the Americas, further confirming her New World identity.

In the novel, Ezili functions as a mother, or a mother-consciousness, and one of her contradictory qualities is the way in which she represents and practices love. Dayan argues that there are many loas that embody love, but it is Ezili who 'can be said to defy the very love she represents.'<sup>41</sup> Emanuela Maltese suggests that for a human to be possessed by Ezili is for them to be 'possessed both by the healing love of spirituality, and, simultaneously, by what has been historically — atrociously — considered to be love; subjugation to slavery, acceptance of oppression, experience of silenced grief'.<sup>42</sup> These 'ambiguities of love' are best represented in *The Salt Roads* through Hopkinson's characterisation of Mer.<sup>43</sup> On the plantation, Mer acts as a healer and counsel for the Ginen, and is a central figure within her slave community. Her love for the Ginen, and her vocation as a healer, means that she frequently compels them to endure and accept their enslavement, rather than fight it. For example, when a new slave is brought to the plantation, and refuses to eat, Mer is called to the slave hospital to aid him. Mer does not allow Mamadou to resist his enslavement at the expense of his own life: hers is the kind of love that asks for endurance. She tells Mamadou, 'I know the work is so hard that you ache all the time [...] I know that you don't want to live no more [...] No man should take a life, even his own'. (197) Mer's kindness and sincerity compel Mamadou to start eating so that he can continue enduring his oppression: such is the contradictory essence of the love she offers her community.

Mer finds herself in a similar position as the novel's Haitian storyline reaches its climax. Mer learns that Makandal, unsatisfied with slow-poisoning of the French

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<sup>40</sup> Meredith M. Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration and Survival* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2006), p. 29. ProQuest eBook.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Maltese, pp 89-90.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

masters, has rallied the slaves and readied them for violent rebellion. Mer is compelled by the spirit of Ezili to walk towards the river, and follow the moonlight 'until I could hear a soft thumping. Followed until the noise was drums. Followed till I could hear the Ginen laughing and talking'. (312) Makandal and Mer converse about the gods they serve, and Makandal criticises Mer for using her connection with the gods only to help the Ginen endure. (314) It is then that Makandal is possessed by the spirit of Papa Ogu, a 'blacksmith ancestor [...] The Warmaker'. (316) Ezili, hearing his prayers, fights to enter Makandal's consciousness, but is pushed out by Ogu: 'Back away, back away, watery one, cuntled one. This horse is mine, not for you. He's mine.' (318) Arguing that she wants to keep him from harm Ogu retorts, 'He doesn't care for his own skin, for his safety. He cares for the Ginen more than himself. He's my child [...] Souls of war,' (319) and pushes Ezili into the river. Ezili eventually finds her way into Mer's body, and attempts to stop Makandal: 'Mer could warn the slaves in the great house [...] She could protect those of my people. And she could mislead the whites, send them away from this bush meeting'. (326) However, Makandal stops Mer from running, and with a spirit machete, rids Mer of her ability to speak, and forces Ezili out of her body and back into Jeanne's. The confrontation between Ezili and Ogu is her first encounter with a deity who is widely recognised as one of her husbands, and Sorenson comments on Hopkinson's engagement with the ambiguity of the 'ethics of revolution' in this passage.<sup>44</sup> Milena Marinkova suggests that Mer refuses to participate in violent revolution because 'it risks perpetuating the inhumanity of the hegemonic macropolitical structure'.<sup>45</sup> I think the encounter between Mer/Ezili and Makandal/Ogu can also be analysed as another example of the contradictory nature of the love that Ezili represents in *The Salt Roads*. She fights for her people, but is ultimately ambivalent towards the notion of revolution because of potential resulting violence against her community. Ezili and Mer want to keep the Ginen safe, but is afraid to risk any lives for the possibility of freedom.

Nalo Hopkinson creates a historical novel that is charged with the possibility of re-imagining the present. By choosing to write speculative fiction, Hopkinson has

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<sup>44</sup> Sorenson, p. 273.

<sup>45</sup> Milena Marinkova, ' Revolutionizing Pleasure in Writing: Subversive Desire and Micropolitical Affects in Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*', in *Postcolonial Literatures and Deleuze: Colonial Pasts, Differential Futures*, ed. by Lorna Burns & Birgit M. Kaiser (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp. 181-198 (p. 194). Springer eBook.

the opportunity not only to exploit the genre in order to question definitions of reality, but also to re-write women who are forgotten or ill-remembered by dominant historical narratives. Kate Houlden argues that 'the trans-historical and trans-spatial links that Hopkinson draws between her characters, place a [...] range of African diasporic connections centre stage.'<sup>46</sup> I agree that Hopkinson's complex narrative structure works well in forcing the reader to make correlations and connections between otherwise separate characters and locations. More specifically, the novel successfully makes connections between female protagonists across the African diaspora, re-writes their narratives, and offers them a sense of agency through their connection to the Haitian goddess. The narrative structure of *The Salt Roads*, and the omniscient presence of Ezili throughout the book asks the reader to engage with the influence of African-derived Caribbean religion and spirituality within the region, and consider the ways it helps to connect women across the African diaspora.

### **Global and Local Matrifocal Communities**

The multiplicity of Ezili, and her multiple iterations, gives Hopkinson the scope to explore the identities of three black women, and consider the ways that their skin tones shape their experience of womanhood. Ezili, in her many incarnations, becomes the perfect thread to bind black women into matrifocal communities. Hopkinson portrays a number of different types of community: there is the local matrifocal community, where community members inhabit the same space at the same time; and the global community of trans-spatial and trans-historical women living with a shared connection to Ezili, and a common spirit of resistance. The matrifocal community is at one time portrayed in *The Salt Roads* as a mixed-gender community, and at other times, it is solely a group of women. Regardless of the varying make-ups, there is always a mother-figure at the core of these communities, be it goddess or human.

