

FERTILE MATTERS IN CARIBBEAN HISTORY: CONTEMPORARY FICTIONAL
REVISIONS OF THE SEXUAL AND TEXTUAL LIVES OF WOMEN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE FIRST DAY OF APRIL 2014

TO THE ROGER THAYER STONE CENTER FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

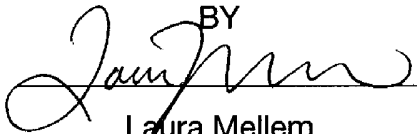
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

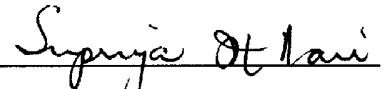
MASTER OF ARTS

BY

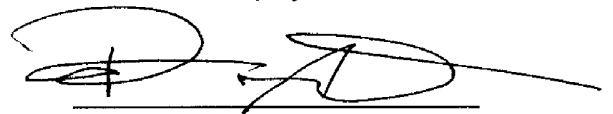


Laura Mellem

APPROVED BY:



Dr. Supriya Nair, Ph.D.



Dr. Rosanne Adderley, Ph.D.



Dr. Marilyn Miller, Ph.D.

Acknowledgements

I am ever indebted to many people who assisted in this, the completion of my Master's thesis. To my dedicated committee, comprised of Dr. Supriya Nair, Dr. Rosanne Adderley, and Dr. Marilyn Miller, I owe a great deal of gratitude for the unwavering support in researching, writing, and editing the pages that follow. Their guidance in my time at Tulane has greatly shaped my abilities and interests as a scholar and I am forever grateful to them. I offer my thanks, as well, to the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies and the director of graduate studies, Dr. Jimmy Huck, for the opportunity to complete my Master's degree at Tulane and to pursue this research project. I am especially grateful for the Foreign Language Area Studies fellowship which allowed me to study Haitian Creole and to travel to Haiti in 2013, offering me a deeper connection to and context for the project that follows. To my peers in the Master's program at the Stone Center, including Baird Campbell, Molly Hansen, and Elliott Powell, who gave up precious hours of their own thesis semester to review my work, I am very thankful. Finally, to my partner Jason, I offer my heartfelt gratitude for the unyielding support and encouragement, and especially, for the initial suggestion to pursue my graduate studies at the Stone Center.

Table of Contents

Prologue - Writing Back to Silence	1
Chapter 1 - The (Nation) State of the Family: Remembering the Links Between Collective Rape and the Cult of Virginity in Edwidge Danticat's <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i>	14
Remembering the History of Collective Rape	18
Linking <i>Testing</i> and Collective Rape	26
Chapter 2 - (Pre)Occupations of <i>La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña</i> : Contesting Reproductive Choice, Respectability, and Race in Rosario Ferré's <i>The House on the Lagoon</i>	37
Reproductive Choice, Sexual Autonomy, and Population Control	40
Rape, Respectability, and the De-Africanization of the Colony	47
(Anti)Miscegenation, Whitening, and the Gendered Ideologies of <i>La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña</i>	57
Chapter 3 - (Sup)Plantation Narratives: Reading Andrea Levy's <i>The Long Song</i> as a Textual and Sexual Revision of <i>The History of Mary Prince</i>	64
(Neo)Slave Narratives and the Voice of the Enslaved Woman	65
The "Woman Card:" Domesticizing the Enslaved Mother	70
Mary Prince's Sexual Controversy and A Revision of Her Sexual Liaisons	76
Epilogue - The Textbooks of History	88
Works Cited	95

Transnation

Prologue - Writing Back to Silence

There are many possible interpretations of what it means to create dangerously, and Albert Camus, like the poet Osip Mandelstam, suggests that it is creating as a revolt against silence.
 -Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously*

And that is what literature gives you: the reverse side of history.
 -Rosario Ferré, "Sin Pelos en la Lengua"

Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out. Not just the wails of anguish and victimhood that we are used to, although that is very much part of the story, but the chatter and clatter of people building their lives, families and communities, ducking, diving and conducting the business of life in appallingly difficult circumstances. Now THERE is a story.
 -Andrea Levy, "The Writing of *The Long Song*"

The Paradox of Silence and Speech: Sexuality in Historical Narratives of the Caribbean

In the wake of the 1991 coup d'état that ousted democratically elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide leading up to the U.S.-run intervention in 1994 that removed the military junta led by Raoul Cédras, an estimated 1,680 rapes were committed in Haiti by military officials as a form of sexual terrorism (Rey 79). Seeking to intimidate and silence those involved in the women's movement,

which became newly active during the democratization process of the 1980s, the military regime resorted to “sex-specific abuses,” including rape (Charles 135-36). Even beyond the punishment of women active in the defense of women’s rights, rape became a general political tool of sexual terrorism targeted at the families of remaining Aristide supporters (Rey 77). International attention became particularly focused on sexual violence against women in Haiti after Human Rights Watch and the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees published a report in 1994 on the drastic increase in the number of politically motivated rapes reported (Rey 73-74).

As attention was increasingly paid to the campaign of rape, international media framed the situation as one that was particularly dire given the rarity of rape in Haiti until this point (Rey 79). A series of news reports suggested that rape was not common, whether politically motivated or not, before the Cédras junta. In 1994, for example, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* wrote that before 1993, Haitian women “lived nearly free from fear of sexual assault” (qtd in Rey 79). Other news sources recognized more critically that a rise in reporting did not necessarily indicate a rise in incidence, suggesting that rape may have been prevalent, although largely unreported, even before the junta’s rule (Reitman 2). Yet these sources maintained that the current rise in reports pointed to the recent inclusion of rape as a central tool of the regime’s campaign of political repression. In a 1994 *Washington Post* article, the director of the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees, Anne Fuller, reported that before the regime, rape “didn’t seem to be a major aspect of...repression, but what we’re

seeing now is an increase in what women say are politically motivated assaults” (Reitman 2). The international media’s framing of the Cédras rape campaign generally agreed, then, that rape was either completely uncommon in Haitian culture before the regime’s takeover in 1991, as the *Dallas Morning News* reporter states, or as Fuller maintains, more specifically, as a tool of political repression, rape was uncommon before the regime.

As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, this is certainly not the case. Multiple eras in Haitian history witnessed the large-scale rapes of women by agents of the respective ruling class as a central tool to engender social and political control: the rape of enslaved women served as a mode to reinforce the masters’ power across the lines of race, class and gender during plantation slavery; a wave of retaliatory rapes of white women by previously enslaved men after the Haitian Revolution attempted to attack white women as a proxy for white men and to avenge the sexual violence undergone by enslaved women during slavery; the rapes of Haitian women by U.S. Marines and by Caco nationalist rebels alike were characteristic of the era of U.S. occupation in Haiti; and sexual violence against women enacted by members of the infamous civilian militia, the *Tonton Macoutes*, served as a primary element of social control during the Duvalier dictatorships. The rape campaign during the Cédras rule, then, was only the most recent manifestation of a long history of state-sanctioned sexual violence in Haiti. The assertions made by journalists in response to the sexual violence of the Cédras regime--that rape was, until the present, a rare occurrence--served to silence these multilayered histories of women’s sexual violation.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process” (Trouillot 27). Outlining the stages of the production of history, Trouillot suggests that these silences are made in various times and manners, including in “the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*), the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)” (Trouillot 26). As I expand upon in Chapter 1, the sexual violation of Haitian women has certainly been silenced in both the making of sources and the making of archives. However, the above example of the public forgetting of the long history of rape in Haiti by international media falls into Trouillot’s third category of silence-making in the *narratives* of history. Recent investigations focused on gender and sexuality in the Caribbean have grappled with similar questions of addressing the silences, particularly surrounding the sexual lives of women and queer people, that remain in (and are reproduced daily in the telling of) dominant historical narratives of the Caribbean region. In her book *Citizenship from Below* (2012), Mimi Sheller suggests:

Beneath the official histories of post-emancipation political struggles--peopled with valiant laborers and hardy peasants, wicked colonial elites and imperious foreign powers, military mobilizations and noble popular resistance--lies an equally relevant domain of sexual and spiritual struggles, gendered and queer meanings, and a deeper undertow of erotic politics...that have been silenced in Caribbean history and in our conceptualization of the making of modern freedom. (Sheller 8)

Sheller’s book, along with other recent publications on Caribbean sexuality studies, including Faith Smith’s compilation *Sex and the Citizen* (2011), Donette

Francis' *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* (2010), M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), and Kamala Kempadoo's *Sexing the Caribbean* (2004), are interested in the excavation, within historical, literary, and legal texts, of subaltern histories (and present realities) of sexuality and citizenship in the region. As such, sexuality studies in the Caribbean have been invested in addressing the multilayered silencing of histories of sex, sexuality, and sexual violation in the both the archives themselves and the stories that narrate dominant accounts of history.

Yet, there is more than just silencing at play in the example of the international reporters' denial of the history of rape in Haiti. For even as the reporters silenced the history of women's sexual violation, they did so in their present effort to spotlight women's then current sexual vulnerability within the nation. There was, then, paradoxically, a silencing of Haitian women's sexual history in the very act of speaking (or writing) about the centrality of their experiences of sexual violation in the present political situation. In the course of my research, I found a recurring incidence of historical moments in the Caribbean region when, paradoxically, there existed the simultaneous discursive centering and silencing of women's sexuality in various stages of the process of history-making, as outlined by Trouillot. The chapters that follow move between Caribbean locales and backwards in time from Haiti during the Duvalier dictatorships (1957-1986), to Puerto Rico during a century of U.S. occupation (1898-1980s), and finally to Jamaica and Antigua in the years leading up to and following emancipation (1807-1898). In each of these places during each of

these moments there were, on the one hand, historical silencings of the sexual experiences of women--especially women of color--while on the other, certain preoccupations with women's sexuality as it served to symbolize the respective futures of the nation, colonial occupation, and plantation society.

Chapter 1 grapples with the ways in which the sexual violences inflicted on Haitian women by agents of the Duvalier regimes were silenced, at the level of source-making and archival assembly, and later through American journalists' narrative production, even while an obsession with virginity and the control of women's sexuality was articulated as a cultural value in public discourse, depicting women's chastity as a symbol of the respectability of the nation. Chapter 2 is set against a growing U.S. interest in population control and eugenics at the beginning of the twentieth century that convened upon Puerto Rican women's bodies in an effort to curb their supposed hyper-fertility while Puerto Rican nationalists simultaneously appealed to the fertility of Puerto Rican women who would serve as the reproducers of a nation on the brink of independence. Amidst the symbolic centering of their sexualized bodies in public debates about the future of the island, actual accounts of Puerto Rican women's experiences of and struggles with sexuality, reproduction, and sexual autonomy remain outside of the dominant historical narratives, marking a silencing in the construction of both national and colonial narratives of history. Finally, Chapter 3 is premised on the historical moment of the eve of emancipation during which abolitionists and pro-slavery supporters debated the future of the institution of slavery largely in gendered and sexualized terms.

Appealing to an England enmeshed in Victorian ideals, abolitionists proclaimed the horrors of slavery endured by female slaves, in particular, who were whipped during pregnancy and separated from their children, while pro-slavery supporters denied the severities of abolitionist claims and highlighted the “immorality” and “licentiousness” of black women in an effort to discredit abolitionist claims to their femininity. In the face of the centrality of enslaved women’s sexuality to the debate over emancipation, evidence of their own experiences of sexuality--coerced, for pleasure, and for economic gain--remained silenced in the main archival source that offered the perspective of the enslaved--slave narratives.

My project is interested, as Jenny Sharpe articulates, in both what the dominant historical narrative “does [and] does not say” (Sharpe 146) about the sexual lives of women of color in the Caribbean region in each particular historical and geographic context. Sexuality scholars of the Caribbean region have used a variety of methodological approaches to uncover subaltern sexual histories in the face of the silences that remain in the historical record. Sharpe proposes the comparative reading of multiple archival accounts of the same sexualized event to reveal their overlappings and disjunctures (Sharpe 146-47). Sheller focuses on interpreting “embodied eroticism” across archival documents, oral histories, and photography (Sheller 9-10). Alexander critically examines the deployment of sexuality, gender, and transnational tourism in postcolonial law (M. Alexander 4-9). Kempadoo, indicting post-independence efforts to eschew colonial representations of hyper-sexuality, explores the

diversity of Caribbean sexualities through the contemporary lens of transactional sex and tourism (Kempadoo 1-4). The respective works of Smith and Francis fall most closely in line with my own methodology in their analyses of the ways in which writers in the Caribbean region and its diasporas have attempted to address the historical silences surrounding sex, sexuality, and sexual citizenship through fiction. As Edwidge Danticat's epigraph at the beginning of this section asserts, to create dangerously is to write in the face of silence (Danticat, *Create* 11). In this thesis, I explore how the works of three contemporary women writers "write back" to the silences in the dominant historical narratives--made at various stages of Trouillot's notion of the production of history and in varying ways--surrounding the sexual lives of women of color in the Caribbean and how, in turn, each offers an alternative narrative of women's history.

Literary Revisions of the Silences of History

Alongside the backdrop of the respective articulations and silencings of women's sexuality in each of the three periods and locations covered in this study, I examine a contemporary fictional account of women's lives that I argue each serves to offer a feminist revision of the dominant historical narrative. Chapter 1 focuses on Edwidge Danticat's novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), a realist antiromance set in Haiti and the United States during the final years of the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc) in the 1980s. In Chapter 2, I analyze Rosario Ferré's novel, *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), an example of the genre of Latin American feminist historical fiction that follows the history of a Puerto Rican family on the island beginning with the transition from Spanish to

U.S. occupation to the textual present (1898-1980s). Chapter 3 situates Andrea Levy's novel, *The Long Song* (2010), a neo-slave narrative set in Jamaica in the years leading up to and following emancipation (1807-1898), alongside an original slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), that recounts Prince's experiences as an enslaved woman in Bermuda and Antigua in the same era. Enlisting different literary genres, representing regions that are culturally and linguistically distinct, and narrating histories that are centuries apart, these novels certainly share as many differences as commonalities. Yet these differences, when read next to each other, further reveal a transnational interest among contemporary women writers, in the Caribbean and its diasporas, to contest dominant representations and silences of women's sexuality in Caribbean history and to use fiction to offer an alternative version that spotlights the sexual lives of women.

The difference in genre, moreover, suggests the multifaceted approaches contemporary fiction writers utilize in order to write back to dominant narratives, for each respective genre used by Danticat, Ferré, and Levy is itself grounded in the project of historical revision. In addition to Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, other contemporary works categorized as Caribbean antiromances include, among others, Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* (1998), Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* (2002), Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus* (2000), and Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001). The Caribbean antiromance genre is a response to imperial travel and romance writing of the colonial era that, as Francis asserts, "categorically disavowed the horrors of slavery, specifically sexual violence,

choosing instead to represent love stories centered around the benign project of civilizing Africans and other natives” (Francis, *Fictions* 5). Writing against the original romance, then, antiromance novels of the Caribbean focus on the failure of the romance and that which it silenced, revealing of histories of rape and rethinking citizenship in the nation by spotlighting the vulnerability of female sexuality in the past and present (Francis, *Fictions* 5-6). The antiromance genre offers a realist depiction of an unidealized past even while it “leaves open ended the possibilities of charting alternative futures” (Francis, *Fictions* 8). Following Francis’ and other critics’ work on Danticat’s use of antiromance, in Chapter 1 I analyze the ways in which *Breath, Eyes, Memory* remembers the forgotten history of centuries of collective rape in Haiti and in doing so reveals the relationship, in the textual present under Baby Doc’s regime, between the policing of sexuality within the family and the sexualized operations of social and political control enacted by the state.

Like Danticat, Rosario Ferré examines similar themes of women’s sexuality in national discourse and the history (and present reality) of racialized sexual violence in *The House on the Lagoon*, but she does so using distinct literary techniques. Categorized as “Latin American feminist historical fiction,” Ferré’s novel is an example of recently published feminist and postcolonial literature that has built upon the genre of “new historical fiction” to focus not only on the recovery of postcolonial national histories, but also of those marginal histories within the postcolonial nation, specifically those of women and black and indigenous communities (Weldt-Basson 35). Latin American feminist

historical fiction, then, is engaged in a double revision: first, of the dominant colonial narrative which leaves silent the complexities of the history of the colony and postcolonial nation, and second, of works of new historical fiction which leave silent the history of women and people of color in their nationally-focused narrative revisions. In addition to Ferré's novel *The House on the Lagoon*, other examples of Latin American feminist historical fiction include Ángela Hernández's *Charamicos* (2003) and Mayra Santos-Febres' *Nuestra Señora de la Noche* (2006). In these works, while the postmodern textual devices remain similar to those used in new historical fiction--such as meta-narrative and intertextuality--the emphasis in these novels shifts to represent the multiple and intersecting historical erasures of the experiences of women and people of color and the possibilities of their recovery (Weldt-Basson 35).

