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# Imprisoned by Sex, Spirit, and Speech: Complicating Diasporic Negritude

Natasha N. Walker  
*Georgia State University*

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IMPRISONED BY SEX, SPIRIT AND SPEECH: COMPLICATING DIASPORIC  
NEGRITUDE

by

NATASHA NICOLE WALKER

Under the Direction of Renee Schatteman, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to complicate racial performance by suggesting that writers of the diaspora are actually using geographical, historical, and cultural touchpoints to create a sense of identity and belonging. Through analysis of African diasporic fictional characters that lie outside of classic black archetypes--I seek to seal the rift between these “outsiders” and the greater black community through their journeys in the texts. While my focus is on three points of contention within the black community--spirituality, sexuality, and speech--I suggest that the conscious movement to black Southern spaces allows RCBs agency to reconcile with their communities.

INDEX WORDS: Negritude, Reverse South Migration, African diaspora, Racially critical blacks, African literature, Caribbean literature, African American literature

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NEGRITUDE

by

NATASHA NICOLE WALKER

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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2018

IMPRISONED BY SEX, SPIRIT, AND SPEECH: COMPLICATING DIASPORIC  
NEGRITUDE

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NATASHA NICOLE WALKER

Committee Chair: Renee Schatteman

Committee: Jay Rajiva

Scott Heath

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my friends and family who stood beside me despite my delays, obstacles, and doubt. Thank you to my father--Roland Franchot Carter--for instilling in me a love of learning and reading and also watching over me as an ancestor. Many thanks and love to SOME of my closest friends: Kimberly Cathcart, Juanita Taylor, Gale Ratel, Ian Thacker, Rommel Chatman, Rebecca Kumar, Rand Csehy, and John Sarine for listening to me as I worked out my ideas, reading my drafts, and keeping tabs on me. I am overwhelmed by your support and your patience! Finally, thank you to my mother--Jennifer Bailey--my greatest cheerleader and my rock.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

RCB- Racially Critical Blacks

ADR- African Derived Religions

RSM- Return/Reverse South Migration

LWC- Language of the Wider Community

AAVE- African American Vernacular English

## 1 NOT INVITED TO THE COOKOUT: THE INTRODUCTION CHAPTER

“Being black isn’t what I’m trying to be, it’s what I am. I’m running the same race and jumping the same hurdles you are, so why are you tripping me up? You say we need to stick together but you don’t even know what that means. If you ask me, you’re the real sellout” *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, season 4, episode 8, 1993.

In this poignant scene in the popular television show, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, Carlton Banks--the Tom Jones-loving, preppy cousin of Will Smith--is denied entry into a black Greek fraternity because he “acts white.” The interaction between Carlton and Top Dog, who is one of the big brothers of the fraternity, is significant as it highlights how some black people have entrenched views of blackness. While Will is accepted into the fraternity because he falls into acceptable black behavior, Carlton, despite his passionate commitment to joining the fraternity, is rejected because he isn’t “black enough.” Acceptable black behavior is often assessed by outward markers--appearance and dress, speech patterns, hobbies and interests--despite how little these markers represent the individual’s sense of racial identity. This episode is one of the first times a conversation about blackness--without the presence of white people--is presented in popular culture with a huge and diverse viewing audience.

*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* is an iconic television show, airing from 1990 to 1996, which followed the experiences of Will Smith, a fictionalized version of the actor Will Smith, as he adjusts to life in a wealthy, predominantly white enclave of California. Will Smith hails from Philadelphia, amusingly explained in the opening theme song, because his mother fears the violence of their neighborhood and sends him to her sister to experience a more privileged life. Much of the tension--and humor--is based on the different viewpoints of Will Smith and his

cousin, Carlton Banks.<sup>1</sup> They have vastly different childhood experiences which result in Will being more jaded and suspicious of the wealthy white people that surround his relatives, and Carlton being more naive to overt and covert examples of racism in his world.

As the show progresses, Carlton and Will grow closer, both in their relationship to one another, but also in their views of the world they inhabit. Carlton, a conservative Republican<sup>2</sup> like his father Philip Banks, slowly experiences the dangers of being black that Will constantly mentions and becomes more attuned to the understanding that his wealth and privilege does not change the negative encounters he will experience because of his blackness. The episode in which Carlton and Will attempt to pledge into a black fraternity shifts the conversation about racism and stereotyping from a white lens to a black one. Carlton gets his first taste of alienation and isolation from not only white people--to whom he has spent the majority of his life interacting with--but also, a different isolation from other black people.