As I have outlined in my introduction, the origins of matrifocality in the Caribbean have been popularly theorised in two ways. Whilst older sociological studies attributed the commonality of the matrifocal household to the breakdown of

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<sup>46</sup> Kate Houlden, 'Writing the Impossible: Racial, Sexual and Stylistic Expansivity in Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51.4 (2015), 462-475, (p. 465).

familial structures during the period of slavery in the Caribbean,<sup>47</sup> such views have since largely been critiqued as heteronormative, and male-biased, focusing on missing men, and regarding matrifocality as ‘a problem that needs to be solved, rather than a distinct family structure’.<sup>48</sup> Other studies have suggested that the Caribbean matrifocal family was a ‘truncated derivative of matrilineages’ found in some African cultures, and a ‘fitting compromise between African principles of lineage and the new environment’.<sup>49</sup> Through her representation of the birth of Ezili and the communities she creates in *The Salt Roads*, Hopkinson engages with debates about the roots of matrifocality, and ultimately positions the community structure as being the result of the creolisation process in the Caribbean. Beyond this, however, Hopkinson represents matrifocality as having strong ties with African cultural traditions, and engages with post-matrifocal anthropological perspectives through engaging with matrifocality as a viable tool for diasporic connectedness. Hopkinson’s representation of matrifocality takes place on both the local and global level, and her employment of the speculative fiction genre allows her to position these two types of communities parallel to one another. In this section I will analyse the representation of both the local matrifocal community on the Haitian plantation, and the global community that they give birth to through the appearance of Ezili. I will consider Hopkinson’s engagement with images of salt and water as the binding symbols and elements of a global community of black, resistant women.

The representation of the matrifocal community in *The Salt Roads* happens on two levels. Hopkinson fictionalises the global and the local communities working together simultaneously. On the plantation Sacré Coeur in eighteenth century Haiti, Mer, in her capacity as confidant, healer, and surrogate mother of her fellow slaves, is established as the central figure of the community. In the novel’s first chapter Mer serves as both midwife and nurse, and the narrator notes, ‘All of the Ginen on Sacré Coeur plantation were grateful to have Mer as a doctress. Belle Espoir further down the way had only Jean Rigaud; the young timid white man [...] Mer had earned her place among the Ginen as one of the elders’. (12-13) Recognising her importance to plantation life, Mer’s reputation as a healer ensures that she is treated with respect

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<sup>47</sup> John Stuart MacDonald & Leatrice D. MacDonald, ‘Transformation of African and Indian Family Traditions in the Southern Caribbean’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15:2 (1973), 171-198 (p. 171).

<sup>48</sup> Carin Tunåker, ‘The Matrifocal Household: Santería Religious Practices and Gender Relations Explored’, *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 8.2 (2011), 137-148 (p. 138).

<sup>49</sup> MacDonald and MacDonald, p. 192

by the other slaves. As previously cited, in her research on African Caribbean slave mothers, Barbara Bush argues that the specific environment of the plantation brought about the creation of matrifocal, female networks that were integral to the survival of enslaved communities. Bush argues that, though fertility and motherhood were central components of many African cultures, 'female centred households and local networks of quasi-'kin' had no significant precedents in Africa'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Bush argues that matrifocality is a Caribbean phenomenon and an example of 'creative responses' to the cruel plantation environment.<sup>51</sup> Bush points specifically to older women within these communities as 'midwives, healers and priestesses [who] were at the hub of these female networks', and I contend that Hopkinson represents Mer as similarly central in her role as a healer.<sup>52</sup>

Mer is known by many on her plantation as 'matant' — the Haitian Creole term for 'aunt' — which suggests that she holds a position of authority and respect within her community.<sup>53</sup> As a plantation healer, Mer comes into contact with a large number of her fellow slaves, and Hopkinson represents her as a tender and selfless mother-figure. For example, when giving Ti-Bois medicine for his rotting teeth, she offers him sugar to improve the taste, and invites him to eat with her afterwards. (136-137) When, towards the end of the novel, Mer is presented with the opportunity to flee the plantation and join a Maroon community, she declines because of her responsibility as a mother figure on the plantation. Mer tells Tipingee, 'Ti-Bois [...] he's getting big now [...] He's learning healing well from me. Georgine has another baby coming. And Belle's hand is starting to heal. If I leave, would be no one to put compresses on it.' (373) Mer puts the needs of her community before her own, and in return asks that her community learn to endure their enslavement. Unlike the matrifocal plantation community of Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women*, the local community in *The Salt Roads* does not function as a way to organise rebellion. In fact, it is Mer who offers the most resistance to Makandal's plans for revolution. Rather, the matrifocal nature of the local community is a survival mechanism.

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<sup>50</sup> Barbara Bush, 'African Caribbean Slave Mothers and Children: Trauma of Dislocation and Enslavement Across the Atlantic World', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 56.1-2 (2010), 69-94 (p. 84).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Anon, 'Matant', *Glosbe- The Multilingual Online Dictionary* [online] <<https://glosbe.com/ht/en/matant>> [accessed January 8<sup>th</sup> 2017].

Mer's authority as a matriarchal figure of the Sacré Coeur slave community is threatened by her male counterpart Makandal. Hopkinson's Makandal is based on the historical figure of the same name, made famous for 'leading the first of the Haitian insurrections against slavery that ultimately led to the establishment of the first Republic led by Africans and their descendants.'<sup>54</sup> In all aspects of daily life on the plantation, Mer has the authority. Her fellow Ginen come to her for medical matters and they respect her seniority, Mer having been on the plantation for twelve years — 'the time it had taken for Mer to lose a child and a husband'. (13) The matrifocal structure of the plantation community only becomes destabilised at the point of rebellion, when the Ginen choose to turn away from the counsel of Mer. Instead it is Makandal, possessed by the Iwa Papa Ogu, who becomes the leader of their violent rebellion.

Makandal's rebellion in *The Salt Roads* is easily halted by the French powers, and, in accordance with the official historical narrative, he is executed. By rewriting the tale of Makandal with the inclusion of her fictional character Mer, and by placing Mer at the heart of her local community, Hopkinson suggests that matrifocality is vital to the organisation of communities in the Caribbean, as well as in the wider African diaspora. When the slave community rallies around the inherently masculine energy of Makandal and Papa Ogu, it results in death. Unlike Marlon James' enslaved male characters in *The Book of Night Women* (2009), Hopkinson's male slave characters are charged with the organisation of the revolt, and it ends up being suppressed very quickly. Mer is unwilling to partake in violent rebellion, and teaches the Ginen instead to endure their enslavement, offering stability to the Ginen of Sacré Coeur. The passive love and support she offers is superseded by the will of Ogu, who silences Mer by using 'the arm that was not there' (330) and slicing the spirit machète across her tongue. Of course, Haiti is ultimately successful in ridding the island of the French powers, and they do so under male leadership. However, Mer, harnessing power from Ezili and her matrifocal community, recognises that it is not their time to do so. She exercises caution and restraint, willing her fellow Ginen free, but recognising that they are not ready to take control.