Drawing attention to the constructedness of history and the elements it leaves out, *The House on the Lagoon* is presented as a dialogue between Isabel, the primary narrator who is writing a novel of her family history, and her husband Quintín, who at various moments in the text interjects his voice into Isabel's manuscript to dispute her portrayal of historical events. In Chapter 2, with particular attention to the postmodern literary devices of Latin American feminist historical fiction, I argue that Ferré's novel offers a critical glimpse at the operations of race, gender, and sexuality in the competing ideologies of Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony and as an independent nation at the beginning of the twentieth century. In doing so, it provides an otherwise absent narrative of the ways in which women, both white and Afro-Puerto Rican, navigated sexual

autonomy in this ideologically charged context.

Using meta-narrative in *The Long Song*, Andrea Levy draws attention to the narrator's writing of the text in a manner similar to Ferré, but once again enlisting a distinct literary genre. The neo-slave narrative, of which Levy's novel is an example, is a particular literary form in which contemporary authors adopt the narrative voice of an enslaved or previously enslaved individual, relating his or her experiences of slavery (Rushdy 3). Emerging in the 1960s, the neo-slave narrative afforded black authors a device to reclaim one of the first literary forms used by African Americans, the slave narrative (Rushdy 7). For African-American women writers, moreover, creating neo-slave narratives from enslaved women's perspectives offered a new space to concentrate on and re-imagine women's experiences during slavery that had been doubly ignored by the silence regarding their experience in the archive and the silence reproduced by the male-focused neo-slave narrative (Beaulieu 2). Levy's novel follows other neo-slave narratives written by women including Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1992), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986). The neo-slave narrative, as I argue in Chapter 3, allows Levy to write back to an original slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince*, in order to draw attention to the multiple mediations and editorializing of the narrative and to recite what, because of the gendered politics of abolitionism, Mary Prince was asked to conceal: the sexual experiences--coerced, for pleasure, and for economic gain--of enslaved women.

Although enlisting distinct genres and literary devices, representing diverse geographies with unique cultural and linguistic traditions, and narrating historical moments that are at times centuries apart, these three novels share the common undertaking of revising the representations of the sexual lives of women of color in the dominant narratives of Caribbean history. Writing back to the paradoxical silences and discursive centerings of women's sexuality in three distinct times and places, the novels reveal a larger transnational project of contemporary women writers of the Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora concerned with the ways in which the narratives of the past inform the present. In the pages that follow, I explore the successes and failures of the attempts, made by Danticat, Ferré, and Levy, to "revolt against silence" (Danticat, *Create* 11) by writing "the reverse side of history" (Ferré, "Sin Pelos" 163) from the perspectives of "the voices that were left out" (Levy, "The Writing" 5).

Nation

Chapter 1 - The (Nation) State of the Family: Remembering the Links Between Collective Rape and the Cult of Virginity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

In the twenty years since its publication, Edwidge Danticat's first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, has attained a unique status in its revealing depiction of state-sanctioned sexual violence against women in Haiti. Donette A. Francis credits Danticat's novel as one of the first among a new generation of Caribbean women's narratives which foreground the systematized violence experienced by women and girls in the region, thus breaking a longstanding silence on these issues (Francis, "Uncovered" 73). A coming-of-age novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of Sophie Caco who is born in Haiti and raised by her aunt until the age of twelve, when she migrates to New York to live with her mother. Central to the novel are the multiple sexual traumas experienced by three generations of women in Sophie's family, including her mother's brutal rape by a *Tonton Macoute* (a member of the notorious civilian militia during the Duvalier dictatorships lasting from 1957-1986)¹ and the passed-down practice of

¹ François Duvalier, known commonly as "Papa Doc," ruled Haiti from 1957 to 1971, when he named his son, Jean Claude Duvalier, his successor in the presidency. Jean Claude, called "Baby Doc," ruled until 1986, when he fled into exile.

mothers regularly “testing” their daughters’ virginity by using a finger to check the intactness of the hymen. As I argue in this chapter, these, along with other allusions to experiences of sexual trauma in the novel, allow Danticat to revise a dominant historical narrative, in both national and international scripts, of Haitian women’s experiences within the family and the nation. Drawing attention to the long histories of the rape of Haitian women as a tool for social and political control, Danticat compels readers to question the normative codes of gender and sexuality that are policed within the family and to recognize how this very policing serves to protect the patriarchal interests of the nation. In doing so, she unmasks the ways in which citizenship is a gendered and heterosexualized construct that thwarts Haitian women’s sexual autonomy.

The primary rape depicted in the novel occurs in the 1960s during Papa Doc’s rule. We learn from the various tellings of the story that as a young girl, around the age of sixteen, Sophie’s mother Martine was attacked by a masked man on the road home from school, dragged into a nearby cane field and was raped, beaten, and left there on the ground (Danticat, *Breath* 61, 139). She becomes pregnant as a result of the rape and begins to have nightmares, effectively reliving the rape every night for the rest of her life. After Sophie, the child of that rape, is born, Martine moves to the United States in an effort to get away from the constant memory of her attack which helps to a certain extent, although the nightmares continue. When Sophie is twelve, she moves to New York to be with her mother. It seems that being near her daughter, who is

another reminder of the rape, intensifies Martine's anxiety and trauma, a trauma that eventually leads to her suicide.

Martine's rape is the driving force of the narrative, as many critics have examined, most commonly through the lens of psychoanalysis and trauma theory.² Additionally, a series of essays have been published on Danticat's politicization of the history of rape by *Tonton Macoutes* under the Duvalier regimes, discussing the novel's depiction of women's position as citizens within the nation.³ In her book *The Tears of Hispaniola*, Lucía Suárez argues that the novel is an act of remembering the real history of sexual violence during the Duvalier dictatorships that has otherwise been silenced (Suárez 68-69).

Politically motivated rapes, explains Carolle Charles in her historical analysis of rape during the Duvalier decades, became a prominent tactic under Papa Doc's rule in an effort to silence women who were outspoken opponents of his regime. The now well-known rape of anti-Duvalier activist and feminist journalist Yvonne Hakime Rimpel occurred in 1958, a year after she lent her support to Duvalier's opponent, Louis Déjoie, in the presidential election (Charles 140; Rey 84). She was attacked by *Tonton Macoutes* and taken from her home, raped repeatedly in an unknown place, and was found naked on a street near her home the next morning (Kang 45-46). Although Rimpel's case has recently gained attention, many women who have had similar experiences remain silent and silenced.

² For example, see Jennifer C. Rossi's "Let the Words Bring Wings to Our Feet," Newtona Johnson's "Challenging Internal Colonialism," Semia Harbawi's "Against All Odds," and J. Brooks Bouson's *Embodied Shame*.

³ The pluralized French form of Tonton Macoute would be "Tontons Macoutes," while the Creole form would be "Tonton Makout yo." Danticat maintains the use of "Tonton Macoutes," most likely and Anglicized version of the plural form. As such, I follow her usage.

Suárez suggests, then, that Danticat's storytelling offers a "memorial space of acknowledgement" for the real victims of rape whose experiences have until now been denied (Suárez 70). In her book *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, Francis further interrogates rape under the Duvalier regime, arguing that Martine's state-sanctioned rape reveals the ways in which citizenship is gendered and sexualized. The specific nature of sexual violence against women as a tool of political repression made clear the ways in which women occupied a distinctly sexed category of citizen whose bodies could be punished in particular ways, even while this distinction was denied by the state that "obscure[d] violations against women by dismissing their testimonies as nonsensical or inconsequential to the political life of Haitian society" (Francis, *Fictions* 81). For Francis, then, there is a double denial of "sexual citizenship" present in the Duvalier rape campaign: the sexualization of political repression for women as a group which sanctions rape as a political tool, and the denial, at the level of the state, of the occurrence of rape in the first place.

Suárez's and Francis' historical readings of Danticat's novel are focused on politically motivated rapes under Duvalier, like Rimpel's, which certainly remain the more recognized occurrences of sexual violence during the era. Yet, Martine is no such political dissident. She is a young peasant girl who is raped on her way home from school by a masked man. Most critics, and the character Sophie herself, read Martine's rapist as a *Tonton Macoute*. But Sophie states, "My father *might* have been a Macoute" (Danticat, *Breath* 139. My emphasis). The ambiguity here suggests a larger context of state-sanctioned rape in Haiti,

one in which *state-sanctioned* means not only rape that is executed by agents of the state, but also rape that remains unaddressed, unpunished, and even unrecognized by the state. In this vein, Simone A. James Alexander argues more broadly that Danticat's novel, in its depiction of both rape and the familial obsession with virginity, reveals the ways in which women are marked as "second class citizens" within the nation (S. Alexander 373). Combining the arguments of Suárez, Francis, and S. Alexander, it is clear that Danticat's depiction of rape in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* gives voice to a silenced history of rape under the Duvalier regimes by agents of the state, while also giving voice to a wider history of unpunished rape in the region, ultimately revealing women's sexual vulnerability due to their marginality as sexed citizens of the nation.

Remembering the History of Collective Rape

From this perspective, and following Clare Counihan's recent article on the novel, I argue that the text serves as an act of remembering a much longer history of the sexual violation of Haitian women from the moment of colonization to the moment of publication, during which multiple campaigns of sexual violence occurred, constituting what Jennifer L Green calls instances of "collective rape" (97). Collective rape has been developed as a sociological concept in response to mass rape campaigns around the world in the last 30 years, particularly within the context of the civil war in Rwanda in 1994 during which an estimated 250,000 people were raped, leading to the first ever declaration of wartime rape as a crime against humanity (Green 97-98). Since the Rwanda case, war criminals have been tried on charges of rape in

Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone as well (Green 98), and a truth commission in Haiti was formed to investigate the crimes committed during Raoul Cédras' rule (1991-1994), paying particular attention to the regime's use of sexual violence (Suárez 68). Defined as "a pattern of sexual violence perpetrated on civilians by agents of a state, political group, and/or politicized ethnic group," collective rape provides a framework to analyze large-scale sexual violence during a specific historical moment (Green 101). Although used mainly in contemporary contexts, I argue that the concept of collective rape has particular salience in Haitian history (and Caribbean history more broadly) where sexual violence on the plantations served as a gendered and racialized tool of social control that established the masters' power.

Although Martine's rape and the Caco women's experiences of being tested and *testing* their daughters are certainly the main instances of sexual trauma in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, there are other hints, snippets, memories, and historical references that point to many more occasions of the sexual violation of women through centuries. That Martine's rape occurs in a cane field, for example, evokes the gendered and sexualized violence inflicted on enslaved women, in particular, during plantation slavery. The rape of enslaved women by their masters was certainly a characteristic of the plantation system in Saint Domingue, among other slave societies, where, as David Geggus asserts, "female slaves were exceptionally vulnerable to rape, and sexual harassment by whites occasionally extended to the most vicious sadism" (Geggus 265). As scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, and Thomas A.

Foster have pointed out in the context of American slavery, enslaved men, too, were likely sexually assaulted and exploited by their masters, suggesting that the institution of slavery and the violence it required were sexualized across gender lines (Hartman, *Scenes* 80-81; Abdur-Rahman 226; Foster 446).

Martine's rape, although clearly representative of the specific sexual violence inflicted upon women during the Duvalier dictatorships, also symbolizes, through its cultural geography, the history of the sexual vulnerability of black women and men in Haiti during slavery. Indeed, after her mother's funeral, Sophie visits the site of Martine's rape in the cane field in an effort to free herself from the "ghosts" of the past (Danticat, *Breath* 211). In a rage, she cries and pulls at the cane until her grandmother finally asks her, "Ou libéré?," "are you free?" (233). Freedom in this scene is multilayered, representing a sense of freedom from her mother's, and her own, sexual trauma. Yet, the site of the cane field and the unanswered question of freedom make clear the historical setting of slavery and collective rape that informs the present trauma, suggesting that freedom, particularly from sexual violation, remains, from the era of slavery, unattainable for many Haitian women.

Beyond allusions to the history of rape and enslavement, Danticat offers other hints of instances of collective sexual violation experienced historically by Haitian women in the novel. As Francis notes, the family name Caco references the name of the peasant guerrillas who resisted the U.S. Marine presence in Haiti during the U.S. occupation from 1915 to 1934 (Francis, *Fictions* 79). In a lively conversation at a Haitian restaurant in the U.S., a young Sophie hears a

man shout, “Never the Americans in Haiti again...Remember what they did in the twenties. They treated our people like animals” (Danticat, *Breath* 54). Indeed the prevalence of rape of Haitian women by U.S. Marines during the American occupation of Haiti has been documented and is credited with having been a significant organizing factor in the early years of the Haitian’s women’s movement (Rey 83; Charles 146-147). Yet Francis argues that the invocation of the Caco name allows Danticat to expose the position of Haitian women in the midst of the resistance to the occupation as sexually vulnerable to men on *both* sides, revealing the history of rape of Haitian women by both the U.S. Marines and the Caco rebels themselves (Francis, *Fictions* 79-80). Alongside the Caco name, Danticat pieces together these multiple histories of sexual violation by hinting at generations of sexual trauma undergone by women in Sophie’s family. We know that Martine has nightmares about her rape every night, but when Sophie returns to Haiti for the first time since she left as a child, she realizes that her grandmother, too, has nightmares. Sophie explains, “She mumbled in her sleep, like an old warrior in the midst of a battle. My mother used to make the same kinds of sounds. *Lagé mwin*. Leave me alone” (Danticat, *Breath* 109). The notion of a warrior in battle, here, suggests a longstanding fight against violation that Sophie’s grandmother has fought. Moreover, we might gather that Grandmè Ifé, who would have been a young woman during the U.S. occupation, too has experienced sexual violation, like her daughter, and has similarly relived the violation in her dreams. This emphasis on inherited historical trauma leads

Sophie to state, “There is always a place where nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms” (Danticat, *Breath* 234).

The sexual violation of generations of women in Haiti is indeed historically documented, particularly during moments of political upheaval. As already mentioned, the rape of enslaved women by their white owners, overseers, and even visitors was a tenet of the plantation system, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 3. In response to this sexual and gender violence of the plantation system, a wave of what might be called “retaliatory rapes” occurred after the Haitian Revolution in 1804 when Dessalines’ soldiers raped French women (and black women who had voluntarily entered relationships with white men) as a means of vengeance for the countless violations experienced by black women under slavery (Rey 82; James 88). The rapes of Haitian women by both nationalist guerrillas and U.S. Marines were reported during the American occupation of Haiti, as Danticat references. Rape also became a tool of political repression under both Duvalier regimes, together ranging from 1957 to 1986, during which the *Tonton Macoutes*--civilian militia members who acted as Duvalier’s henchmen--increasingly detained, tortured, raped, and executed women (as well as men) who were considered to be political dissidents (Charles 140). In the wake of the 1991 coup d’état that ousted democratically elected president Jean Bertrand Aristide leading up to the U.S.-run intervention in 1994 that removed the military junta led by Raoul Cédras, an estimated 1,680 rapes were committed in Haiti by military officials as a form of sexual terrorism (Rey 79). During multiple historical periods, then, ranging from the European

conquest and the subsequent implementation of plantation slavery to the Cédras junta from 1991 to 1994 (at which time Danticat was writing the novel), collective rape has been a critical reality for women in Haiti.⁴

Yet, these many instances of collective rape remain generally absent from dominant narratives of Haitian history. International attention became particularly focused on violence against women in Haiti after Human Rights Watch and the National Coalition for Haitian Refugees published a report in 1994 on the drastic increase in the number of politically motivated rapes under the Cédras regime (Rey 73-74). As more and more attention was paid to the rape campaign, Haitian and international media framed the situation as one that was particularly dire given the rarity of rape in Haiti until this point (Rey 79). In 1994, for example, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* wrote that before 1993, Haitian women “lived nearly free from fear of sexual assault” (qtd in Rey 79). Written and published during the junta’s rule, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, contests this narrative by revealing the complex history of the rape of Haitian women, across generations, and its absence from national and international memory.

While the reporter’s statement certainly ignores the existence of historical documentation on generations of rape in Haiti, such as the instances of collective rape I have discussed above, it also points to a certain marginality of this documentation within a larger dominant historical narrative. Historians

⁴ More recent accounts of the rape of Haitian men and women by UN peacekeeping forces and the post-earthquake wave of rapes in tent camps have also gained international attention (Sheller 1). These instances of collective rape, although clearly important, occurred after the publication of the novel, which is why they are not mentioned in this historical timeline.

themselves have discussed the difficulties of piecing together Haitian women's history, especially in the context of sexuality and violence, from the archival documents that remain. Bernard Moitt, for example, points to the dearth of archival evidence of enslaved women's experiences of sexual violation in the French Caribbean, especially compared with historical evidence on the topic in the British Caribbean colonies and in the U.S. South: "We have no personal testimonies such as that presented by Thomas Thistlewood, a young English overseer in Jamaica in the mid-eighteenth century, who sexually exploited a host of slave women and recorded his daily activities (partly in Latin) in a journal" (Moitt 99). While Moitt goes on to argue that accounts of children of mixed race, of the prostitution of enslaved women, and of slave drivers' sexual assault of enslaved women serve as evidence that sexual violation of enslaved women was commonplace in Saint Domingue slave society, the general lack of documentation on the issue allows sexual violation to remain in the shadows of the history of the lived experiences of the enslaved, especially in Haiti (Moitt 99-100). Even in the historiography of slave societies where more accounts on the sexual experiences of enslaved women is available, there remains the challenge of filling in the blanks in the quest to reproduce the experiences of the lives of the enslaved. In her experimental historical account of the rape of an enslaved woman in New England, Wendy Anne Warren writes of historians' predicaments, "We make our way among flawed sources, overreliant on written texts, hopelessly entangled in our own biases and beliefs, doing the best we can

with blurry evidence, sometimes forced to speculate despite our specialized knowledge” (Warren 1049).

Through fiction, Danticat (and other writers of subaltern history, including Ferré and Levy) can address these silences and the blurry evidence in the archives by filling in the blanks with fictional narrative. In her book *Framing Silence*, Myriam Chancy asserts, “the female characters brought to life in the works of women of the African diaspora function as representative figures of real women whose lives would, in the absence of these literary figurations, remain without shape or actualization in our imaginations and ideologies” (Chancy 109). In this sense, Danticat’s depiction of centuries of sexual violation of Haitian women serves to represent a history that remains otherwise untold in both popular media and dominant historiography. As Suárez asserts, “[t]he text does not allow the crime to be forgotten” (Suárez 74).

Although it asks us to remember these crimes to a certain extent in the novel, Danticat’s method of representing multiple instances of collective rape throughout Haitian history also demonstrates the purposeful forgetting and silencing of these crimes. Scenes of rape are depicted through what I have called “snippets” and “moments” in the text, suggesting not so much a clear memory but rather a shadowy haunting of a past partially forgotten and written over. These specters of sexual violence serve to simultaneously remember the forgotten past of a longer history of trauma while also revealing the ways in which this history--and its forgetting--informs the present trauma the female characters experience.

Linking *Testing* and Collective Rape

Even beyond giving voice to an otherwise silenced history of sexual violence against women, however, Danticat's portrayal of centuries of collective rape serves to remember and reveal the ways in which gender and sexuality norms in Haiti have been and continue to be in the service of the interest of the ruling class, on multiple levels. Portrayed particularly alongside the other main instance of sexual trauma in the novel, virgin testing, allusions to the long history of rape force us as readers to reconsider the cultural justifications behind *testing* and the more general control of women's sexuality. Ultimately, as I will argue, the pairing of rape and *testing* as experiences of sexual trauma allows the novel to reveal the connections and paradoxes between the policing of women's sexuality within family and the state-sanctioned sexual violation of women as a tool for social and political control. *Testing*, in its multiple and contradictory explanations, is simultaneously a practice that polices women's sexuality within a patriarchal system of marriage exchange, a nervous tic based in historical trauma that serves as a vigil against rape, and ultimately a practice in the home that upholds a national obsession with virginity. The novel makes clear, then, the irony of the existence of a virginity cult, upheld and enforced within the family, in a society with a long history of collective rape.

Martine first *tests* Sophie at the age of eighteen when she comes home late one night after a date with Joseph, her black American boyfriend. She finds her mother waiting up for her. She narrates, "'Where were you?' ...[My mother] took my hand with surprised [*sic*] gentleness, and led me upstairs to my

bedroom. There, she made me lie on my bed and she tested me” (Danticat, *Breath* 84). The *tests*, which become regular after this first night, are a source of trauma for Sophie who copes psychologically through the practice of doubling, “weaving elaborate tales to keep my mind off the finger” (Danticat, *Breath* 155). Sophie later realizes that all of the women in her family had been tested by their mothers and they, in turn, tested their daughters.

Testing is presented in the novel by the women who have both perpetrated and undergone the practice as a measure to ensure Haitian girls’ chastity and marriage prospects. When, as a new mother, Sophie returns to Haiti, she asks her grandmother why women perform the *tests*. Grandmè Ifé responds, “From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity” (Danticat, *Breath* 156). In this sense, virginity or purity constitutes women’s exchange value within a heteropatriarchal system that positions daughters as exchangeable property, and mothers as the ensurers of their value (Francis, *Fictions* 86). As such, their highly valued virginity must be policed within the family whose members stand to benefit from their marriage, which can be, as Rossi points out, especially economically beneficial to women in female-headed households such as Martine’s (Rossi 206). Imbued with moral and economic values, virginity becomes linked with family honor, the responsibility for which is overwhelmingly placed on mothers. Mothers within this heteropatriarchal system, then, must be responsible for their daughters’ virginity.

A common depiction of the relationship between the nation and the nuclear family, as Anne McClintock, among others, has shown, is within nationalist discourse that uses the symbol of the nuclear family to represent the nation as one that is unified, orderly, and patriarchal (McClintock 91). Fathers are configured as the leaders of the nation, as they are the leaders of the household, and mothers are configured as the nurturers and culture bearers of the nation, as they are within the home. Indeed, Mimi Sheller argues that post-independence national rhetoric in Haiti consistently configured women as symbolic representations of the nation as mothers, wives, and sisters, but never as citizens (Sheller 162). Women's roles within the nuclear family, then, are projected onto the larger national project of portraying the national family. If we read *testing* as a practice to maintain family honor, we must also see it as a nationalist practice to maintain the honor of the nation (S. Alexander 376). In this light, women as the symbolic mothers of the nation are asked to police the sexuality of their daughters in order to maintain the nation as one that is respectable. Tante Atie stresses the strictness of gender and sexuality norms within national culture, highlighting their imposition on her daily life: "[E]ach finger had a purpose...Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing...Her ten fingers had been named for her even before she was born" (Danticat, *Breath* 151). These are the roles women must play within the family in order to (re)produce a respectable heteropatriarchal nation.

Read alongside the specter of Martine's rape and the many other references to historical rapes, however, *testing* is revealed as more than just a practice of a "virginity cult" (Danticat, *Breath* 154) within a heteropatriarchy. As Clare Counihan effectively argues in her recent essay "Desiring Diaspora," the side-by-side portrayal of rape and *testing* in the novel reveals the constant threat of sexual violation as a contributing reason mothers seek to feel the untouched hymen of their daughters, to know that they have not been raped (Counihan 39-40). Once again, there are snippets in the text that hint at this truth. Tante Atie's above statement about the predefined uses of each of the ten fingers of a woman makes a clear reference to the practice of *testing* during which a mother inserts a finger into her daughter's vagina. The ten uses hold multiple meanings for the practice of *testing*. In the hegemonic explanation for *testing*--to guard young women's chastity in order to ensure their marriage prospects--the roles of "mothering" and "loving" can be read as a form of a tough love policing that will ensure the promise of their daughter's future. The roles of "nursing" and "healing," however, might suggest another layer of *testing* as an act of vigilance against the threat of sexual violence for which mothers must be prepared. In another example, after explaining *testing* as a practice to ensure marriage prospects, Grandmè Ifé says to Sophie, "You must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child's own good" (Danticat, *Breath* 157). While this excerpt could certainly be read as another glorification of family honor, there is also present a sense of vigilance against danger, perhaps a danger of which Sophie is not completely aware.

Even while the connection between the threat of rape and *testing* as a practice of vigilance against rape is suggested in the novel, as Counihan asserts, it is also recoded by dominant gendered and heterosexualized scripts as a practice made necessary by the promiscuity of Haitian girls (Counihan 40). The women in the Caco family simultaneously remember and forget that *testing* is bound up with rape, making it possible for the multilayered readings of the women's explanations of the practice. In the end, it is Martine who makes the most overt connection between the two instances of sexual trauma: "I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both everyday" (Danticat, *Breath* 170).

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Danticat's portrayal of *testing* is the reality that none of the women in the Caco family successfully "pass" the tests: as Martine makes clear in the excerpt above, her mother stopped *testing* her after she was raped; Sophie chooses to end the *tests* by using a pestle to tear her own hymen (Danticat, *Breath* 88); we are unsure how or why Tante Atie's *tests* end, but it is clear that she had an affair with Monsieur Augustin in Croix-des-Rosets (Danticat, *Breath* 14-15) and that later in life she is in a queer relationship with Louise.⁵ *Testing*, then, in its dominant coding as a practice to ensure family honor and marriage prospects, is revealed as ineffective because

⁵ While Danticat portrays a queer relationship between Tante Atie and Louise, it remains undeveloped in the novel. My silence throughout this thesis surrounding queer sexual histories reflects their relative absence from the three novels in this study. Examinations of literature of the Caribbean that seeks to narrate the silences of queer experience, such as Omise'eke Tinsley's *Thieving Sugar*, are certainly integral to a larger project of excavating subaltern sexualities in the history of the region.

it neither guarantees women's virginity nor does it seem to factor into their marriageability. In its hidden premise as a practice of vigilance against rape, *testing* is also clearly ineffective. It cannot prevent rape and it cannot offer any healing after a rape has occurred, aside from the promised end to the trauma of undergoing the *tests*.

Interestingly, what seems to be most effectively established in the practice of *testing* is, on the one hand, a preservation of the value of virginity within the home and the nation, and on the other, a reproduction of the sexual trauma to which it is a reaction. In both cases, Danticat reveals the irony of the practice of *testing* in a society that has experienced centuries of collective rape as a prominent tool for social control. The concept of collective rape, as explained in the previous section, denotes a historical moment when sexual violation is used as a tool of torture or war by a ruling group (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) against another (Green 101). As I have argued in the first section of this chapter, many moments of collective rape have occurred in Haitian history in which a ruling group--be it the planters on the plantations, the revolutionary soldiers, the Duvalier militia, or the Cédras junta--has enacted mass sexual violences against women, and in some cases, men. What is particularly important here is an understanding of the ways in which these ruling groups in these particular moments benefitted from the sexual violence they enacted. During plantation slavery, the rape of enslaved women served planters in multiple ways by both providing a mechanism to reproduce the labor force in a slave system in which the child of an enslaved woman became the slave of her

master and by disrupting the familial home of the enslaved which served to reinforce the master's power on the level of race, class, and gender. As Angela Davis asserts, "Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men" (Davis 23-24). Moreover, sexual violence and exploitation of enslaved men and women, argues Abdur-Rahman, highlighted "the vulnerability of all enslaved black persons to nearly every conceivable violation [which] produced a collective 'raped' subjectivity" (Abdur-Rahman 226).

During the Haitian Revolution, too, rape became a tool used by the previously enslaved rebels who enacted a kind of "retaliatory rape" campaign as a form of vengeance for the sexualized violence imposed on the plantations, as C.L.R. James explains:

From their masters [the previously enslaved] had known rape, torture, degradation, and at the slightest provocation, death. They returned in kind. For two centuries the higher civilisation had shown them that power was used for wreaking your will on those whom you controlled. Now that they held power they did as they had been taught...They, whose women had undergone countless violations, violated all the women who fell into their hands, often on the bodies of their still bleeding husbands, fathers, and brothers. (James 88)

Here, a collective campaign of violence of a particularly gendered and sexualized nature is used against white women in order to revenge more broadly the violences undergone by the enslaved during slavery. As such, this moment of collective rape serves the interests of the revolution.

Under Duvalier and later under the Cédras junta, state-sanctioned rape served to disrupt families and cause national terror. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat writes of the Duvalier tactics:

But the Macoutes, they did not hide. When they entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was her daughter's turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father. (Danticat, *Breath* 139)

In an article investigating rape culture in Haiti, Terry Rey argues that a similar tactic was used during Cédras' military junta from 1991 to 1994 and that "a discernible objective in the junta's rape strategy, beyond the humiliation and intimidation of women, was the disruption of the entire family structure and thereby the destruction of both civil society and popular support for democratic institutions and social change" (Rey 78). Seeking to intimidate and silence those involved in the Haitian Women's movement, which became newly active during the democratization process in the 1980s, the military regime resorted to "sex-specific abuses," including rape (Charles 135-36). Even beyond the punishment of women active in the defense of women's rights, rape became a general political tool to target remaining supporters of Aristide (Rey 77). Danticat depicts this disruption of the family by the wave of rape and terror directly after the coup d'état overtly in her short story "Children of the Sea," published in her collection *Krik? Krak!* (1996).⁶ The story portrays the plights of multiple families who face the terror of the *attachés* (civilian militia members) of the new military junta: a son is forced by soldiers who burst into the family's home to rape his mother, a young woman is gang raped by soldiers and becomes pregnant, and a father refuses to sleep at home out of fear that soldiers will force him to sleep with his daughter (Danticat, "Children" 3-29). Danticat reveals the centrality of

⁶ "Children of the Sea" was previously published with the title "From the Ocean Floor" in *Short Fiction by Women* in October 1993.

sexual violence (against men and women) to the regime's tactics of political repression, and more broadly in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the ways in which collective rape has served the interests of the planters, the soldiers of the revolution, the Duvalier state, and the Cédras junta in each respective historical moment.

In an essay examining sexual violence against women by the Argentine state during the Dirty War in the 1970s and 80s, Ximena Bunster argues that the combination of support for a gendered society in which women must remain chaste with the promotion of military tactics that specifically use sexual violence against women produces a situation in which the state-sanctioned rape "becomes most cruelly doubly disorienting" (Bunster 100). She asserts, moreover, that there is a "double brutalization involved in socializing women in particular modes and then using that very socialization as a method of torture" (Bunster 101). For Bunster, the combination of policing women's sexuality within the family and the use of sexual violence as a form of torture is particularly traumatic to the female victims of state violence. Read in a different light, however, it could be argued that the social obsession with women's chastity makes their sexual violation particularly forceful, not only for the survivors of rape themselves, but more broadly for the society as a whole. In a similar way, Danticat makes ironically clear the role that the practice of *testing* plays in preserving a cultural obsession with virginity within the larger context of histories of collective rape that operate through the violation of this very cultural

value. Terror and political control are specifically wrought through enacting sexual violence against women in a society that so values women's chastity.

Moreover, the paradox of the relationship between *testing* and the history of collective rape in Haiti is revealed by the fact, made clear by the women in the Caco family, that *testing*, itself, is manifested as another experience of sexual violence for Haitian women. For in responding to historical trauma, be it to ensure women's chastity for the prospects of marriage or to guard against the real threat of rape, *testing* inflicts its own trauma, enacted on daughters by their own mothers. Positioned alongside the specters of centuries of collective rape, then, *testing* in the novel is depicted as a practice with multilayered meanings, alternatively remembered and forgotten by the women who perform and undergo the *tests*. While it is coded as a practice to ensure the marriageability of daughters, it is revealed, in certain moments, to be a form of vigilance against the possibility of rape. Danticat's ironic depiction of the failures of *testing*--that it does not ensure marriage or prevent rape--highlights its primary function to reproduce a cultural obsession with virginity. That this obsession with women's chastity is precisely the social value targeted by campaigns of collective rape which enact social terror, moreover, makes clear the paradoxical relationship between the practice of *testing* and the history of state-sanctioned sexual violation. Danticat's novel is groundbreaking, then, not only in the ways in which it remembers a forgotten women's history, but also in its compelling revelation of the relationship between the policing of sexuality within the family and the operations of social and political control enacted by the state. Both the

family and the nation are indicted in the continued infliction of sexual violence on Haitian women who remain sexual non-citizens.

Occupation

Chapter 2 - (Pre)Occupations of *La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña*:
Contesting Reproductive Choice, Respectability, and Race in
Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*

While Edwidge Danticat's emphasis on the national remembering and forgetting of Haitian women's experiences is narrated primarily through a realist depiction of the present lives of the women in the Caco family, Rosario Ferré enlists a more postmodern narrative approach in her novel, *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), to bring attention to the marginalization of women's history in a Puerto Rico under occupation by Spain and the United States. Through meta-narrative, the direct calling attention to the text's constructedness, Ferré reveals a gendered dialogue that disputes what should be represented as history. Isabel, the primary narrator in the novel, has a particular fondness for the saying, "Nothing is true, nothing is false, everything is the color of the glass you're looking through" (Ferré, *The House* 106). Her husband, Quintín, disagrees, and feels strongly that rather there is always "a true and a false, a right and a wrong" (Ferré, *The House* 106). This tension between Isabel and Quintín surrounding truth and perception guides the novel's at times contradictory portrayals of four generations of the couple's families in Puerto Rico, from the

turn of the twentieth century to the textual present in the 1980s. Indeed, this textual dialogue between Isabel--whose voice narrates the majority of the novel in the form of a manuscript that attempts to recover the family's history--and Quintín--whose discovery of and reactions to his wife's manuscript are told by a third-person narrator in certain italicized chapters--is central to Ferré's project of examining Puerto Rican history, as many critics have pointed out. Ylce Irazarry, Irene Wirshing, Kelli Lyon Johnson, and Giada Biasetti, among others, have argued that the dialogue between Isabel and Quintín in *The House on the Lagoon* reveals the inadequacy of the official historical record of a colonized nation, exposing, as Irazarry asserts, "the history between the United States and the Hispanic Caribbean for the palimpsest it is: a text partially erased, written over, and manipulated" (Irazarry 199). This interrogation of what Johnson calls "traditional colonial history" (Johnson 252-53) through fiction is a tenet of the genre of "new historical fiction," particularly in its Latin American literary manifestations.