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Davis, 'Macandal', *The Kingdom of This World* [online] <<https://www.msu.edu/~williss2/carpentier/part1/macandal.html>> [accessed October 12<sup>th</sup> 2015] (para 3 of 7).



As well as the local community, Hopkinson also represents a global matrifocal community centring on Ezili, her three protagonists, and a host of other historical black women made famous for their acts of resistance. The global matrifocal community is undeniably rooted in the Caribbean as its central mother figure — Ezili — is of Haitian descent. The community extends across the African diaspora. Ezili's consciousness moves from Queen Nzingha in seventeenth century Angola to Rosa Parks in twentieth century America. However, through the narrative of *The Salt Roads*, Ezili's consciousness most notably spends time in France, Egypt and Haiti. The global community of women is bound through Ezili, but also through a number of shared characteristics, and an overarching spirit of resistance.

*The Salt Roads* makes an interesting connection between the practice of African-derived spirituality and matrifocality in the region; one that Carin Tunåker also makes in her consideration of Santería and gender in Cuba. Tunåker argues that, like Haitian Vodou, Santería is a 'female-normative religious system',<sup>55</sup> where women make up the majority of practitioners, and two of its most widely known deities are feminine spirits.<sup>56</sup> She argues that, because African-derived Caribbean religions are largely practiced in the home, 'due to lack of presence of a formal church,' women become the 'perceived owners' of said space.<sup>57</sup> This perceived ownership, Tunåker contends, results in the empowerment of women in the home space, which she suggests forms part of the reason for the occurrence of matrifocal households in Cuba. Tunåker theorises matrifocality in such a way that centres Caribbean religions, and ignores the popular 'missing man' theory, and I suggest that Hopkinson does something very similar in *The Salt Roads* through her characterisation of the three female protagonists, all connected to the Haitian goddess.

The global matrifocal community is one connected by the salt roads in the minds of the people of the African diaspora, and Lasirèn explains this to Mer in their first encounter. Salt is a motif used frequently by Caribbean women writers, and Meredith M. Gadsby explores the 'intimate relationship with salt' that people of the African diaspora enjoy in her book *Sucking Salt*.<sup>58</sup> The Caribbean phrase 'sucking

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<sup>55</sup> Tunåker, p. 141.

<sup>56</sup> The feminine spirits that Tunåker references are Oshún and Yemayá.

<sup>57</sup> Tunåker, pp. 141-142.

<sup>58</sup> Gadsby, p. 53.

salt' means 'to suffer hardship,' and this metaphor recalls 'a culture of communal support that manifests in the determination of Caribbean women to confront oppressions in the new spaces they enter'.<sup>59</sup> Hopkinson exploits the intimate relationship between Caribbean people and salt in *The Salt Roads*, and re-invigorates the metaphor as a way of connecting the experiences of African diasporic women. Ezili says that she is born of a combination of a 'small life never begun', 'mourning and sorrow and [...] tearful voices', and 'countless journeys chained tight in the bellies of ships'. (40) Thus, because Ezili is born from the salt of blood, tears, and the sea, it can be concluded that Ezili is born as a result of hardship, and hardship becomes a connecting factor for the global community of women that she creates.

Nancy Kang suggests that 'Hopkinson intermingles sea salt with corporeal salt to distil a kind of transformative continuity out of these working women's Afro-diasporic experience.'<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Hopkinson's employment of the image of salt in a novel about the hardships of a community of women could not be more suitable, and it is an image that punctuates *The Salt Roads*. The first chapter opens with the image of 'salt-smelling air, blowing up from the cliffs to the foot of the plantation'. (2) The smell of that dangerous and treacherous sea that transported African people to Haiti reaches the plantation, and this image of hardship sets the tone for the novel. Salt continues to be mentioned in this chapter, from the 'salt scent of Georgine's body,' (4) to an interesting exchange between Mer and Makandal, wherein Mer attributes Makandal's djinn-like qualities to his aversion to salt. Hopkinson's narrator says:

Every man jack of us as we got off the slave ships, the white god's priests used sea water to make the magic cross on our foreheads and bind us with salt to this land. Maybe not Makandal. Never chained to the white man's obeah, never fed the salt of the bitter soil of this new world to tie his earthly body down to it, never ate the salt fish and the filthy haram, the salt pork that was the only meat the Ginen got. (9-10)

Hopkinson's narrator believes that, through the shared 'sea in the minds of the Ginen' (65), salt not only binds humans to the earth, but also to each other. Gadsby argues that the 'belief in the spiritual benefits of the avoidance of salt' is one held by

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<sup>59</sup> Gadsby, pp. 6-7.

<sup>60</sup> Kang, p. 711.

many African- derived Caribbean religions, including Rastafarianism, Shango, and Santería.<sup>61</sup> Lorna McDaniels contends that salt makes the spirit too heavy to fly.<sup>62</sup> Gadsby builds upon this argument by suggesting that ‘in African diasporic mythology, spirits are the only beings that can travel all over the world, and they do not eat salt.’<sup>63</sup> Salt ties Mer and her fellow slaves to the earth, and the hardships of their condition, but Makandal’s avoidance of salt affords him the ability to change form and exercise some level of freedom. However, as Mer notes, Makandal is still a man, and therefore ‘still too much of this world to be able to fly back home.’ (10) It is because Mer is so connected to the earth, to Haiti, and to the suffering of her people, that she is able to bring about the birth of Ezili, a goddess born of ‘Song. Prayer. Scream.’ (42) Her connection to the earth heightens her connection with the spiritual world.

Salt becomes a symbol of hardship and loss, not only for Mer, but also Jeanne and Meritet in *The Salt Roads*. After her lover Charles is cut off from his inheritance, Lemer and her mother are forced to eat ‘salt pork and flour dumpling soup’. (179) It is the ‘vile smell’ (178) of the salted pigtails that sets the scene of poverty in this instance. Later in the book, when Lemer is robbed after her stay in the sanatorium, she comes home to a nearly starving dog. Having no food to offer, Jeanne narrates, ‘She just licked my face. The salt from my skin was all I could give her, for I had no food.’ (337) Salt, as an image of poverty or despair, is a recurrent image in the novel that bring together Hopkinson’s matrifocal community. Her three protagonists, unlike Ezili, are bound to the earth, and have to find ways to endure and overcome their conditions.

Hopkinson uses imagery of both salt and sea to connect her global matrifocal community in *The Salt Roads*. Ezili is born by the river, and Mer, Jeanne, and Meritet are connected through her, but also through their shared African diasporic identities. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza argues that diaspora, ‘once seen as a space of social death... is now increasingly invested with new possibilities as a harbinger of globalized futures.’<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Stuart Hall defines diasporic identity as ‘those which

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<sup>61</sup> Gadsby, p. 26.

<sup>62</sup> Lorna McDaniels, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998).

<sup>63</sup> Gadsby, p. 26.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, ‘Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic’, *African Affairs*, 104.414 (2005) 35-68 (p.35).

are constantly producing and reproducing anew, through transformation and difference'<sup>65</sup>. His understanding of identity as a production 'which is never complete, always in process', conjures up images of identity as a fluid, evolving construct.<sup>66</sup> It is small wonder, then, that writers from the Caribbean are drawn to images and metaphors of water in their literary explorations of identity. Water is often the image of choice for Caribbean writers exploring diasporic identity, and it can evoke a number of different interpretations. Brinda Mehta argues that water 'represents an archive of memory and traumatic experience to demonstrate how trauma becomes a complex site of abjection and resistance as the human will struggles to survive amid adversity, dehumanization and death.'<sup>67</sup> However, water can also be employed as a metaphor to help understand the nature of diasporic identity. As Zeleza highlights, 'diaspora is fashioned as much in the fluid contexts of social experience, differentiation and struggle'.<sup>68</sup> The fluidity in the way diaspora has been defined, and the fact that the global African diaspora is most easily mapped by using oceans, means that water is an ideal metaphor to use when thinking about diasporic communities. Indeed, Hopkinson's employment of water as the mode of connection between her trans-spatial diasporic community is ideal water as is expansive and malleable. I argue that the matrifocal community in *The Salt Roads* is represented as one of strength and resilience, and the novel encourages readers to consider the merit of forging connections between black women across the African diaspora. Much like contemporary understandings of diaspora, Hopkinson's matrifocal community, connected by salt and water, has space to adapt to allow room for growth. For example, its malleability allows Ezili to connect with the black drag queens who begin the Stonewall resistance. (311) Had the global community been more rigid, it might not have allowed space for these 'women with men's bodies'. (311) Thus, images of water and salt allow Ezili's community to expand organically and limitlessly.

Each of Hopkinson's three human protagonists, though completely unaware of the other women in the global community, share similarities to each other and

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<sup>65</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222-237 (p. 235).

<sup>66</sup> Hall, p. 222.

<sup>67</sup> Brinda Mehta, *Notions of Identity, Diaspora, and Gender in Caribbean Women's Writing* (New York City, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 11. Springer eBook.

<sup>68</sup> Zeleza, p. 42.

Ezili, and through their characterization Hopkinson explores the very definition of community. In Ezili's narrative, she often references a 'three-twist' woman, and this is a repeated image in *The Salt Roads*. An example of this is the scene in which Ezili is thrown from Jeanne's body and finds herself embedded in the consciousness of Meritet. She observes, 'her name is Thais. Or something else. Or something else again, but she doesn't think about her second and third names much. Three names. She's another three-twist, this one. A braided girl, sister to the three who birthed me.' (265) Here, Ezili refers to Mer, Georgine and Tipingee, a braided community of three women who brought about her birth.

As Ezili's consciousness grows, she continues to reference communities of women that she influences:

I fight as another three-twist; fierce, libidinous Queen Nzingha of Matamba and her two sisters [...] Together, we three, imbued with Ezili je-wouj, lead our army and our country [...] One summer New York night, a group of men who love men and women who love women hang about in front of a nightclub [...] A Puerto Rican woman with a man's body throws her high-heeled pump' the first missile of resistance [...] Black Madonna, Sylvia Rivera, and Marsha P. Johnson all teach us Ezilis more about beauty, defiance, and resistance. (309-311)

Ezili is birthed by three women, and her repeated references to braided or three-twist women implies that matrifocal communities, or some variation of them, have, historically, been influential in acts of resistance in African and African diasporic communities. By burying the stillborn child at all, and praying to non-Christian gods, Mer, Tipingee and Georgine secretly resist their enslavement, and bring Ezili into the Haitian pantheon. Ezili is born of the 'bitter experience,' (40) of black women's lives, and she thus possesses women across the diaspora who attempt to resist their condition. Since Ezili is a sisterhood of goddesses, she is able to identify easily with communities of women because she recognises in them their potential for resistance, and is able to connect with their plights and aid in their revolutionary acts of self-expression.

Nancy Kang notes that the shared 'mer' in the names of Hopkinson's protagonists is 'a homophone for 'mère' (Fr. 'mother') and ',mer' (Fr. 'the sea').<sup>69</sup> The women of *The Salt Roads*, Haitian Mer, Alexandrian Meritet, and Parisian Jeanne, more commonly referred to as Lemer, all share connections both with the

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<sup>69</sup> Kang, p. 710.

sea and with motherhood that are worth exploring as part of the basis of their trans-spatial community. The sea is a place of refuge for Mer, a space in which she can escape the reality of her enslavement and enjoy the quietness of nature away from the plantation. At the beginning of the novel, after Georgine loses her baby, Mer prays to Lasirèn, the Haitian mermaid and 'polymorphous goddess'<sup>70</sup> who is sometimes known as 'Ezili of the waters'.<sup>71</sup> A short time after this, Mer takes a night walk to the sea to bathe and, with the 'moon-face of Ezili' (64), sees in the water the face of Lasirèn, 'young, smooth; she was fat and well-fed. The bush of hair tumbled around her brown, beautiful face in plaits and dreadknots, tied with twists of seaweed'. (64) Mer begs her goddess to take her away from her enslavement, but is told instead to help Lasirèn remedy the drying sea roads. Indeed, it is not until much later in Hopkinson's narrative that she reveals that it is Ezili, whose consciousness punctuates the entire novel, who gives Mer this message as her 'mother whale self'. (306) Lasirèn tells Mer, 'The sea in the minds of my Ginen. The sea roads, the salt roads. And the sweet ones, too; the rivers. Can't follow them to their sources anymore'. (65) According to Lasirèn, Mer, Lemer and Meritet are connected to each other by the sea roads in the minds of all people of the African diaspora.