Helene Carol Weldt-Basson, however, highlights the ways in which recently published feminist and postcolonial literature has evolved the genre of new historical fiction even more to focus not only on the recovery of postcolonial national histories but also of those marginal histories within the postcolonial nation, specifically those of women and black and indigenous communities. While the textual devices remain similar, including meta-narrative and historical intertextuality, the emphasis in these novels shifts to represent multiple and intersecting historical erasures and the possibilities of their recovery (Weldt-

Basson 35). In this vein, more recent work on *The House on the Lagoon* has situated the novel within this emerging genre of Latin American feminist historical fiction, and has reinterpreted Isabel and Quintín's dialogue as one that is constituted by not only colonial, but also gender and racial politics.¹ For these critics, it is precisely the combination of the limits and possibilities of literature (Isabel's realm) and history (Quintín's discipline), fleshed out in the dialogue between the two narrators, that allows Ferré to attempt to recover the histories of those who have been marginalized within the historic record, in this case, Puerto Rican women, both white and Afro-Puerto Rican.

Following these critics' interest in the feminist historical critique portrayed in the novel, I focus my analysis on the ways in which Isabel's portrayals of the women in her and Quintín's families, particularly in the context of sexuality and sexual autonomy, contribute to a historical revision of the representation of women's lives in Puerto Rico during the transition from Spanish colonization to U.S. occupation. As Laura Briggs, Eileen Findlay, and Ileana Rodríguez-Silva, among others, have argued, Puerto Rican women have occupied a prominent symbolic space within a century of public discourse on the topic of the island's political and economic future. Moreover, the topic of race within Puerto Rican nationalist discourse and U.S. imperial discourse has convened upon the body and sexual choices of Puerto Rican women, often in conflicting ways. By portraying how Puerto Rican women's lives might actually have been lived within

¹ See Biasetti's "El Poder Subversivo de *La Casa de la Laguna* y *La Niña Blanca y los Pájaros sin Pies*," and Urraca's "He Said/She Said: Gendered Historical Discourses in Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*"

this historical context in *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré attempts to reveal the coalescence of competing national and racial ideologies in the sexual choices (and violations) of women on the island. Her depictions of women's sexual lives are at times very rich, offering an alternative glimpse into Puerto Rican history, but at other times the representations, particularly of Afro-Puerto Rican women, are problematically shallow, and serve to reproduce the silence about their lived experiences already present in the hegemonic historical narrative. Analyzing her portrayal of women's negotiations of reproductive control, respectability, and racial miscegenation, I argue that the text effectively unmask the particular ideological position imposed upon Puerto Rican women, within both colonial and national discourses, as the reproducers of a national family that will be always lighter and whiter than the previous generation. However, while some of her female characters succeed in articulating and enacting a female sexual autonomy within this gendered, racialized, and heterosexualized paradigm, others remain trapped, not only by circumstances of the plot but also by underdevelopment in the text, in the roles and experiences designated for them by dominant public discourse.

Reproductive Choice, Sexual Autonomy, and Population Control

Perhaps one of the most prominent themes portrayed in the lives of women in the novel is the struggle and tension surrounding sexual autonomy and reproductive control. For Isabel's maternal grandmother, Gabriela, control over one's fertility becomes the single most defining factor of a woman's autonomy, a distinct portrayal compared with Danticat's focus on the repression

of women's sexual autonomy within the family and the nation. After having one child each year for six years, Gabriela vows to remain abstinent in order to free herself from future pregnancies. Through abstinence Gabriela is relieved to be rid of the possibility of becoming pregnant, yet she remains frustrated to have to refrain from sex: "Abuela was a sensual woman and had enjoyed sex with her husband; abstention was torture. She resented the fact that a woman's fertility should condemn her to loneliness" (Ferré, *The House* 84). Ferré's depiction of Gabriela's experiences surrounding sex and fertility highlights the interlocking issues of sexual autonomy and reproductive control. Without access to reproductive technologies of birth control, Gabriela must choose between sexual desire and the desire to not have any more children. Moreover, Ferré, via Isabel's manuscript, hints at the patriarchal context of compulsory sex within the heterosexual marriage, which in many cases might not allow the choice of abstinence to be made in the first place: "It wasn't an easy victory; [Gabriela] had to fight for her bed as if it were a castle under siege" (Ferré, *The House* 83). Indeed, it is not until her husband begins regularly visiting two mistresses that Gabriela feels she has escaped the possibility of having another child.

Gabriela's experience of multiple back-to-back pregnancies pushes her to encourage her daughters to space out their pregnancies in order to retain personal autonomy:

She made them promise they would have one child every five years, and they would surreptitiously do everything to prevent consecutive pregnancies. 'An only child is portable,' Abuela said to them. 'The mother may carry it with her everywhere. But two babies are a powerful link in the iron chain with which men tie women down and make them their prisoners.' (Ferré, *The House* 85)

Here, Gabriela makes a historical connection between the strictures of women's freedom in their roles as mothers at the beginning of the twentieth century and the binds of racialized slavery in the Caribbean region. Controlling one's fertility, then, is specifically articulated through the language of female autonomy--that is for women to have as much freedom as possible--even within the confines of a patriarchal marriage. Isabel's portrayal of her maternal grandmother combines an assertion of female sexual desire, demand for women's control of their reproduction, and ultimately women's liberation within the patriarchal marriage.

In the same moment in the continental United States, Margaret Sanger, champion of the birth control movement and founder of the American Birth Control League which would eventually become The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, was making a similar argument for the development of birth control technologies in order to allow women more autonomy and, as Dorothy Roberts notes, "equal participation in society" (Roberts 58). Facing a postwar society in the 1920s that increasingly upheld the family, motherhood, and morality, however, Sanger's insistence on women's autonomy was met with animosity, even from feminist activists who at that moment "grounded their public activism in the moral superiority of motherhood" (Roberts 73). Sanger found instead, indeed quite successfully, that re-framing the need for birth control from one based in women's autonomy to one based in the control of the population growth of "unfit" groups in the nation would gain her the support she needed to continue her project to develop reproductive technologies. Aligning

herself with the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century, Sanger began to advocate for technologies that would inhibit the reproduction of unwanted populations, specifically targeting the fertility of black and poor white women (Roberts 77-78).

Sanger's shift in the justification for birth control technologies represents a growing national interest in the U.S. in the science and technologies of controlling populations, including both "negative eugenics," the control of fertility in order to inhibit reproduction of unwanted groups, and "positive eugenics," technological and societal approaches to encourage wanted groups to reproduce at a higher rate. As Laura Briggs argues, much of the eugenics discourse in the early decades of the century became more and more focused on the territories now in U.S. possession and their population size, racial makeup, and economic positions, including of course, Puerto Rico (Briggs, *Reproducing* 82-86). In 1926, the Porto Rico [sic] Health Review stated, "Industrially undeveloped and still backward agriculturally, Porto Rico has been, however, steadily increasing its population at an astounding rate" (qtd in Briggs, *Reproducing* 84). With rampant claims of the island's overpopulation, demographers and politicians alike argued that the best way to curb population growth was to restrict fertility. In 1933, (U.S. appointed) Governor John Beverley wrote: "I have always believed that some method of restricting the birth rate among the lower and more ignorant elements of the population is the only salvation for the island" (qtd in Briggs, *Reproducing* 86). This statement was written in a letter to Margaret Sanger.

Interestingly, Puerto Rico has in many ways played the role of “test tube” for U.S. policies and medical research in the 114 years it has occupied the politically ambivalent position first of U.S. colony and then “commonwealth,” especially in the terrain of fertility control for women. Various players from the United States, including doctors, social workers, public health experts, feminists, and eugenicists, were involved in decades of experimentation in the technologies for and justifications behind fertility control programs on the island. In the 1920s, U.S. doctor and researcher Clarence Gamble conducted research on the effectiveness and ease of use of spermicidal jellies, replacing the more effective device, the diaphragm, as the contraceptive method most available on the island (Briggs *Reproducing* 102-104). In reaction to the ineffectiveness of spermicidal jellies, Puerto Rican women demanded a more effective measure that was ultimately found in surgical sterilization (Briggs *Reproducing* 107). In 1937, the Puerto Rican legislature passed a law, backed by the federal government that legalized birth control and sterilization, for which poverty was listed as a legitimate reason to pursue the operation, and set up a Eugenics Board to review sterilization cases. By the 1970s, permanent sterilization, or *la operación*, became the most commonly used form of birth control with over one third of Puerto Rican women having undergone the procedure (Briggs *Reproducing* 107). The medical trials of the birth control pill, ethically questionable and dangerous as they were, were also carried out in Puerto Rico in 1954 and 1956 by U.S. scientists, doctors, feminists and Puerto Rican nurses (Briggs, “The Pill” 160).

Ferré's use of intertextuality in *The House on the Lagoon* makes multiple references to public health and hygiene programs being developed and funded in Puerto Rico, of which these fertility control programs were a part. For example, Abby, Isabel's paternal grandmother, had hoped to work for a U.S. health initiative that was "teaching people the values of vaccines and modern sanitary methods" (Ferré, *The House* 98-99). As she states in another chapter, these programs were aimed at painting the United States as a benefactor to the poor and diseased inhabitants of the island:

Puerto Rico was often in the news at the time; it was described by the press as an exotic, far-off possession, where there was a dire need for public works. The island had been a colony of Spain for four hundred years and, as William Randolph Hearst's newspapers often pointed out, was mired in poverty. This situation more than justified the United States taking over the island after the Spanish-American war....A roster of projects was to be undertaken by the federal government to better the lot of the inhabitants. (Ferré, *The House* 42)

This discursive link between poverty and the public works projects pursued by the federal government is integral in an analysis of the development of reproductive control measures in Puerto Rico. For it is decidedly not an interest in women's autonomy, so well articulated by Isabel's grandmother Gabriela, that motivated the birth control programs on the island, but rather the racialized concerns of overpopulation and hyper-sexuality.

Similar to Sanger's own ambivalent motivations in developing birth control methods, Ferré highlights the competing and contradictory concerns of female autonomy and population control whose respective supporters both turn to the development of fertility control strategies as a method to address their

concerns. In the face of these dominant colonial representations of Puerto Rican women as hyper-fertile and the cause of the island's poverty, Ferré attempts to examine the histories of individual women's struggles for sexual autonomy and reproductive control. Gabriela's insistence on birth control as a strategy to maintain autonomy in marriage shows the intimate negotiations women make in the context of reproduction, an emphasis that complicates the dominant representation of Puerto Rican women's lack of self control regarding their supposed hyper-sexuality and hyper-fertility.

Ferré further complicates a portrayal of women's sexuality through other characters whose sexual autonomy is denied yet demanded. Carmita, Gabriela's daughter (and Isabel's mother), for example, is emotionally devastated after having a late term abortion. Because of Gabriela's negative experience of back-to-back pregnancies, she convinces her daughter to abort her second pregnancy that occurs three years after Isabel's birth:

Carmita had gone along with the abortion. Then the unexpected had happened. Carmita suddenly felt guilty; something had been uprooted from her heart that she hadn't known was there...A deep sadness came over her...All of a sudden it was as if Carmita weren't there anymore. (Ferré, *The House* 86-87)

Here, Ferré complicates Gabriela's assertion that women should be free from raising multiple children by showing the emotional stress and pain Carmita experiences due to a coerced abortion. For although Gabriela argues that "every woman had the right to determine what took place in her own body" (Ferré, *The House* 86), it is clear that she coerces Carmita into making a reproductive decision that the latter cannot accept. Shifting the definition of

women's autonomy from one that relies on spaced out births (or no births at all), Ferré now defines women's autonomy as the ability to make reproductive choices, whether the choice is to avoid or abort a pregnancy or to have a baby. Moreover, her affirmation of women's choice to have children in this scene interrogates the dominant historical discourse that portrays Puerto Rican women who have children as irresponsible and at fault for the island's economic distress. In this sense, Ferré offers a fictional revision to the dominant narrative of women's reproductive experiences in Puerto Rico in the context of eugenics, birth control technologies, and theories of overpopulation. Rather, she shows women's individual struggles within the family to articulate and enact a female sexual autonomy regarding their reproductive choices.

Rape, Respectability, and the De-Africanization of the Colony

The success with which some of the women characters in Ferré's text are able to navigate social, cultural, and economic strictures in the context of sexuality and reproduction, however, is haunted by many instances of other female characters' inability to make sexual and reproductive choices, revealing the factors of race and class that contribute to women's lived experiences. The multiple rapes of black female characters in the novel serve to highlight a long history of the rape of black women in the region--much like Danticat's portrayal of collective rape--shedding particular light on the stereotypical depiction of the black woman as hyper-sexual that is often used by male assailants as a justification for their actions. As I will argue, in pairing the sexual violence Afro-Puerto Rican women have undergone with the white bourgeoisie's simultaneous

obsession with making Afro-Puerto Rican women respectable, Ferré further unmask the complexities and contradictions of post-emancipation efforts to “de-Africanize” the island both culturally and racially. Her revision stops short, however, when Isabel, the narrator, is unable to imagine or engage with the lived experiences of the black women she narrates.

There are multiple instances of rape in the novel in which Afro-Puerto Rican women are raped and become pregnant as a result. Petra, the Afro-Puerto Rican housekeeper of the Mendizabal home where Quintín grew up, has a great-granddaughter and a great-great-granddaughter who were both conceived as the result of their mothers’ rape and whose mothers both leave them with Petra at the house on the lagoon. Alwida, who is Petra’s granddaughter, arrives at the house on the lagoon one day with an infant Carmelina in her arms. Alwida is physically disabled and fears she cannot care for her child, who had recently fallen into a marsh and nearly drowned in the time it took Alwida to get to her. We learn that Alwida was raped by a black sailor near the waterfront in San Juan and discovered she was pregnant soon after. Petra feels for Alwida and agrees to take the baby, Carmelina, and to raise her. Some seventeen years later, Carmelina, who has served as a maid and nanny for Quintín and Isabel’s young son Manuel, is raped in the mangroves by Quintín himself. After fleeing the house to New York, Carmelina returns nine months later to ask Petra to care for her son, conceived in the rape.

Ferré’s portrayal of the women’s rapes gives voice to a silenced history of the unpunished rape of black women over centuries in the Caribbean region, in

a similar fashion discussed in the context of Danticat's novel in Chapter 1. Particularly salient here is Ferré's depiction of the assailants' and other observers' reactions to the rapes, highlighting the racialized discourse of black women's hyper-sexuality to explain their uncontrollable desire for black and mulatta women. Quintín, for example, attempts to explain the facts of the story of Carmelina in one of the chapters in which he is reading Isabel's manuscript. He writes, "What took place between us was something no one, not even God Almighty, could have prevented" (Ferré, *The House* 356). In another chapter, a response to Isabel's narration of the affairs Quintín's father had with black women in Lucumí beach, Quintín writes, "She could have been discreet about his foibles--his weakness for black women, for example" (Ferré, *The House* 248). This kind of emphasis on the fated inevitability or predisposed weakness of white men's sexual attention toward black women is commonplace in dominant historical discourse which paints black women as hyper-sexualized and seductive, to white men in particular.² This rhetoric shifts the blame of the rape from the perpetrator (the white man) to the survivor (the woman of color), whose sexuality is supposedly really at fault.

Interrogating formations of racialized sexuality, Eileen J. Suárez Findlay examines the post-emancipation society of Spanish Puerto Rico and the interconnectedness of race, gender, class, and respectability. Poor Afro-Puerto Rican women's supposed hyper-sexuality, she argues, served to constitute

² As noted above, however, Alwida's assailant is black, which perhaps suggests, on the one hand that the construction of black women as irresistible extends to black men's desires as well. On the other hand, this representation might also perpetuate the image of black men as violently hyper-sexual (Findlay 60).

white women's sexuality as one that was honorable, and vice-versa: "Only in relation to poorer, darker, disreputable 'others' could 'respectable' women assert their honor" (Findlay 26). Moreover, black women's "indecent" behavior and hyper-sexuality was constructed on the assumption that white men would take them as their lovers in order to let out their sexual energies without tainting white women's honor: "[Plebeian women's] supposed moral degeneracy supplied the necessary counterpoint to 'decent' women's respectability. And their sexual availability to elite men--sometimes coerced--allegedly ensured that white, wealthy women's honor could be properly guarded" (Findlay 33). On the one hand, this history reveals the ways in which black women's sexuality is constituted by white men's sexual desire, complicating Quintín's sense of the inevitability of his rape of Carmelina. On the other, it reveals the ways in which white women's social status is partially premised on the rape of black women. In depicting the rape of black women and the racialized justifications offered by the assailants and other observers, Ferré brings voice to a silenced history of both the sexual violation of Afro-Puerto Rican women and the victim-blaming rhetoric that accompanies it.