It is significant that Hopkinson's three protagonists' share the name 'Mer' because they all have a particular connection with motherhood. Desiree Lewis argues that black women writers represent motherhood as 'a pivotal and extensively supportive activity which co-ordinates acquisitions of selfhood in a patriarchal system influenced by white-centred myths and hierarchical oppositions'.<sup>72</sup> The portrayal of black motherhood, according to Lewis, has given black women writers the opportunity to destabilise sexist ideas about the power of the feminine. Janice Lee Liddell argues that 'the image of mother — giver and nurturer or life; teacher and instiller of values and mores — has indeed become the most persistent of Caribbean archetypes'.<sup>73</sup> Hopkinson's discards this Caribbean archetype by portraying three protagonists who reject conventional models of motherhood, although they ultimately

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<sup>70</sup> Kang, p. 710.

<sup>71</sup> Marilyn Houlberg, 'Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Art of Haitian Vodou', *African Arts*, 29.2 (1996), 30-35 (p. 32).

<sup>72</sup> Desiree Lewis, 'Myths of Motherhood and Power: The Construction of "Black Woman" in Literature', *English in Africa*, 19.1 (1992), 35-51 (p.36).

<sup>73</sup> Janice Lee Liddell, 'The Narrow Enclosure of Motherdom/Martyrdom: A study of Gatha Randall Barton in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*', in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 321-330 (p. 321).

end up mirroring Ezili's assertion that, though she is 'mother to none' (212), she still acts as a matriarchal figure. After her boat journey to Aelia Capitolina, Meritet finds that she has miscarried. Lemer, seeing the way that childbirth nearly killed her mother, fears the idea of childbirth. Nancy Kang suggests that, like Ezili, Mer 'is a nurturer or many [but] a literal mother to none [...] yet she remains "Matant" to the slave community,'<sup>74</sup> having lost her own child during her enslavement. Mer thus functions as an 'othermother', a role that Patricia Hill Collins argues has historically been important within black communities.<sup>75</sup> I have referenced the term in my consideration of Homer's role in *The Book of Night Women* (2008), and its reoccurrence in these texts further suggests the significance of the othermother figure in Caribbean contemporary fiction.

Hopkinson's inclusion of motherhood as a symbol is significant and fraught with contradiction, and although the novel's three protagonists begin their narratives with either ambiguous or negative views of motherhood and childbearing, each ends the novel as a central figure in their own local matrifocal community or family. Kang argues that, through these women, Hopkinson explores the image of the black woman as 'more-than-mother,' and indeed, though none of the women are biological mothers, their attitudes towards motherhood are explored throughout *The Salt Roads*. By being remembered by Zosimus as Saint Mary of Egypt, Meritet becomes the patron saint of penitents, and thus can be regarded as a mother figure or matriarch to those that follow her. The last words of *The Salt Roads* belongs to Meritet, and there is a tone of optimism in her narrative, as she describes hearing Zosimus inventing 'huge stories' about her, and accepts the possibility of living with a new matriarchal identity. (392) Jeanne, though plagued with illness 'dies a happy woman' (366) as the partner of Achille and the adoptive mother of her friend Lisette's teenage daughter St  phanie. Mer, still unable to speak after Makandal's attack, continues to act as a central figure on the plantation community, and also enjoys a close relationship with Georgine, who teaches Mer how to read, offering 'a gift of beauty and knowledge to a sad, powerful black woman'. (369) Lee Liddell argues that a lot of Caribbean fiction has tended to romanticize mothers as 'self-sacrificing'

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<sup>74</sup> Kang, p. 711.

<sup>75</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 178.

and 'self-effacing'.<sup>76</sup> Liddell further suggests that, in patriarchal societies like those prevalent in the Caribbean, 'little or no premium is placed on what a woman can produce unless it is from her womb or the stove'.<sup>77</sup> Hopkinson subverts this stereotype by portraying female characters who can be central figures in their societies without being conventional mothers. Indeed, it is only after these women grow in self-realisation, after they have completed personal journeys, that they can accept maternal responsibility on their own terms.

Ezili's narrative in *The Salt Roads* largely details her growth into consciousness, and she experiences what I would call a second birth at the very moment that Meritet loses her unborn child. Ezili's consciousness tears loose from Meritet when she loses her baby. Ezili finds herself lost in the 'swirling aether' (303) where she is introduced to her sisters, and her three-twist nature is thus explained:

One is a biscuit-brown beauty, wreathed in the pink mists that hide and reveal her, like so much lace. She lazily waves a cut-work fan, smiles at me. One is bent under the weight of her sorrows. Her earth-brown hands are knotted as roots and her eyes are sad, but her back is strong [...] The third comes surging at me on a vast gout of aether. She is large beyond my imagining [...] "*Welcome, sister,*" say the three voices (303-304).

Her sisters introduce themselves as Frèda, Lasirèn, and Danto, and Hopkinson's narrator observes, 'My own face gazes back at me from those infinite reflections, and it is all their faces. They are me'. (304) The narrator of *The Salt Roads* becomes conscious of who she is: "'*Je-Wouj,*" I name myself to my sisters. I hear my echoes, all our echoes, say it with me. I am Ezili Red-eye'. (305) Until the loss of Meritet's child, Ezili was nameless and alone. Once Meritet becomes aware of her pregnancy, even though she loses the child, Ezili is able to take the next step into selfhood — naming herself, identifying as a three-twist deity, and being able to connect with other deities in the pantheon of Haitian spirits.

As the centre of the global matrifocal community, Ezili exercises influence on both the lives of the women she possesses, and the lives of the people around these women. Once Ezili is made conscious of who she is, she is able to take on the persona of any of the goddesses in the Ezili pantheon, and harness her three-twist identity. For example, when Tippingee's husband Patrice returns to the plantation

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<sup>76</sup> Liddell, p. 322.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.



after his marronage, he is brought before the plantation master Simenon to decide punishment. Simenon's fiancé encourages him to grant him clemency, and soon after faints unexpectedly. Mer wonders, '*who was it who had come as Patrice's saviour, hiding in the white woman's head? What ancestor, what spirit?*' (91) It is much later in the narrative that Ezili takes credit for the act:

I slip into the head of the white woman [...] Coiffed and perfumed as Ezili Frèda, light skinned Power of love and romance, I say in a voice like tinkling bells to the preening man beside me, "Then you will grant him clemency my dear! I thought you might!" (306)

It is through the flirtatious nature of Ezili Frèda that the goddess is able to save one of the Haitian Ginen. Another example of Ezili's three-twist identity is the description of her possessing Rosa Parks at the moment of her 'simple act of refusal,' through harnessing the power of Ezili Danto, the incarnation of Ezili who can 'bear much pain [...] holds fast, refuses to be moved'. (306) Barbara Bush explains Ezili Danto as the 'warrior and fierce protector of women' who specifically reflects the 'dramatic transformations in African women's lives as enslaved people in the Caribbean and the persistent poverty that has blighted their lives since freedom.'<sup>78</sup> In *The Salt Roads*, Ezili describes herself as being 'born from countless journeys chained tight in the bellies of ships,' (40) which emphasises her position as a goddess of the African diaspora. Thus, utilising this analysis, it is understandable that Ezili Danto come to the forefront for Rosa Parks, whose act of refusal existed as a product of those years of poverty since the enslavement of African people in the Americas.

*The Salt Roads* offers a representation of women who, under the protection of their mother-god Ezili, take ownership of their sexuality. This not only acts as a recurring theme in Hopkinson's text, but also serves as another thread that binds the novel's global matrifocal community. In an interview, Hopkinson comments that there are no bisexual characters in her novel. She continues,

There are no gay people, no lesbians, no straight people in *The Salt Roads*. The characters all live in times and places in which there is little queer/straight identity politic around which to accrue a sense of self. They

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<sup>78</sup> Bush, p. 77.

think of their sexual behaviour as what they do or would prefer to do, not as what they are.<sup>79</sup>

Given that, as Dayan explains, Ezili ‘goes beyond false dichotomizing [... and] “marries” women as well as men’ without the need to define her fluid sexuality, it is no surprise that Hopkinson writes her human protagonists’ sexualities as fluid and without definition.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, Mer, Jeanne and Meritet are not at all defined by their sexualities, but are a part of local communities that accept their sexual fluidity. For example, the reader is first introduced to Jeanne whilst her best friend Lisette has her thighs clamped to Jeanne’s ears. (15) This local community has matrifocal characteristics of its own. Jeanne is part of a community of women who are managed by Bourgoyne at Theatre Porte-Saint-Antoine. Jeanne, as a more experienced entertainer, commands respect from the younger women. As she gets ready to surprise Charles and his mother, she calls on Margot to help her get ready, saying ‘the younger dancers had to do what the more senior ones told them’. (48) As with the community on the Haitian plantation, older women at the theatre command the respect of their younger counterparts, and these younger women are expected to run errands on their behalf. In Haiti, Mer, for example is left to ‘play madivinèz’ (a Haitian word meaning ‘lesbian’) with Tipingee because ‘plenty of the Ginen felt life was too brief to fret about that.’<sup>81</sup> So long as Tipingee was doing her duty by her husband, most people swallowed their bile and left them be’. (13) Meritet has no same-sex encounters in *The Salt Roads*, but, as part of a community of prostitutes, she is encouraged to accrue a sense of self outside of her sexual behaviour. Mer, Jeanne and Meritet are not pressured into feelings of shame for embracing their sexualities. Hopkinson creates a matrifocal community wherein her protagonists are able to express sexuality freely, though they face oppression in the other elements of their lives.

In *The Salt Roads*, Hopkinson presents Ezili as a Caribbean goddess, but because her consciousness floats around the African diaspora with ease, she is able to bring together a global matrifocal community; one that binds black femmes across

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<sup>79</sup> Nalo Hopkinson, ‘Nalo Hopkinson’, in *The Queer Caribbean Speaks: Interviews with Writers, Artists and Activists*, ed. by Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell (New York City, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 161-165 (p. 164). Springer eBook.

<sup>80</sup> Dayan, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> Anon, ‘Madivineez’, *The Creole Lingo* [online] <<http://creolelingo.com/index.php/dictionary/81-noun/2876-madivineez>> [accessed October 12<sup>th</sup> 2015].

space and time through their African diaspora identity and their acts of resistance. By locating the local matrifocal community that births Ezili on a plantation in Haiti, the novel suggests that matrifocality is a strategy of survival and connectedness that is unique to the Americas as a result of the enslavement of African people. As a central figure, Mer uses her position to offer tenderness, acceptance and love to her community. However, by also representing a global matrifocal community, inclusive of femmes across the African diaspora, *The Salt Roads* positions the community and family structure as one with wider influence. By centring the global matrifocal community on African-derived Caribbean religion, and characterising Ezili as the mother figure around which the community develops, *The Salt Roads* engages with post-matrifocal anthropological perspectives that position African-derived Caribbean spiritual traditions as woman-centred practices that function as a site within which women are able to exhibit strength. The novel represents the women connected by Ezili as revolutionary through their capacity to endure and resist.

## Conclusion

As with all the novels my thesis interrogates, *The Salt Roads* fictionalises women who not only connect to each other, but resist subjugation through the structure of the matrifocal family or community. Hopkinson re-imagines and re-writes the lives of historical women by giving them the agency that historical narratives do not, and she is largely able to do this through their connection to the goddess Ezili. Hopkinson's braided community, between three women living in the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa, suggests an unbreakable connection between women of the African diaspora, and the novel's narrative style reinforces this connection. Ezili is a uniquely creolized goddess who has been influenced both by the African traditions of enslaved people in Haiti and the French Catholicism of their enslavers. Thus, Ezili's characterisation emphasises the mix of influences that are attributed to the identities of Caribbean societies, and those across the African diaspora.