Further interrogating bourgeois anxieties about the "indecent" sexuality of Afro-Puerto Ricans, Ferré depicts a particularly historicized obsession with making rural whites and Afro-Puerto Ricans "respectable" citizens in the post-emancipation period. In the late decades of the nineteenth century an increased vigilance toward marriage as a symbol of respectability in Puerto Rico emerged (Findlay 59-60; Rodríguez-Silva 81-82). In an intertextual reference to Governor

Reily's term in the 1920s, Isabel writes in her manuscript:

[The governor] was a Mennonite and an authentic reformist, in favor of the Temperance Law, banning cockfights, and jailing all prostitutes. He found out most marriages on the island were common-law marriages, because the Catholic Church charged an absurdly high sum to perform the ceremony, so he ordered an army of Mennonite ministers to visit the hills. (Ferré, *The House* 123-24)

The Puerto Rican nation-building project of the bourgeoisie was premised on the need to promote sexual morality, especially among the rural poor populations (both white and black), with the ultimate goal of “de-Africanizing” Puerto Rican culture. Common-law marriage and concubinage were common practices, particularly in rural areas, and were associated with African cultural traits that should be shed in order to build a *mestizo* nation (Findlay 59-60; Rodríguez-Silva 81-82). This, as echoed decades later by Governor Reily, would rely on the promotion of church-sanctioned marriage rather than common-law marriage and concubinage:

If poor women could be elevated to marital *compañera* (companion or partner) rather than sexually degraded *hembra* (woman) of their man, they would achieve through moral suasion and example what the state in all its repressive power had failed to accomplish--the formation of a de-Africanized, controllable rural labor force. (Findlay 60)

The emphasis on the promotion of marriage both under Spanish and American colonization was portrayed by dominant historical discourse as a benevolent mission to “civilize” rural and black Puerto Ricans whose moral backwardness was construed as a drain to the society at large (Findlay 111). Moreover, compelling plebeians to marry and therefore become respectable citizens could culturally “lighten” a society that was already invested in its own physically racial

lightening, as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

Isabel depicts this preoccupation with marriage through Governor Reily's mission, but also in the Mendizabal home itself. Rebecca, Quintín's mother, discovers one day that Petra, their housekeeper, is not officially married to Brambon, her partner of many years and the father of her children. She is "horrified" at this discovery and decides to put on a wedding for them: "Rebecca made them dress up as bride and groom, got them a marriage license, and took them to see the judge. Petra and Brambon did everything she told them, as if it were all a game" (Ferré, *The House* 120). Isabel portrays Rebecca's attempts at benevolence with irony, because it is clear that Petra and Brambon are not interested in a marriage certificate, but decide to go along with it so as to humor Rebecca. In this sense, Ferré offers a glimpse of a critique of dominant discourse's obsession with respectability through revealing its performative nature, meaning that the marriage ceremony would perform a claim of respectability for Petra and Brambon, but also for Rebecca as the benevolent (white) benefactor. Nothing in Petra and Brambon's relationship would change from their official marriage, except that they would have enacted a race and class performance that has historically been instrumental in the de-Africanization of Puerto Rican culture. Moreover, the performance would also reproduce Rebecca's position of honorable mistress and benefactor who takes pity on those below her station and offers a hand to help raise them toward progress and modernity.

While Ferré is clearly invested in portraying the particularities of race

formations and racism in Puerto Rico, she does not allow her character Isabel to narrate Afro-Puerto Rican women's lives in the complex ways that she narrates those of the other white members of her and her husband's families. As we have seen, it is precisely through Isabel's narration and creative reconstruction of her family members' pasts that alternative histories to that of the dominant are posited, whether it is a history of the colonized nation or of the colonized woman. Indeed, her dialogue with Quintín consistently weaves together the dominant narrative with the marginalized narrative. She fails to do this, however, in Isabel's portrayal of the sexual, reproductive, and marital experiences of the Afro-Puerto Rican women in the family's history, leaving the portrayal of Afro-Puerto Rican characters flatly developed and as Antonio Olliz Boyd states, "cartoonlike" (Boyd 38). What remains, then, is a successful depiction of the complexities of race, gender, desire, and respectability, certainly, but one without a narrative vision of what real women's experiences might have been like in this context.

For example, Ferré's portrayal of Carmelina's and Alwida's rapes and the unwanted pregnancies they yield complicates our understandings of women's struggles for sexual autonomy. The sense of autonomy that is produced by Gabriela's birth control and Carmita's regretted abortion, which portray reproductive choice as the foundation of female autonomy, is necessarily muddled by Alwida and Carmelina's rape where choice is violently negated. But whereas Isabel depicts an alternative to Gabriela and Carmita's predicament, she fails to do the same for Alwida and Carmelina, who both effectively

disappear from the narrative after they deliver their children. The dominant representation of black women as victims of rape remains problematically unchallenged compared to the ways in which the white women's struggles for sexual autonomy directly indict the dominant discourse representing their sexualities. This is clearly where Ferré's project of uncovering women's histories fails in both portrayal and in method.

In the case of the rape of Carmelina, we hear only Quintín's story. Isabel makes no attempt to recover what Carmelina has experienced, and rather, shares with us her own feelings about the rape:

Strangely enough, it wasn't Quintín's betrayal which hurt me the most, but what I had done to myself. Soon after Quintín said he didn't want any more children, I went to my gynecologist and asked to be sterilized. Quintín signed the necessary documents and the following week I went into the hospital. The operation was simple; my tubes were tied and I was out in a day. (Ferré, *The House* 321)

Here Isabel explores her own reactions to learning of her husband's rape of Carmelina and the child who is a product of it. She is seemingly jealous of the woman who gave birth to her husband's baby when Isabel herself can no longer have children (at the wish of her husband). While Isabel's emotions are certainly indicative of yet another example of the lived sexual and reproductive experiences of women, that it is offered in the place of any attempt to narrate Carmelina's experience of rape is problematic. Without attempting to uncover what either Alwida or Carmelina may have experienced, felt, or been moved to do, Isabel, and ultimately Ferré, effectively re-inscribe the dominant narrative of the black woman both as the object of racialized rape and as a sexual threat to

the white family.

In the case of Petra and Brambon's marriage, too, Ferré seemingly fails at her own critique of dominant history by reproducing the stereotype she attempts to subvert in the first place. Following the marriage ceremony Rebecca puts on for them, Isabel narrates:

They thanked [Rebecca] for the wedding gifts, drank champagne, and ate a slice of wedding cake, but the next morning they secretly went back to the civil court and asked the judge to divorce them. They had been married a long time ago, in a voodoo ceremony in Guayama, and were afraid the legal marriage might put a hex on them. (Ferré, *The House* 120)

There is a certain ambiguity in this passage. On the one hand, it demonstrates Petra and Brambon's rejection of Rebecca's attempts to make their relationship respectable, revealing the performativity of the ceremony and interrogating the social institution of marriage itself. In this sense, Ferré critiques the racialized discourse of respectability and offers an alternative depiction of Petra and Brambon's resistance to white bourgeois values and, instead, their preference for African-derived cultural practices. Yet, Isabel's vague and stereotypical language surrounding their participation in "voodoo" and their fear of "hexes," on the other hand, serves to portray them more as superstitious rather than culturally defiant, reinscribing an unproblematized racial othering of the couple who remain as underdeveloped and racialized caricatures in the novel.

Perhaps in this scene, and those that discuss the rapes of Alwida and Carmelina, Ferré attempts to depict her character-narrator's inability to critically engage with the marginalized histories of Afro-Puerto Ricans, revealing Isabel's own racial privilege and racism. While this tactic would certainly add

depth to Ferré's portrayal of racial tensions on the island, it does little to expand upon the experiences, otherwise flatly developed and stereotypical, of the Afro-Puerto Rican characters present in the novel. Moreover, as I have argued, it is the specific method of Isabel's narration of the characters' lives and internal conflicts that allows Ferré to posit an alternative historical narrative of the experiences of women in Puerto Rican history. Without engaging in the lives of her Afro-Puerto Rican female characters, she only contributes to a further marginalization of their experiences, even in her own historical revision project.

The House on the Lagoon was Ferré's first text originally written in English, although she published a Spanish translation within a year of the publication of the English version, leading some critics to suggest that Ferré's shallow development of her black characters is related to the audience for whom she is writing. Lyn Di Iorio Sandín, for example, implies that writing for a North American English-speaking audience, Ferré enlists a simplified portrayal of racial and class dynamics on the island in her use of the upstairs/downstairs metaphor of the house itself and that, "unfortunately, characters who appear marginal, such as Petra, end up actually reinforcing the stability of the structure" (Sandín 48). The "disappointing" (Sandín 49) portrayals of black characters in the novel are bound up not only with Isabel's narrating voice, but also with the politics of literary publication in the transnational market. In writing for an audience in the United States, Ferré seems to abandon a deeper analysis of racial realities on the island present in her earlier work in Spanish (Sandín 33). While *The House on the Lagoon* does draw specific attention and critique to

societal realities that hinder Afro-Puerto Rican women's sexual autonomy in the form of racialized rape, discourses of women's respectability, and campaigns of cultural de-Africanization, the text fails at fully revising a dominant history by positing an alternate view of the lives of Afro-Puerto Rican women.

(Anti) Miscegenation, Whitening, and the Gendered Ideologies of *La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña*

Despite her relative neglect of recovering a complex history of Afro-Puerto Rican women in the novel, Ferré does depict and successfully critique the operations of race and sexuality in white bourgeois Puerto Rican society, particularly in the seemingly contradictory ideologies that simultaneously thwart and encourage racial mixing in its ranks. Throughout the text, there are many references to interracial relationships between characters that often result in the birth of a child of noticeably mixed racial heritage. The commonplace depiction of miscegenation fits into the post-emancipation ideology of national unity described as "*la gran familia puertorriqueña*," (the great Puerto Rican family), premised on centuries of racial mixing among the Taínos, Africans, and Spaniards who lived together on the island and have blended to become a more or less unified society.³ Ferré's text also shows, however, vehement policing of racial mixing in the white bourgeois class who struggle to maintain and prove their whiteness, especially under scrutiny by a United States under Jim Crow. With a critical eye, Ferré succeeds in revealing the gendered contingencies of

³ "La gran familia puertorriqueña" could also be translated as "the big Puerto Rican family," although in English texts, it tends to be referred to as "the great Puerto Rican family." As such, I use the more common latter translation.

these seemingly contradictory ideologies--one in favor of racial mixing and one opposed to it--in the centering of women's reproduction as the site of the promise of a whiter population for the next generation. Once again, however, her critique of these ideologies does not extend into a revised insight into the lives of black Puerto Rican women.

The rise of liberalism in the 1870s in Puerto Rico and new forms of anti-colonial sentiment on the island contributed to the production of a national ideology premised on the unity of the Puerto Rican population in the form of the metaphor of a "great family" (Quintero Rivera 24-25). The idea of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* noted briefly the violences of the history of slavery, but stressed the present unity of a people who had overcome that past and who were now intimately related to one another, both socially and biologically (Findlay 54-55). Similar to other Latin American formations of ideologies of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) the metaphor of *la gran familia* functioned, at times, to stress the racial harmony and homogeneity of the newly forming nation in order to unite the population in an anti-colonial struggle.⁴ Likewise, in other moments, the ideology of *la gran familia*, was clearly built upon a paternalistic hierarchy that placed white liberal elites as the benevolent leaders of the newly forming nation who could help to pull up the lower classes of black and mulatto people through the enforcement of morality, work ethic, and education (Quintero Rivera 24-25). In this sense, the ideology maintained a division between racial and class groups rather than emphasizing cultural and racial homogeneity. Arlene Torres

⁴ See, for example, José Vasconcelos' *La Raza Cósmica*.

explains these contradictions within the rhetoric of *la gran familia*, arguing that they are mobilized intermittently when politically useful: “While Puerto Ricans on the island have tended to focus on the blend in particular historical moments, in other contexts they have sought to establish and maintain boundaries between groups that are racially defined” (Torres 287).

Ferré depicts these tensions of the ideology of *la gran familia* in multiple ways in the text. The house on the lagoon itself serves as a representation of the possibilities and limits of *la gran familia* ideology. The novel chronicles the family’s lives in the three houses that have been built on the lagoon with characters living and working in, coming to, and going from the houses. As such, the house represents the nation as a whole in all of its racial and class manifestations, as Mary Ann Gosser Esquilín points out (Gosser Esquilín 56). The house is hierarchically divided with the white bourgeois Buenaventura and Rebecca Mendizabal occupying the paternal and maternal figures of *la gran familia* who benevolently help to “raise up” the lower caste members of the household. Rebecca’s insistence on a marriage ceremony for Petra and Brambon, discussed in the previous section, for example, portrays a “moralizing” campaign within the nation’s elite to make the lower class and browner populations “respectable” members of society. In this case, *la gran familia* is depicted as a family clearly divided but working together for the betterment of the nation.

In other moments of the text, however, Ferré portrays the ideology of *la gran familia* in its emphasis on racial mixing, rather than racial division. Many

characters in the novel are involved in interracial relationships and have children who are racially mixed. Doña Ermelinda, for example, is a “light-skinned mulatto” (Ferré, *The House* 218) who has a lifelong relationship with Don Bolívar, a white businessman in Ponce and with whom she has three daughters. Don Bolívar is married to Carmela, a white woman, but continues his affair with Doña Ermelinda for years. Their children, thus, are considered illegitimate, even though they receive significant financial support from their father and are widely known to be his (Ferré, *The House* 223). In this and other instances of interracial relationships, like that of Manuel and Coral, racial mixing is portrayed as commonplace in the novel. Ferré does suggest, however, that these relationships are always in some ways illicit and do not lead to marriage or the legitimacy of children born of the relationship.

Legitimacy, rather, is reserved only for children born in wedlock and is revealed to be particularly bound up with race. While interracial relationships, specifically between white men and women of color, are often depicted, there is no instance of marriage between a white man and a woman of color in the novel. In this way, Ferré reveals the very real anxieties about the maintenance of whiteness within elite Puerto Rican families that accompany a racial ideology otherwise emphasizing *mestizaje*. Quintín and Isabel’s son, Manuel, falls in love with Coral, a young woman who is the daughter of Isabel’s childhood friend. She appears white, but Quintín and Isabel know that her mother is mulatta. In a conversation that ends up being their last, Quintín explains to Manuel:

‘You see this blood, Manuel?...It doesn’t have a drop of Arab, Jewish, or black blood in it. Thousands of people have died for it to stay that way.

We fought the Moors and in 1492 we expelled them from Spain. When our ancestors came to this island, special books were set up to keep track of white marriages. They were called the Bloodline Books and were jealously guarded by the Church. Esmeralda's marriage to Ernesto Ustariz doesn't appear in any of them, because she's part black. *That's why Isabel shouldn't have taken you to Esmeralda's house when you were a child. And that's why you can't marry Coral.*' (Ferré, *The House* 346)

Here the maintenance of racial purity is the deciding factor of Manuel's ability to marry. This passage reveals the contradictory nature of the ideology of *mestizaje* within *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, which emphasizes racial mixing, on the one hand and the Bloodline Books, which strictly protect against racial mixing, on the other.

Perhaps Ferré's greatest achievement in the novel is her depiction of the gendered experiences of this contradiction. The Bloodline Books police official marriages, which are the only form of respectable coupling for white women. Yet, it is generally acceptable for white men to have mistresses, many of whom are women of color. Thus, while the Bloodline Books forbid Manuel to marry Coral, they have no interest in his extramarital engagements with her. If they had a child together, he or she would not be regarded as white and would not be in the Bloodline Books. However, that child would be lighter than Coral, which is where the ideology of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* fits back into the puzzle. For the ideology is premised on past racial mixing but toward the goal of whitening; as Rivera echoes, "*hay que mejorar la raza* [one must advance the race]" (Rivera 164).⁵ Non-white women are always already excluded from the Bloodline Books, but the ideology of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* compels

⁵ Translation original. "One must *improve* the race" might be a better translation here.

them to partner with white men, outside of marriage, in order to *mejorar la raza*, to have lighter children. In her complex depictions of the various legitimate and illegitimate pairings of characters in the novel, Ferré ultimately reveals that the Bloodline Books and the ideology of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* are not at odds with each other after all, but rather are two sides of the same coin: they both work to ensure the whitening of the nation and they both rely on women's reproduction in order to ensure the nation's future.