Hopkinson represents matrifocality on both a local and global level. The most notable local community is portrayed on the Haitian plantation, and in this setting, matrifocality functions as a support network for enslaved people. In her role as a mother figure, Mer offers counsel, healing and love to her quasi-kin. Matrifocality

functions as a creative strategy for survival. Through her narrative structure, by hopping back and forth between the narratives of Mer, Jeanne, Meritet and Ezili, Hopkinson creates global connections between her human protagonists and the deity, and these form the basis of her global matrifocal community. Ezili, in her multiple incarnations, influences a number of historical women who are fighting for their rights to express their personhood freely. Thus, unlike the local community, matrifocality on a global stage is represented as an entirely revolutionary structure that supports women in their acts of resistance. The representation of the novel's matrifocal community rejects patriarchy and Eurocentrism, and resonates with post-matrifocal perspectives because it aligns the community structure with the practice of African-inspired Caribbean religions, and positioning a female deity as central within the novel. By binding multiple women across space and time in a braid with Ezili, and through the recurring images of salt and water, *The Salt Roads* suggests that matrifocality can be a liberatory and connective tool for women across the African diaspora, and offers them a space within which to live freely and honestly, all under the watchful protection of their god-mother Ezili.

## Conclusion

After leaving Jamaica, the protagonist of Erna Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* says of the mat she creates, 'the mat was not finished. There was still a string hanging and it would continue to do so to infinity unless someone decided to stop the journey'.<sup>1</sup> She recognises that the work she and Cousin Nothing do to map their family tree is a continual process. As the family expands, so too can the mat, so long as someone is willing to put in the work to make continue its expansion.

I posit that the study of the representation of matrifocality in Caribbean literature is like the mat in that it can continue to evolve and expand. My thesis acts as the starting point, the 'seed' mat, from which analyses can continue to grow and develop.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, I cannot argue that my thesis is a complete analysis of how matrifocality is represented in contemporary literature from the Caribbean. However, my readings of five novels published in the twenty-first century offer new insight into literary representations of matrifocality by Caribbean writers, and demonstrate the importance of an interdisciplinary conversation when considering matrifocality in a Caribbean context. The analysis of novels by Jacob Ross, Marlon James, Erna Brodber, Marie-Elena John and Nalo Hopkinson offers texture to existing debates about matrifocality, most of which exist within social science scholarship. What my thesis demonstrates is that matrifocality is a key feature of contemporary Anglophone Caribbean fiction, and each novel I have analysed offers a unique contribution to existing debates about the place, function, origin and merit of matrifocality in the Caribbean.

The representations of matrifocality I have analysed in my thesis are diverse, and I have paid a significant amount of attention to the genre and style of each novel because I believe this contributes to each text's engagement with matrifocality. Brodber's *Nothing's Mat* and Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* have particularly interesting styles, and their innovative use of form offers a direct engagement with Caribbean matrifocality. Brodber's novel pointedly rejects Eurocentric definitions of non-nuclear Caribbean families as 'fractured', arguing instead that for a fractal approach to genealogy that is mirrored by the structure of the text. In *The Salt*

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<sup>1</sup> Erna Brodber, *Nothing's Mat* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2014), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

*Roads*, the fluid movement between the novel's protagonists who live in different spaces and times encourages the reader to view the women in the novel as a community. The consciousness of Ezili interjects the narrative, putting her at the centre of this global and matrifocal community of resistant women.

Each novel engages with sociological, historical, and anthropological debates about matrifocality, and mapping each text on to a specific anthropological perspective allowed me to explore the ways in which fiction both resonates with and moves beyond scholarly research on this concept. For example, I argue that *Pynter Bender* shares concerns with Eurocentric perspectives on matrifocality because of the novel's employment of the 'missing man' trope. However, the novel is ultimately critical of gender dynamics in the Caribbean, and although Jacob Ross engages with the notion that missing and marginal men are the cause of Caribbean matrifocality, he is not dismissive of the family structure. Rather, he uses the novel to celebrate the achievements and resourcefulness of the women who are integral to matrifocal families and communities. In *Unburnable*, Marie-Elena John's narrator is highly aware of the long history of scholarship on matrifocality in the Caribbean. John summarises existing arguments about the prevalence of the family structure in the region and ultimately concludes, '[d]escendants of slaves, of course, had a natural aversion to slavery.'<sup>3</sup> She moves beyond established debates about matrifocality in African Caribbean communities by aligning matrifocality with marronage. In doing so, John positions matrifocality as an act of resistance and liberation for African Caribbean women.

Each novelist considered in the thesis makes their own particular connections between matrifocality, slavery, and African cultural traditions. All, I suggest, attribute matrifocality in the region to a combination of the influence of African cultures, wherein mothers were central, and the particular environment of slavery that discouraged nuclear families. Matrifocal communities and/or families are presented in these novels as both a strategy of survival and a network of care and connection. Within these networks, women are represented as central figures, portrayed with influence, as commanding respect, and having the capability to lead and organise their families or communities. For example, in *Night Women*, Marlon James positions matrifocality as a uniquely Caribbean structure, with clear influences from traditional

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<sup>3</sup> Marie Elena John, *Unburnable* (New York City, New York: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 72.

African cultures. Indeed, Homer brings to the plantation many African traditions that inform the creation of the Night Women, but it is the particular environment of the plantation, and that particular desire for freedom, that is the driving force behind the matrifocal community. The community's function as an emotional support network, I argue, comes second to their plots of rebellion and resistance. Like James, Brodber also engages with the debate about the origins of matrifocality, and the narrative of *Nothing's Mat* suggests that the prevalence of the family structure within African Caribbean communities is as a result of slavery and its legacies. However, for Brodber, matrifocality is not positioned only as a tool to organise acts of resistance. It also functions as a creative and beautiful survival strategy. The novel's protagonist explains to her son, '[in] the absence of family, we loved anyone we could find and were grateful for the love that anybody gave to us,' thus highlighting the fractal patterns of expansive loving that occurred as a result of African displacement.<sup>4</sup> Hopkinson also engages with the notion of diaspora in *The Salt Roads*, and roots matrifocality firmly within the practices of African-derived spiritual traditions. By making Ezili, a Haitian-born goddess, central to the novel's global community, Hopkinson positions matrifocality as a Caribbean cultural phenomenon with inextricable ties to pre-colonial African traditions.