Ferré's accomplishments in the novel, then, include not only a creative project that re-imagines the lived experiences of women that have otherwise been largely ignored by dominant historical discourse, but also a careful unmasking of the operations of race, gender, and sexuality within the complex national ideology of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*. Although she at times fails to engage deeply with her Afro-Puerto Rican characters and thereby misses the opportunity to offer an alternate glimpse into their histories in the way that she so intimately portrays her white characters' lives, she does succeed in portraying a society that, under changing colonial occupations, negotiates race and class along the intersections of gender and sexuality. Through her use of meta-narrative in the dialogue between Isabel's fiction and Quintín's history, Ferré displays a sense of discord between what is recorded as truth within the historical record and what remains untold and forgotten. This form of historical fiction can be truly revolutionary, for as Isabel argues, "Our veiled passions, our ambivalent emotions, our unaccountable hates and preferences can be best understood through novels, and heard across the centuries" (Ferré, *The House*

312).

Plantation

Chapter 3 - (Sup)Plantation Narratives: Reading Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* as a Textual and Sexual Revision of *The History of Mary Prince*

Thus far in my analysis I have examined the ways in which contemporary women writers use fiction to reinvent portrayals of women's lives during periods in which their experiences remain largely silenced within dominant colonial or national narratives. This chapter, however, examines a contemporary novel, Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010), and its elaboration of a prominent historical text of the experiences of a slave woman in the West Indies, *The History of Mary Prince*, originally published in 1831. Although Levy "writes back" to a text that does relate the lived experiences of black women in the region (compared to the historical silences to which Danticat and Ferré respond), Levy's revision, too, grapples with silences. In depicting the sexual encounters of enslaved women--coerced, for pleasure, and for economic or legal gain--in Jamaica in the period between the abolition of the slave trade and full emancipation (1807-1838), I argue that Levy's novel especially responds to

the deliberate silencing of aspects of Mary Prince's sexual experiences as an enslaved woman in the original slave narrative. In doing so, Levy offers a complex portrayal of the ways in which slave women might have negotiated their particularly gendered position in plantation slavery while simultaneously making visible Mary Prince's own resistances and subversions hinted at or suppressed in her narrative.

(Neo)Slave Narratives and The Voice of the Enslaved Woman

Written in the form of a "neo-slave narrative," *The Long Song* belongs to a genre in which contemporary authors adopt the narrative voice of an enslaved or previously enslaved individual, relating his or her experiences of slavery (Rushdy 3). The American neo-slave narrative, argues Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, emerged in the late 1960s as a tool for black authors to reclaim the literary form "in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" (Rushdy 7). Focusing on the validation of black men in history and in the present, however, many of these works tended to reduce women's roles in histories of racial struggle (Beaulieu 5-6). For African American women authors, writing neo-slave narratives from enslaved women's perspectives offered a new space to concentrate on and re-imagine women's experiences during slavery that had been doubly ignored by archival historical documents and the male-focused neo-slave narrative (Beaulieu 2). The British neo-slave narrative genre (of which Levy's novel is an example) has aimed more specifically at bringing the history of slavery to the forefront of the British imaginary, a movement which has

gained momentum since the 2007 bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade (Muñoz-Valdivieso 43-44; Lima 136). Levy's work, then, must be situated in this transnational movement that takes up the form of the slave narrative in order to recenter the history of slavery, reclaim a black voice in the present, and in the case of women's neo-slave narratives, recover, through invention, the missing or marginalized histories of black women during slavery.

Narrated by a now elderly July and supposedly published by her editor son, Thomas Kinsman, in Jamaica in 1898, *The Long Song* chronicles July's life and experiences as a domestic slave on the Amity plantation in the years leading up to and directly following emancipation. Hers is a narrative voice filled with humor, irony, and slyness that serves to represent the complex relationships between all classes of characters on the island, including the hierarchies of the plantation slaves (based on work position and color), the overseers, planter families, merchants, and free people of color in town. We follow July from her birth on the plantation and her relocation as a child into the big house (upon the request of the owner's sister, Caroline Mortimer), to her sexual affairs with Nimrod, a free man of color, and later with the plantation's new overseer, Robert Goodwin. Through humor and satire, July narrates the violences, resistances, ironies, and romances that make up her experiences at Amity, refusing a one-dimensional portrayal of the enslaved as an abject victim. The comic is often used to depict ironic moments in which enslaved characters engage in a small resistance or trickery regarding a task or interaction with their owners. For example, in preparation for the Christmas feast hosted by the Howarths,

Caroline gives Godfrey, the headman, a long list of items to purchase in town but refuses to give him the amount of money he asks for, calling him a cheat. He then tells her, "It is not that things be expensive, it is just that you can not afford them," to which she responds with a blow to his head and an order to "be sure to lay the best linen cloth upon the table" (Levy, *The Long* 62-63). In revenge, Godfrey gives July a bed sheet to lay on the table in the place of the fine linen, and July "beg[ins] to smile, for she scent[s] Godfrey's mischief" (Levy, *The Long* 66). "Miss July, is that a bed sheet you be holding?," Godfrey asks, to which she responds, "No Mr Godfrey, it be fine tablecloth" (Levy, *The Long* 66). Here, Levy uses humor and irony to depict the sly ways in which the enslaved individuals at Amity work together to defy and resist their owners' orders. Although Kalenda Eaton warns of the dangers of satire that can sometimes reinscribe gendered and racialized stereotypes in neo-slave narratives (in this case, the stereotypes of trickery and deceit) (Eaton 9-10), I maintain that Levy's satire gives a more three-dimensional portrayal of enslaved subjectivity especially when read alongside the original slave narrative of Mary Prince.

Mary Prince's life, as reported in *The History of Mary Prince*, shares many similarities to that of the fictional July's, although narrated in quite a different tone. Dictated to Susan Strickland and edited and published by Thomas Pringle, the testimony of Mary Prince relates, in the first person, her birth into slavery in Bermuda (in the same period as July), her separation from her family at a young age, her relationships with other enslaved people under a series of owners, and her witnessing and experiencing of violence at the hand of whites,

both men and women. Unlike July, Prince moves between Bermuda, Turk's Island, Antigua, and eventually England where she is able to leave the household of her owners, the Woods, and live freely. Her published testimony is part of her larger legal battle to gain manumission from the Woods, in whose possession she would remain if she were to return to her free husband in Antigua, her considered home. Although Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Moira Ferguson, Jenny Sharpe, and Sara Salih, among others, have argued that Prince's testimony reveals her own sense of cunning and resistance in the face of her owners,¹ the tone of the narrative is certainly more somber than the comic tone of Levy's novel, mostly due, as I explain below, to its use as abolitionist propaganda.

In addition to plot similarities, Levy's novel makes multiple directly intertextual references to Prince's narrative. Many of the characters' names in *The Long Song*, for example, align with the figures in Prince's testimony: the editor in *The Long Song* is Thomas Kinsman, referencing the editor, Thomas Pringle, in *The History of Mary Prince*; the sexually violent overseer who rapes Kitty thus conceiving July is named Tam Dewar in Levy's novel who parallels Mr. D-----, Prince's owner who forces her to scrub his naked body; July's first owner is named John Howarth who might be likened to Prince's final owner, John Wood; and finally, July's renaming by her mistress who refers to her as Marguerite might also parallel Prince's alternating names--Molly, Mary, and the ironic Mary Princess of Wales--depending on who is referring to her. These seeming echoes in *The Long Song* of the historical figures in the testimony of

¹ See, for example, Pouchet Paquet 38-39; Ferguson, *Subject* 292-293; Sharpe 136-137; and Salih xxxi-xxxii.

Mary Prince makes clear Levy's intentional engagement and revision of the original slave narrative.

Both narrated by the voice of the previously enslaved women (although one real and one fictional), *The Long Song* and *The History of Mary Prince* relate the experiences of slavery from the perspective of one who has lived it. Yet both texts also reveal the ways in which the stories that are published have been carefully chosen, edited, and pieced together. In *The Long Song*, July's narration draws clear attention to the constructedness of the text in chapters in which she describes her writing process and her son's editorial suggestions, much like the dialogue, discussed in chapter two, between Isabel and Quintín through which they debate the truthfulness of their respective portrayals of their family history in Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*. Roughly halfway through Levy's novel, we read, for example, "Reader, my story is at an end. Close up this book and go about your day" (Levy, *The Long* 144), a passage followed by a dialogue between July and Thomas during which he implores her to tell the story of the birth of her son (himself), one that she has clearly left out. She obliges, although resentfully, and continues to narrate another 150 pages that span at least ten years of her life.

Meta-narrative in this fashion allows Levy simultaneously to suggest the multi-versioned and layered nature of history by offering multiple beginnings and endings to July's story and also to reveal the polyvocal reality of traditional slave narratives, like *The History of Mary Prince*, that were similarly negotiated and constructed by a group of editors and the slave speaker. In her exploration of

British West Indian slave narratives, Nicole N. Aljoe describes the construction of narrative voice as follows:

[R]ather than an expression of purity or singularity, voice in the dictated West Indian slave narrative is a collaborative construction of several voices working together to create the performance of a single, narrating first-person voice understood to be the “slave narrator.” (Aljoe 90)

Mediated through the transcription of Strickland and the edits of Pringle, what is presented as Mary Prince’s first-hand testimony in *The History of Mary Prince* is certainly a constructed voice. Pringle himself comments on the editorial process in his preface: “[The narrative] was written out fully, with all the narrator’s repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary’s exact expressions and peculiar phraseology” (Prince 1). Here Pringle insinuates that Prince’s Creole (her “peculiar phraseology”) would be too foreign for a British audience, but he also implies that the only changes made to her narrative were linguistic. Beyond the preface, however, Pringle continues to insert himself into Prince’s testimony, much like July’s accounts of Thomas’ editorial suggestions, elaborating on incidents or even adding comparative histories in footnotes. In both texts, then, we witness the polyvocality that attempts to construct a singular story of the life of the enslaved, revealing the politics of the publication of the slave narrative, in the case of Mary Prince, and the ironic references to these politics, in the case of Levy’s neo-slave narrative.

The “Woman Card:” Domesticizing the Enslaved Mother

Often transcribed, edited, and published by abolitionist groups, West Indian slave narratives served the express purpose of convincing a British

audience of the brutalities of slavery and enjoining them in the abolitionist cause (Sharpe 120; Aljoe 13; Salih xxvii). Unlike many slave narratives of the U.S. South which were penned by the slave narrators themselves--the most prominent being Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*--slave narratives of the British Caribbean were all "mediated" in some way, be it through transcription, editing, or translation, by a white intermediary (Aljoe 14). As such, portraying an idealized slave within a particular context of violence as one that would garner the widest network of support was of primary interest to British abolitionist publishers, like Pringle, who served as the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society at the time of the publication of *The History of Mary Prince*. Hilary Beckles argues that by the 1820s, abolitionists agreed that what he calls the "woman card"--that is, appealing to would-be supporters of abolition by decrying the particular sufferings female slaves faced, including violent beatings during pregnancy and the cruel separation of mother and child--was the best tactic with which to make their case to the British public (Beckles 18). At the beginning of the Victorian Period, these abolitionist politics were set against the background of a growing cult of domesticity in England in which women's roles were constituted by the feminine values of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity (Patton 29). Appealing to the defining roles of wife and mother, central to the definition of womanhood, then, abolitionists sought to impress upon a domestically obsessed British public the horrors of slavery that violently denied enslaved women these feminine virtues.

In order to bring this gendered vision of slavery to the forefront,

abolitionists publicized the stories of enslaved women and their hardships, one of the most famous of which, in the Caribbean context, was, of course, *The History of Mary Prince*. Pringle was interested in publishing Prince's story in order to gain support for abolition through an appeal to Beckles' notion of the "woman card" (Pouchet Paquet 32; Aljoe 76; Salih xxvii). As Moira Ferguson asserts of Prince's testimony of violence at the hands of her owners--separation from her parents and siblings, and the forced breakup of her marriage--the narrative "touched on almost every clause included in resolutions drawn up by the Ladies Anti-Slavery Associations around the country" (Ferguson, *Subject* 294). One of the most prominent themes in both *The History of Mary Prince* and Levy's *The Long Song* is the separation of mother and child under the system of enslavement, although as I will argue, Levy de-romanticizes Victorian values in her representations of the diametrically opposed reactions of enslaved mothers.

Like Prince, July is separated from her mother, Kitty, at a young age. In July's case, however, she is not sold or moved to another plantation, but rather is hand-chosen by Caroline Mortimer, the newly arrived sister of the owner of Amity, John Howarth, to be a domestic slave in the big house. It is telling that the division between domestic labor and field labor is so extreme that July does not see Kitty again for another eight years. Levy depicts the hardships endured by July due to her forced separation from her mother in the following passage:

Sitting in a corner of the kitchen, behind the stone of the fireplace under the shelf that held teetering dutch pots and jestas, curled up in as tight a ball as her knees and arms could make, you could always find July in those early days, snivelling and weeping. The longing for her mama became a pain within her as fierce as hunger. (Levy, *The Long* 53-54)

This passage portrays a scene similar to the moment in Prince's narrative when as a young girl she is auctioned to a new owner in front of her mother: "My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body" (Prince 7). Both narrators also demonstrate their mothers' pain upon losing their children: Kitty risks punishment each night sneaking up to look in the window of the big house "in anguish to glimpse her only child, July, there within" (Levy, *The Long* 39-40). Prince, too, alludes to the grief of her "poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children" (Prince 6).

Yet Levy complicates the neat formula, fit for a sentimental Victorian audience, of the trauma inflicted on poor enslaved mothers by the forced separation from their children in her portrayal of July's diametrically opposed reactions to the separate loss of her two children. July's second child, Emily, is her daughter with Robert Goodwin, a white man who becomes the new owner of Amity during the apprenticeship period. Although July lives as Goodwin's "real wife" (Levy, *The Long* 227) below his and Caroline's bedroom--which is reminiscent of the upstairs/downstairs structure similarly portrayed in Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*--Goodwin turns against her after full emancipation and leaves for England with Caroline and Emily, without July's knowledge. July experiences terror and shock upon discovering the loss of her child when she "suddenly dropped to sit upon the floor" (Levy, *The Long* 275). Her reaction is completely in line with Kitty's and Prince's mothers, but is set in stark contrast to her separation from her first child, Thomas, who is, of course, Thomas Kinsman,

the editor of the narrative.

Thomas was conceived during a night July spent with Nimrod, a former slave who purchased his freedom. I discuss her relationship with Nimrod more below, but it is important here to note July's racialized disdain for Nimrod, which is transferred onto her son, fathered by him. Thomas is born after Nimrod's death and is described by July, herself, as "the ugliest black-skinned child she had ever seen" (July 145). The narrator goes on to write the following:

July had no intention to suckle this misbegotten black pickaninny. But neither did she wish to leave him mewling upon a mound of trash, nor whimpering within the wood. She found no strength to smother him, nor will to hold him under the river's swell. After two days of hiding her son from all that was this world, July fixed upon the notion of leaving him to the minister-man. (Levy, *The Long* 145-46)

July does indeed leave him at the house of a preacher, James Kinsman, who raises the boy in England and sponsors his apprenticeship at a printing house. This passage reveals a radically different experience of motherhood as a slave compared with those that fit nicely into abolitionists' visions of the torment a loving mother feels upon losing her child. In response to the polyvocality of the slave narrative that tries adamantly to portray the enslaved woman always as an idealized victim, July's calculated and unsentimental rejection of her son reworks the genre into one that seeks to portray a sort of brutal truth of race and color politics, one which refuses to apologize for itself.

On the one hand, Levy demonstrates the internalized racism of the enslaved within the Jamaican system of racial hierarchy that values, if not pure whiteness, then lightness. July, who constantly reminds those she interacts with, "[M]e is a mulatto" (Levy, *The Long* 190), regards her son by a black man

as a “retrograde child” (Levy, *The Long* 189), one who would not, in the Puerto Rican terms discussed in chapter two, “mejorar la raza” (Rivera 164). Compared with July’s love for Emily, who as the child of a white man is a “quadroon,” Levy depicts July’s disdain for Thomas as an indication that she is indeed a product of her context in the racialized plantation system. On the other hand, however, Levy shows the economic impracticality of July’s ability to raise her son, who she hides for days while deciding what to do with him. Having a son by a free man of color who was killed under the charge, although false, of murdering the owner, John Howarth, certainly leaves few prospects of economic support for July in raising her child at Amity. In stark contrast to her relative economic ease in her relationship with Goodwin, who furnishes a room for July and Emily in the basement of the house, Levy makes clear that July faces significantly more challenges, both economic and social, in raising Thomas on the Amity plantation.

Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu argues that other contemporary Black women novelists have similarly used the form of the neo-slave narrative to “problematize both slavery and motherhood by juxtaposing the two” (Beaulieu 148).² Indeed, in considering various methods of killing her infant child, July follows a similar refusal of enslaved motherhood as that of Toni Morrison’s character Sethe in her novel, *Beloved*. In portraying July’s maternal refusal, Levy disrupts the abolitionists’ “woman card” which takes as its base the assumption that motherhood is always a virtue, one that is only negatively affected by the

² Beaulieu lists for example, Morrison’s *Beloved*, J. California Cooper’s *Family*, and Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (Beaulieu 149).

institution of slavery when mothers and children are separated. Rather, in her depiction of the multiple and contradictory separations of mothers and their children, Levy reveals that, far from ideal and virtuous, motherhood is always bound up with the political and sexual economy of racialized slavery. This revelation highlights, specifically, the ways in which, for an enslaved woman, having a child with a white man is the form of motherhood that most closely matches the ideal of domesticity so upheld by Victorian abolitionists. Levy reminds us, however, when Goodwin takes Emily, that even this comparably more stable situation remains volatile for the enslaved woman.

Mary Prince's *Sexual Controversy* and A Revision of Her *Sexual Liaisons*

The representation of sexual relationships between enslaved women and white men in the Caribbean region, explicit in Levy's novel and implicit in Prince's testimony, indeed is problematic to the foundational tenet of women's purity (and the implied fidelity of men) within the cult of domesticity (Ferguson, *Subject* 246). As such, the issue of sexual liaisons between masters and their slaves became a prominent subject in the debate on the future of slavery, in which abolitionists, attempting to appeal to a Victorian public, suppressed the sexual histories of enslaved women while pro-slavery groups eagerly pointed to the existences of such relationships in order to disqualify abolitionist claims (Beckles 17). Such a scenario played out in the case of Mary Prince in a series of articles and court hearings that followed the publication of her testimony.

In order to portray Prince as a Christianized and moral woman who suffered violence and trauma under slavery, and thus appeal to a "respectable"

audience in England, she must be represented as sexually moral, despite the irony of such an expectation. Conscious omissions or maskings of her sexual history are made by both Pringle and Prince, decidedly because there would be little foundation for pity and sympathy among a British audience for a sexually “immoral” woman no matter the other violences she faced or her lack of choice (Pouchet Paquet 32; Sharpe 139-140; 142). These omissions are then made the target of a pro-slavery campaign to debase the reliability of Prince’s testimony. In an account based on a letter from Wood to Pringle published in 1831 in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, a pro-slavery journal, James Macqueen explains that Prince was tried before a magistrate and punished for stealing another woman’s husband, which Sharpe interprets as an allusion to Prince’s concubinage with a white man, Captain Abbot (Sharpe 148-149).³ Ultimately, the truth of her entire testimony of her life as a slave is debated through the lens of her sexual histories with men, leading Sharpe to assert, “The evidence given by a female slave was thus treated as insignificant in what amounted to a legal battle between white men” (Sharpe 142). Moreover, the contradictory requirements placed upon Prince from both sides--on the one hand that she be a chaste victim and on the other a licentious prostitute--reveals what Saidiya Hartman calls “the discourse of seduction in slave law” which imagines the slave to simultaneously act as person and be acted upon as property (Hartman, “Seduction” 113).

³ In Macqueen’s account, the incident reported in *The History of Mary Prince* during which Prince is tried for stealing another woman’s pig masks the “pig” for what it really is, another woman’s husband. Prince later maintains the separation of the two incidents, although she admits to the veracity of both, in her court testimony (Sharpe 148).

What remains, then, from the side of abolitionists, is a deliberate silence regarding Prince's experiences of sexuality in *The History of Mary Prince* (with the exception of a few textual hints which I analyze below), and from pro-slavery publications, a list of sexual indiscretions intended to wholly demean her character as a reliable witness (Ferguson, *Subject* 296). This leads to the problematic conflation of all forms of sexual engagements--including rape, sex for pleasure, and sex for economic gain--into a generalized category of sexual immorality, erasing both slave women's experiences of rape and their negotiations of their sexuality for pleasure and self-gain. In the face of this conflation, however, Levy's intertextual references to Prince's sexual liaisons offer a fictional revision of the ways in which enslaved women, including Prince, may have negotiated their sexuality.

July's narrative begins (after the required foreword from the fictional editor Thomas Kinsman following the form of Pringle's foreword to Mary Prince's testimony) with the scene of Kitty's rape by the overseer Tam Dewar. With irony, July tells us of the white man's "limp offering" that "was finished almost as soon as it began" (Levy, *The Long* 9). Leading to July's conception, the rape is aptly situated on the first page of July's life narrative as a slave since it literally marks the beginning of her being. Starting her neo-slave narrative in this way, Levy doubly reinvents a representation of enslaved women depicted in traditional slave narratives. First, she explicitly tells of the sexual violence that is only alluded to by Mary Prince. In Prince's testimony, we read the following:

[Mr. D-----] had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me

than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. (Prince 20)

Ferguson, Sharpe, and others have argued that this scene clearly alludes to Mr. D-----'s rape of Mary Prince, but the editorial masking likely done by Pringle, Strickland, and perhaps Prince herself, conceal just enough the sexual nature of the incident while leaving plain the pain and shame it causes Prince (Ferguson, *The History* 9-10; Sharpe 132). Drawing specific attention to the editorial process of the slave narrative and its aim to conceal sexual indecency, in *The Long Song*, July follows her first paragraph--the scene of Kitty's rape--by writing, "Reader, my son tells me that this is too indelicate a commencement of any tale. Please pardon me, but your storyteller is a woman possessed of a forthright tongue and little ink" (Levy, *The Long* 9). Here, Levy draws attention to the irony of Thomas' attempts to make decent a story that is premised on her mother's rape, indicting the contradictory placement of the Victorian value of chastity on the enslaved woman who has little autonomy over her body. Moreover, she makes clear her intertextual reference to Mary Prince's slave narrative by using the genre itself to reveal the constructedness of the testimony and thus also revealing, in Sharpe's words, what it "does not say" (Sharpe 146).

What Prince's narrative does not say, of course, is that Mr. D----- raped his slave, Mary Prince. Reminiscent of Danticat's allusion to the history of the rape of enslaved women in the cane fields, as I discussed in the first chapter, Levy's depiction of July's conception reveals the sexualized relationship of power between the slaver master or overseer and the female field slave. But

Levy's depiction of Kitty's rape goes beyond simply naming the act itself. The second reinvention of the genre Levy makes in this scene is creating space for the enslaved woman's subjectivity, even in a scene of violence. Narrating the rape with an emphasis on Dewar's impotence and sexual ineptitude depicts an act of emasculation in a situation in which Kitty is otherwise extremely vulnerable. In doing so, Levy offers room for the enslaved woman to react and resist, as much as she can, to the situation forced upon her. Moreover, in portraying Dewar's limpness, Levy in a sense deflates the binary of the phallic power of white masculinity and the black female victim. Rejecting this portrayal of the enslaved as an utter victim, which is so purposefully and patronizingly constructed by abolitionists, Levy instead opts to reinvent a three-dimensional story of how enslaved subjects may have acted. Centering sexuality in enslaved women's lives at the very start of her narrative, Levy prepares her readers for a different view into the lives of women on this fictional Jamaican plantation.

A much more overt depiction, indeed the only one, of Mary Prince's sexual life in *The History of Mary Prince* is the passage about her marriage to Daniel James, a free man of color in Antigua. Certainly the story remains in the text because it only furthers a portrayal of Prince's morality while also highlighting the evils of slavery when she is forced to leave her husband, and Antigua, to go to England with the Woods. We learn that Daniel James purchased his freedom from his mistress "with money he had earned whilst a slave" (Prince 26). Upon discovering her marriage, the Woods are furious and John Wood asks Daniel James, "who gave him the right to marry a slave of

his?," to which James responds, "Sir, I am a free man, and thought I had a right to choose a wife; but if I had known Molly [Mary] was not allowed to have a husband, I should not have asked her to marry me" (Prince 26). Sharpe suggests that Prince's marriage might have been an act of resistance to gain some autonomy from her owners (Sharpe 140), an assertion that parallels Levy's portrayal of a similar story in *The Long Song*.

During the Christmas Rebellion (1831-1832), the Howarths flee the Amity Plantation--John to fight the rebel slaves and Caroline to attempt to escape on a ship to England. The domestic slaves who are uninvolved in the rebellion remain at Amity. Nimrod, the free man of color, discussed above, returns to Amity to woo July. We learn that Nimrod purchased his freedom from John Howarth by taking Howarth's property and selling it, since, as he explains, "All is just transferring. Everything you now hold is still your massa's property" (Levy, *The Long Song* 89). The narrator is very clear that her interest in Nimrod is purely economic, for July continuously describes his ugliness, bad breath, bowleggedness, and stupidity, but always regains interest by the fact that he is free:

Nimrod's white waistcoat was smeared with something green, while his trousers carried sooty prints from his hands. And this man's legs were bowed so July could see the closed door behind him as he stood before her. His few-few-tooth-grin tried to muster some sort of charm, but was hindered--for while his one eye looked firm upon her face, the other roamed up and down her body and everywhere it pleased. But still, it was a freeman who stood over her, seeming ready to gobble her up. (Levy, *The Long Song* 101)

July and Nimrod do share one night together during which, in the absence of the owners, they role-play as July, the mistress, and Nimrod, the slave. She makes

him serve her wine, fetch various items, and hits him when he does not do a task quickly enough. The reversal of their legal status, with July pretending to be free and Nimrod to be enslaved, is presumably a sort of aphrodisiac that, along with her consumption of wine, motivates an otherwise disgusted July to sleep with Nimrod and even to consider marrying him (101-104). Their romance ends almost as soon as it begins, however, when Nimrod is killed by Tam Dewar for having allegedly killed John Howarth, who in reality shoots himself while Nimrod and July are hiding under his bed.

What is particularly revealing about this anti-romance is the very overt ways in which July asserts her sexual interest in Nimrod only in terms of the legal and economic benefits it could bring to her, and moreover that he woos her by also referencing the particular benefits he could bring to her: “Nimrod said that if she was his woman she could come and visit him in town...And Nimrod said that he would talk to her massa about making her free because he was an important black man in town, a freeman” (Levy, *The Long* 103). Here, Levy makes plain the currencies of exchange that are produced by the construction of black women’s sexuality in the plantation system: enslaved women’s sexuality is constructed as either always available (in the case of rape) or at least negotiable (with the promise of economic or legal benefits). As Sharpe argues, “A consideration of the tactics by which slaves negotiated greater autonomy within a labor system that denied them self-autonomy allows us to distinguish between the sexual appropriation of slave women and the women’s reappropriation of their presumed availability” (Sharpe 140). Noting the ways in

which Nimrod is “ready to gobble her up,” July reappropriates the presumed availability of her sexuality as a way to negotiate more autonomy and perhaps a path to freedom. That this story is intertextually mapped onto Mary Prince’s marriage (although in July’s case it is prevented from amounting to marriage) suggests Levy’s interest in revealing Prince’s own economic and legal interests in marrying Daniel James. Her marriage to James would certainly grant Prince an economic opportunity to raise funds for her own manumission while also offering her a temporary refuge from her owners. Through reading Levy’s fictional account of July’s relationship with Nimrod, Prince’s own marriage is re-characterized as a relationship that loosens, as Sharpe asserts, “the knot of her owners’ control over her” (Sharpe 140).

A relationship alluded to in *The History of Mary Prince* that is more plainly economic is the one she shares with Captain Abbot, who at one point is said to have given her money to purchase her freedom from John Wood. In the supplementary materials and court testimonies, it is revealed that Prince was indeed sexually involved with Captain Abbot, a white man. In her testimony, she writes the following:

I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom. Sometimes I bought a hog cheap on board ship, and sold it for double the money on shore; and I also earned a good deal by selling coffee. By this means I by degrees acquired a little cash. A gentleman also lent me some to help to buy my freedom--but when I could not get free he got it back again. His name was Captain Abbot. (Prince 23)

In the summary of the court testimony regarding Abbot, however, it is argued that Prince lived for “some time” with Abbot, “but soon after discharged him” (qtd in Sharpe 142). It appears that Abbot was, in some capacity, a sexual

partner of Prince who most likely lived with him as a concubine. A relationship of monetary exchange for sexual relations is further suggested by the assertion that he gave her money to purchase her freedom.

In one of the supplementary letters compiled by Pringle at the end of Prince's testimony, a letter from a "Mr. Joseph Phillips, of Antigua" states that he had indeed heard of Prince's former relationship with a white man, "But at any rate, such connexions [*sic*] are so common, I might almost say universal, in our slave colonies, that except by the missionaries and a few serious persons, they are considered, if faults at all, so very venial as scarcely to deserve the name of immorality" (Prince 48). Here, the general licentiousness of the colonies is reported, indeed made normal, in an effort to disregard Prince's story as anything but commonplace. Yet the clear reference to the sexual liaisons, especially between white men and women of color, in the region is precisely the subject abolitionists worked so hard to avoid because of the "massive furor" it induced, to quote Ferguson, among a Victorian (female) audience (Ferguson, *Subject* 246). While Phillips' letter hopes to smooth over Prince's trial by asserting the ordinariness of such a relationship, it most likely further casts doubt on the reliability of Prince's testimony, precisely because she was asked by Pringle and Strickland to conceal this part of her history. The assumption that if she lied about her sexual relationships (which alone question her character), she must have also lied about other aspects of her life, as Aljoe notes, leads to the failure of her legal pursuit of transatlantic freedom, "because the judge does not believe that she was a truthful witness to her own

experience” (Aljoe 10).

The dismissiveness with which Phillips relates the licentiousness of the colonies, alongside the ever-indicted Mary Prince, who from the beginning is damned because of her sexual life, retains a certain sense of the discourse of the “natural indecency” of black women. Levy takes up this trope of sexual liaison to interrogate this formulation, revealing a different logic of sexuality on the plantation that point to white men’s sexualization of black women on the one hand and black women’s economic reappropriation of that very sexualization on the other. Like July’s relationship with Nimrod, her life with Goodwin is similarly conceived through economic gain. Newly arrived from England, Goodwin becomes interested in July but feels morally opposed to engaging in a relationship with her outside of marriage. In one of their first encounters, Goodwin says to July, “Now, Miss July. Please leave now....You are too beautiful, you are too good,” after which, “clenching fistfuls of his own hair as if to wrench it from his head, he howled, ‘Help me, Father, help me, Father,’ before sliding down to sit in his corner and sob like a child” (Levy, *The Long* 207). Upon learning of his interest in her, which she deems as a “prize [that] was just too close for July to give up upon it now” (Levy, *The Long* 207), July writes in the next chapter, “Reader, I must whisper you a truth. That is not the way white men usually behaved upon this Caribbean island” (Levy, *The Long* 209). Here, Levy echoes Phillips’ sentiment of the ubiquity of sexual “connexions” in the region, but inverts the implication. It is not necessarily the unruly sexuality of the enslaved woman, but rather the “licentious” interest of the white man that

sparks the relationship.⁴ The economic configurations, moreover, of race and class within plantation slavery make the white man's sexual interest one of the few ways in which an enslaved woman can raise her status, thus making Goodwin a "prize" in July's mind.

Elaborating on what Prince clearly describes as a relationship of economic gain with Captain Abbot, Levy imagines a scenario in which this relationship is not used to question the enslaved woman's morality or trustworthiness, but rather to reflect upon her ability to negotiate more autonomy for herself within the sexualized economy of slavery. Ultimately, Levy's novel reveals what Prince's testimony does not say, that sexuality was a central tenet of enslaved women's lives and that they did with it what they could. Writing back to the public furor that erupted over Prince's sexual omissions, moreover, Levy pieces together the claims made about Prince and reinvents a full story of her life, and other enslaved women's lives. In doing so, she makes clear the contradictions inherent in the unrealistic Victorian demands being made of enslaved women, including the idealization of motherhood and the insistence on women's chastity. Unapologetically portraying July's rejection of her black child and highlighting her relationships with men, both black and white, for economic gain, Levy disrupts the binary logic of "the woman card" in the debates between abolitionists and pro-slavery supporters. Instead, she portrays a complex female character who is neither simply victim nor concubine.

⁴ This could also be read as depicting black women's hyper-sexuality that draws in white men, but July's emphasis on the non-sexual benefits of this relationship seems to support my claim that Levy problematizes this stereotype.

Reading Levy's *The Long Song* alongside *The History of Mary Prince* allows us to fill in the blanks deliberately left in Prince's testimony, while also appreciating, perhaps even more, the boldness of Prince's original work.

Publication

Epilogue - The Textbooks of History

If Danticat's epigraph in the Prologue exalts "creating dangerously" in the face of silence, the post-publication debates that occurred over the historical revisions portrayed in the three novels make clear just how dangerous the act of writing can be. Controversies surrounding the language of publication, the tone of the texts, and the veracity of the claims the authors made sparked debates about each of the novels after they were published, ultimately questioning their revised versions of history. The thesis has thus far examined, in three different cases, how a fictional novel responds to a series of historical texts that predate it and offers a revised narrative to that which the previous texts claimed as historical truth. But, as I suggest here, these novels are themselves texts and their publication, especially in a transnational field of production, spark a series of new responses that both build upon and question the historical revisions they attempt. In this epilogue I touch on a few of the controversies surrounding the publication of the novels and the questions they raised, suggesting that the novels' contributions to the production (and revision) of history, are found not

only in what they respond to, but also how they were responded to, post-publication, by an international audience of readers.

Of Language and Market

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, there was a significant debate within Puerto Rican literary circles about Rosario Ferré's choice to write *The House on the Lagoon* in English after years of publishing her more radical novels in Spanish. While she was, on the one hand, alienating a Spanish-speaking public, she was, on the other hand, choosing to write in the language of the colonizing power she had for so long written against (Ferré "Sin Pelos" 159-161). Moreover, as I discussed in the second chapter, her adoption of English was accompanied by a tailoring of her portrayals for an audience in the U.S. unfamiliar with Puerto Rican history and culture (Sandín 48-49), leading Frances Negrón-Muntaner to assert in his introduction to an interview he conducted with Ferré:

If Ferré's prior works were largely read by island critics as transgressive texts of nearly every aspect of the status quo, the new novels [written in English] were understood as a form of self-cannibalization in the interest of the U.S. marketplace with monstrous political and aesthetic consequences. (Ferré, "Sin Pelos" 159)

In the published interview that follows Negrón-Muntaner's introduction, Ferré defends her choice to write in English in the plain terms of marketability: "[M]y last two books were first published in English for practical reasons, because they could then be launched in the international market" (Ferré, "Sin Pelos" 168).

Edwidge Danticat echoed Ferré's sentiment of the marketability of English when asked at a lecture why she did not write her work in, or at least translate it into, Haitian Creole, when she pointed, in practical terms, to the limited size of

the Creole-reading market (Danticat, "Telling"). Distinct from the Spanish context, Haitian Creole is a recently orthographized language that because of complex linguistic politics in Haiti remains under-taught in the Haitian school system. Thus there is certainly a much smaller pool of Creole readers compared with Spanish reading Puerto Ricans and a wider audience in the Spanish-speaking world. Nevertheless, the notion of English as an international language of publication remains clearly articulated by both Ferré and Danticat. The underlying question, then, of Haitian and Puerto Rican critics responding to these novels is whether a historical revision of the nation or occupation can truly be represented in English rather than the respective Creole (or French) and Spanish, especially if the plot itself, as critics suggested in Ferré's case, has been adapted to accommodate the experiences of a U.S. audience. Moreover, for whom is the revision being made if Haitian and Puerto Rican readers have little access to the novels? Plainly put, what is the point of responding to historical silences surrounding the experiences of marginalized women of color in novels that present-day women in Haiti and Puerto Rico might not be able to read? And further, in tailoring the stories to the interests of American readers, do the novels written in English reinforce the stereotypical representations of victimized women of color and thus fail to subvert the dominant historical narrative?

The Book of Laughter and Remembering

Accusations of re-inscribing stereotypes have been made, to a certain extent, in response to Levy's *The Long Song*, albeit in a different context of

language politics. For Levy, it is not the question of her use of English, but rather her use of comic language that has some critics cringing. In a review in the *Miami Herald*, Rayyan Al-Shawaf writes, “Levy’s attempt to pepper July’s narrative with humor is not unwise, given the overwhelmingly somber aura of any tale involving slavery, but the concept rarely works. Indeed, the narrator’s frequent interruption to cavil about her son’s manners is embarrassing” (Al-Shawaf 1). There is certainly a tension between the tendency to overemphasize victimhood and suffering in stories about slavery on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to satirize to a point of uncomfortable lightheartedness and stereotyping. Kalenda Eaton warns, “When considering the empowering use of humor or satire in the neo-slave narrative one must also be aware of ways ‘new’ narratives can reinforce the same gender and racial stereotypes writers are attempting to subvert” (Eaton 3). Yet, Levy’s project from the beginning, as we saw in her epigraph in the Prologue, is interested in representing the day-to-day lives of the enslaved, which certainly would include humor and resistance. The question that seems to be lingering in this debate about the viability of humor in neo-slave narrative is not so much whether the enslaved really did speak in irony, play jokes on each other, and trick their masters, but rather, how representing them in a comic fashion for a present-day audience is in itself a political statement. Levy’s revision of slavery, therefore, is not just a revision of what happened, but of how we talk about what happened in the present moment.

As Trouillot asserts, “the reasons why a specific story matters to a

specific population are themselves historical” (Trouillot 13). In this way, we can question why contemporary women writers are interested, in the present moment, in rewriting the past; and conversely why present audiences are uncomfortable with aspects of these revisions. In response to her portrayal of virgin testing in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat received criticism from members of the Haitian American community who maintained that *testing* was not a common practice and that Danticat was bringing bad press to an already marginalized community. One woman wrote to her, “You are a liar...You dishonor us, making us sexual and psychological misfits” (Danticat, *Create* 32). This claim that *testing* was in fact rare certainly challenges its portrayal in the novel as a state-sanctioned cultural practice within the family.

Yet it is interesting that there is, recognizable in the criticisms of Danticat’s text, a sense of anxiety about Haitians being represented in a negative light, especially in an international scene, which as discussed above is made real by her choice to write in English. She writes, “Maligned as we were in the media at the time, as disaster-prone refugees and boat people and AIDS carriers, many of us had become overly sensitive and were eager to censor anyone who did not project a ‘positive image’ of Haiti and Haitians” (Danticat, *Create* 32).

Representing Haiti positively, then, is a kind of call to nationalism, but within the particular context of Haiti in the spotlight of international media. This reveals a clear anxiety about the dangers that the portrayal of sexual violence against women as part of Haitian culture poses to Haitians if it is taken up as a call to action by the U.S. government, for example. In order to protect Haitians both in

Haiti and in the U.S. from the threat of U.S. intervention or heightened racism, the nationalist discourse calls for positive representations only.

Danticat responded to nationalist criticism of her text by adding a letter to her character Sophie as an afterword in the novel. In the letter she writes the following:

I write this to you now, Sophie, because your secrets, like you, like me, have traveled far from this place. Your experiences in the night, your grandmother's obsessions, your mother's 'tests' have taken on a larger meaning and your body is now being asked to represent a larger space than your flesh. You are being asked, I have been told, to represent every girl child, every woman from this land that you and I love so much. Tired of protesting, I feel I must explain. Of course, not all Haitian mothers are like your mother. Not all Haitian daughters are tested as you have been. (Danticat, *Create* 34)

In this response, she makes clear that *testing* is not a universal practice used on all Haitian girls, yet in writing in the form of a letter to her character, she maintains the truth of the experience of *testing* (and its ensuing trauma) for Sophie, and her non-fiction counterparts.

I conclude this investigation of fictional revisions of women's sexuality in Caribbean history by outlining some of the responses to the novels by Danticat, Levy, and Ferré in an effort to demonstrate the ongoing process of historical revision at play in the transnational field of literary production. While these texts themselves respond to both the silencing and centering of women's sexuality in moments in Caribbean history and offer fictional revisions of the portrayals of women's lives, they also figure into a larger body of texts, in dialogue with each other, that produce new narratives about history. The controversies surrounding language, satire, and "airing...dirty laundry" (Danticat, *Create* 33) that arose after

the publication of these novels highlights the ways in which narrating history is always already political, an act of dangerous creation.

Works Cited

- Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. "‘The Strangest Freaks of Despotism’: Queer Sexuality in Antebellum African American Slave Narratives." *African American Review* 40.2 (2006): 223-237.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Alexander, Simone A. James. "M/othering the Nation: Women’s Bodies as Nationalist Trope in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *African American Review* 44.3 (2011): 373-390.
- Aljoe, Nicole N. *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies, 1709-1838*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Barak, Julie. "Navigating the Swamp: Fact and Fiction in Rosario Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon*." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 31.2 (1998): 31-38.
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
- Beckles, Hilary. *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999.

- Biasseti, Giada. "El Poder Subversivo de *La Casa de la Laguna* y *La Niña Blanca* y *Los Pájaros sin Pies*: La Centralización de la Periferia." *Hispania* 94.1 (2011): 35-49.
- Boyd, Antonio Olliz. *The Latin American Identity and the African Diaspora: Ethnogenesis in Context*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010.
- Briggs, Laura. *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- . "'The Pill' in Puerto Rico and the Mainland United States: Negotiating Discourses of Risk and Decolonization." *Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power*. Ed. Lori Reed and Paula Saukko. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. 159-185.
- Brooks Bouson, J. *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009.
- Bunster, Ximena. "Surviving Beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America." *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children and Human Rights in Latin America*. Ed. Marjorie Agosin. Fredonia: White Pine Press, 1993. 98-125.
- Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1979.
- Chancy, Myriam. *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Charles, Carolle. "Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti: The Duvalierist State, Transnationalism, and the Emergence of a New Feminism (1980-1990)." *Feminist Studies* 21.1 (1995): 135-164.

- Condé, Maryse. *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992.
- Cooper, J. California. *Family*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Counihan, Clare. "Desiring Diaspora: 'Testing' the Boundaries of National Identity in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *Small Axe* 16.1 (2012): 36-52.
- Cruz, Angie. *Soledad*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- . "Children of the Sea." *Krik? Krak!*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. 3-29.
- . *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- . "Telling Our Stories, A Lecture in Haitian Creole." Florida International University. FIU Modesto A. Maidique Campus, GC 243, University Park, FL. 10 Jul. 2013.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself: A New Critical Edition*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010.
- Eaton, Kalenda. "Diasporic Dialogues: The Role of Gender, Language, and Revision in the Neo-Slave Narrative." *Language Value* 4.2 (2012): 1-22.
- Ferguson, Moira, ed. *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*. London: Pandora, 1987.

---. *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834*.

New York: Routledge, 1992.

Ferré, Rosario. "Sin Pelos en la Lengua: Rosario Ferré's Last Interview." By

Frances Negrón-Muntaner. *Centro Journal* 24.1 (2012): 154-171.

---. *The House on the Lagoon*. New York: The Penguin Group, 1995.

Filler, Malva E. "Polifonía y Contrapunto: La Crónica Histórica en *Maldito Amor*

y *The House on the Lagoon*." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 49.2 (1996):

318-328.

Findlay, Eileen J. Suárez. *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race*

in *Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Francis, Donette A. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in*

Contemporary Caribbean Literature. New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2010.

---. "Uncovered Stories: Politicizing Sexual Histories in Third Wave Caribbean

Women's Writing." *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 6.1 (2004): 61–

81.

Foster, Thomas A. "The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery."

Journal of the History of Sexuality 20.3 (2011): 445-464.

Geggus, David P. "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue." *More*

than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas. Ed. David Barry

Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine. Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

1996. 259-278.

- Gosser Esquilín, Mary Ann. "Nanas Negras: The Silenced Women in Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla." *Centro Journal* 14.2 (2002): 49-63.
- Green, Jennifer L. "Uncovering Collective Rape: A Comparative Study of Political Sexual Violence." *International Journal of Sociology* 34.1 (2004): 97-116.
- Harbawi, Semia. "Against All Odds: The Experience of Trauma and the Economy of Survival in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *Wasafiri* 23.1 (2008): 38-44.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- . "Seduction and the Ruses of Power." *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms and the State*. Ed. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 111-141.
- Hernández, Ángela. *Charamicos*. Santo Domingo: Editora Cole, 2003.
- Irizarry, Ylce. "Doubly Troubling Narratives: Writing 'The Oppression of Possibility' in Puerto Rico and Cuba." *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 4.2 (2006): 197-217.
- James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Johnson, Kelli Lyon. "Writing Home: Mapping Puerto Rican Collective Memory in *The House on the Lagoon*." *Writing Off the Hyphen: New Critical Perspectives on the Literature of the Puerto Rican Diaspora*. Ed. José L.

- Torres-Padilla and Carmen Haydée Rivera. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. 239-255.
- Johnson, Newtona. "Challenging Internal Colonialism: Edwidge Danticat's Feminist Emancipatory Enterprise." *Obsidian III* 6-7.1-2 (2005-2006): 147-166.
- Kang, Ju Yon. "The Hidden Epidemic: Violence Against Women in Haiti." M.A. thesis Duke University, 2011.
- Kempadoo, Kamala. *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Levy, Andrea. *The Long Song*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2010.
- . "The Writing of *The Long Song*." *AndreaLevy.co.uk*, 2010. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.
- Lima, Maria Helena. "A Written Song: Andrea Levy's Neo-Slave Narrative." *EnterText*, "Special Issue on Andrea Levy" 9 (2012): 135-53.
- Macqueen, James. "The Colonial Empire of Great Britain." *Blackwood's Magazine* 187 (1831): 744-64.
- McClintock, Anne. "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race, and Nationalism." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 89-112.
- Moitt, Bernard. *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles, 1635-1848*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Plume, 1988.

- Muñoz-Valdivieso, Sofía. "Neo-Slave Narratives in Contemporary Black British Fiction." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 42.3-4 (2012): 43-59.
- Nunez, Elizabeth. *Bruised Hibiscus*. Seattle: Seal Press, 2000.
- Panjabi, Kavita. "Probing 'Morality' and State Violence: Feminist Values and Communicative Interaction in Prison Testimonios in India and Argentina." *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. Ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Patton, Venetria K. *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Women's Fiction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Pouchet Paquet, Sandra. *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
- Powell, Patricia. *The Pagoda*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave Narrative*. 3rd ed. Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004.
- Quintero Rivera, Angel. *Conflictos de Clase y Política en Puerto Rico*. 3rd ed. Santa Rita: Ediciones Huracán, 1981.
- Reitman, Janet. "Political Repression by Rape Increasing in Haiti." *Washington Post* 22 July 1994: A10.
- Rey, Terry. "Junta, Rape, and Religion in Haiti, 1993-1994." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15.2 (1999): 73-100.

- Rivera, Maritza Quiñones. "From Trigueñita to Afro-Puerto Rican: Intersections of the Racialized, Gendered, and Sexualized Body in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Mainland." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 7.1 (2006): 162-182.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1997.
- Rodríguez-Silva, Ileana M. *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Rosario, Nelly. *Song of the Water Saints*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2002.
- Rossi, Jennifer C. "'Let the Words Bring Wings to Our Feet:': Negotiating Exile and Trauma through Narrative in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*." *Obsidian III* 6-7.1-2 (2005-2006): 203-219.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Salih, Sara, ed. *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*. London: Penguin, 2004.
- Sandín, Lyn Di Iorio. *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Santos-Febres, Mayra. *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*. New York: Rayo/Planeta, 2008.
- Sharpe, Jenny. *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

- Sheller, Mimi. *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Simmons, K. Merinda. "Beyond 'Authenticity': Migration and the Epistemology of 'Voice' in Mary Prince's *History of Mary Prince* and Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba*." *College Literature* 36.4 (2009): 75-99.
- Smith, Faith, ed. *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*.
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- Suárez, Lucía M. *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Torres, Arlene: "La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña 'Ej Prieta de Beldá.'" *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean: Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations*. Ed. Arlene Torres and Norman E. Whitten Jr.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. 285-306.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*.
Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Urraca, Beatriz. "He Said/She Said: Gendered Historical Discourses in Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*." *Centro Journal* 17.2 (2005): 223-231.
- Vasconcelos, José. *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cósmica*. Bilingual ed.
Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Vásquez, Sam. "Violent Liaisons: Historical Crossing and the Negotiations of Sex, Sexuality, and Race in *The Book of Night Women* and *The True History of Paradise*." *Small Axe* 16.2 (2012): 43-59.

Warren, Wendy Anne. "'The Cause of Her Grief': The Rape of a Slave in Early New England." *The Journal of American History* 93.4 (2007): 1031-1049.

Weldt-Basson, Helene Carol, ed. *Redefining Latin American Historical Fiction: The Impact of Feminism and Postcolonialism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. New York: W. Morrow, 1986.

Wirshing, Irene. "Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*: Representations of Dominant and Marginal Discourse." *Atenea* 27.1 (2007): 167-173.

Biography

Laura Mellem graduated *summa cum laude* from Occidental College in 2008 where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Critical Theory and Social Justice with a minor in English and Comparative Literary Studies. Her undergraduate honors thesis, "Population Control, Biomedicine, and the State: The Politics of Women's Reproduction in the United States," examined the racialized history of birth control technologies in the U.S. from eugenics research at the turn of the twentieth century to the twenty-first century marketing of "new reproductive technologies." Her thesis received the CTSJ award for best integration of feminist and critical theory. In 2009 Laura moved to New Orleans to serve for a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the 7th Ward Neighborhood Center. Upon completion of her term of service, Laura continued in the non-profit sector for three years, working with neighborhood development organizations on issues ranging from hurricane recovery and revitalization to access to technology and wellness programs. In her time at Tulane University, where she is completing a Master's of Arts in Latin American Studies with a graduate certificate in Gender and Sexuality Studies, Laura has focused on gender and sexuality in Caribbean literature and history.