As well as strong representations of matrifocality, there are a number of other themes and tropes that are prevalent in my five key novels. The idea that fiction can act as a neo-archive is explored in *The Salt Roads*, *Night Women*, and *Nothing's Mat* in particular demonstrate this. In the case of *Night Women*, the novel acts as a creative archive that offers an imaginative narrative for the lives of enslaved women in the face of a lack of historical documentation. James draws on limited existing research to create a representation of plantation matrifocality that exists as a tool in the organisation of a rebellion. *Nothing's Mat* is particularly interesting because Brodber, as a social scientist herself, is highly aware of the limitations of official documentation, and her novel advocates for the imagination as a way to fill the gaps. Like James, Brodber's narrator also encounters a lack of historical research when attempting to uncover the truth about Everard Turnbury's family members who arrived in Jamaica on a slave ship. Brodber's protagonist finds it necessary to make several leaps to create a complete narrative because the same lack of official

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<sup>4</sup> Brodber, p. 103.

documentation found within the study of history also effects genealogy projects in the Caribbean. Hopkinson also draws on historical records in *The Salt Roads*, and through Ezili is able to offer an alternative to the male-centric narratives that exist in history. For example, Jeanne Duval is immortalised through the poetry of her lover Charles Baudelaire. However, through fiction, Hopkinson renames Jeanne Lemer, and creates a neo-archive for her that exists outside of her relationship to a male poet. Lemer is newly immortalised through her connection to the matrifocal community that centres on the floating consciousness of Ezili.

As I discussed in my introduction, there has been a notable tradition of scholarship regarding the representation of mothers and mother-daughter relationships in Caribbean literature. It has not been my intention to focus on the representation of this relationship in twenty-first century literature, though I have dedicated a considerable amount of time to the representation of mother figures. Rather, I have focused on how the five novels featured in my thesis demonstrate the particular dynamics of families and communities that appears as a result of matrifocality. I defined twenty-first century anthropological research as post-matrifocal, suggesting that contemporary scholarship is moving beyond matrifocality. Regardless, matrifocality remains a pervasive trope for twenty-first century Caribbean writers because it allows them to think through complex gender identities and relations in the region. I have found that fictive representations of matrifocality create a space within which female characters thrive. Matrifocality acts as a trope through which writers imagine women as having autonomy and power, even within patriarchal environments like the plantation, or colonial society. In *Unburnable*, matrifocality not only offers Lilian a site for healing, but serves as a structure that empowers the women of the maroon community, who are simultaneously represented as leaders, warriors and caregivers. Similarly, it the enslaved women of *Night Women* who are entrusted to organise and lead a nation-wide rebellion. There is a rejection of and resistance against Eurocentric patriarchal norms that presents itself in all five of my chosen novels. As such, matrifocality is not presented as an anomaly or a problem, but a viable alternative model for Caribbean families and communities.



Barbara Bush argues that fertility and motherhood were central in many traditional African cultures.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins agrees that ‘the concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the philosophies of people of African descent’,<sup>6</sup> but warns against its glorification, as this often leads to the perpetuation of such stereotypes as ‘matriarchs’ and ‘mammies’.<sup>7</sup> The five novels I analyse avoid relying on such harmful tropes as these by focusing, not only on the characterisation of those central mother figures so integral to the definition of matrifocality, but also on the networks that are created as a result of women in their roles as mothers within Caribbean families and communities. Through their representation of matrifocality in the fictional space, writers are able offer three-dimensional representations of mothers that move beyond stereotypes. For example, though Ross’ novel focuses on Caribbean masculinity, it strongly advocates for the central role of women in the construction of a healthy masculinity during the era of independence. And though the Bender women are central to Pynter’s socialisation, Ross does not diminish their characterisation by employing stereotypes such as that of the golden-hearted mother or stern matriarch, but represents them with complexity and nuance. Given the history of sociological research on matrifocality, which began as a condemnation of the family structure — or lack thereof, as early Eurocentric researchers suggested — fiction offers a springboard on which to take imaginative leaps which help to extend debates about the Caribbean family, and resist problematizing matrifocality in the region.

My thesis develops the conversation about the Caribbean family within Caribbean literary studies. It marks the movement away from mother-daughter dyad and towards a consideration of wider family dynamics. The focus on matrifocality has given me the opportunity to think beyond the family and consider the centrality of women within communities, both local and global. Each of the novels I analyse has a unique portrayal of matrifocality, but each highlights its validity within the Caribbean, and offers a positive representation of the structure. Within these texts, matrifocality acts as a tool with which to organise families, communities, rebellions and

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Bush, ‘African Caribbean Slave Mothers and Children: Trauma of Dislocation and Enslavement Across the Atlantic World’, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 56.1-2 (2010), 69-94 (p. 84).

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York City, New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

spirituality. Equally, matrifocality is represented as having the power to connect and liberate people in and of the African Caribbean diaspora.

The Caribbean family has long been a point of discussion in both Caribbean literary discourse and scholarly research. By considering how sociological academic debates can be enhanced through a consideration of literature, and vice versa, my thesis has brought literary studies into the evolving debates on African Caribbean matrifocality. Marlon James says of history, 'a lot of the people who are covered in fiction, you aren't going to find in history books. Or you aren't going to find in academic papers'.<sup>8</sup> There are alternative perspectives that are missed within existing scholarship that can be imagined and represented in fiction. Fiction allows us to take imaginative leaps that can be a useful contribution to academic discourses across a number of disciplines. Fiction allows us to look both backwards and forwards; to imagine what might happen whilst considering what has come before. My thesis demonstrates that broader, interdisciplinary conversations are beneficial when engaging with a cultural phenomenon like matrifocality, and that Caribbean literary discourse can be enhanced and nuanced by drawing on academic frameworks.

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<sup>8</sup> Kaitlyn Greenidge, 'Violently Wrought', *Guernica* [online] <<https://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/violently-wrought/>> [accessed 28 April 2015].

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