As always, popular culture imitates life; however in this case, black pop culture also highlights the intraracial tension of black authenticity. Much of the conversation of racial identity focuses on defining racial expectations through the white mainstream lens, effectively ignoring racial expectations within the black community. Self-policing is not confined to black pop culture; it also rears its head in diasporic literature: literature from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Diaspora literacy is a term used to define a knowledge of the African diaspora--through both historical knowledge and literary knowledge. Literature and pop culture expose the intraracial issues of blackness and create inroads to complicated notions of "authentic" blackness or racial performance.

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<sup>1</sup> The surname holds particular significance as Will's relatives are an embodiment of money--they have a butler, their social circle is made up of high profile political figures, and they live in the wealthiest neighborhood in Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> This distinction is necessary because less than ten percent of African Americans identify as Republican, which influences ideas of blackness in relationship to politics.

The idea of an “authentic” blackness is not a new concept. Authentic blackness is aligned with acceptable black behavior in that there is a way to be black--mostly informed by stereotypes--which is judged and assessed from within the black community, despite being created and disseminated from outside of the community. The black/white paradigm is borne of a perceived difference, and thereby inequality, between the races. Since the power dynamic of black/white relations relegate black people to second class citizens, it must be reinforced by stereotypes of blackness in order to survive. The question of what is black is defined by the Western world, in caricature, and, over time, accepted by the black community as truth. The reified binary structure--built from slavery and colonialism, but sustained through racism--has become so entrenched within both white and black communities that it is hardly necessary to address why many black people use it as a measure of authenticity.

Intraracial tensions stemming from authenticity have existed since slavery and colonialism up through to this contemporary moment. Here, by authenticity, I am referring to performing hollow caricatures of black people. Tropes like Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom, little black Sambo, as well as the incorrigible Sapphire and Stagolee, born in slavery and slave literature, have inundated Western media. The black community latched on to the latter--the rebellious, autonomous, fiery characters that refused to placate whites. Stagolee represents the black man who drinks, fights, and womanizes, while Sapphire represents the black woman who is willing to fight, cuss, and tear someone down with a single word. Both are unyielding. Cecil Brown’s article in *The Guardian*, “Godfather of Gangsta,” recreates the timeline of bad man Stagolee and outlines why Stagolee as a model more than a myth is so enduring.

At the height of the Black is Beautiful era, James Brown and Wilson Pickett recorded the Stagolee song. Bobby Seale, the leader of the Black Panthers, used it

to recruit young black men to the party. I once got the opportunity to ask him why. He replied that StagoLee represented a template for black resistance to whites that just needed to be organized. (Brown)

Tropes like StagoLee and Sapphire has become the marker of a rebellious black identity resistant to racial oppression. The other tropes--passive, smiling, genial stereotypes like Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom--are mapped onto non-conforming blacks like Carlton Banks. Usually members of black communities are critiqued for their behaviors and met with suspicion if they deviate from the more rebellious tropes. Individuality in the black community is often resisted and when a black person strays outside of a monolithic blackness, there is a groupthink that brands the individual as an outsider.

I termed these individuals as racially critical blacks or RCBs. RCBs are members of the black community who either do not (or cannot) pursue interests and relationships generally expected of black people or are resistant to the binary of black behavior and white behavior. (Both sadly and humorously, a black person who cannot dance or play sports is seen as either a unicorn or an aberration).<sup>3</sup> Often RCBs engage in stereotypically white hobbies and interests (or so believed), such as musical taste or recreational activities or develop intimate relationships with white people. Racially critical blacks may also speak in Standard American English or reject Christianity.

RCBs are seen as self-loathing because of their behaviors, interests, and social groups, deemed by the larger black community as rejecting their community. While some people reject their identity and community, using an *arbitrary* list of authentic behaviors often yields a false positive which isolates and repudiates those that fail to acceptably “act black.” In Paul Tiyambe

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<sup>3</sup> A brief Google search using “black people” and “dance” produces YouTube videos titled “Black people can dance to anything” at the top of the page.

Zeleza's essay, "Diaspora Dialogues: Engagements Between Africa and its Diasporas," Zeleza seeks to define the term "diaspora" and set up frameworks for which to discuss the interplay between its members. Zeleza's take on the nuances of the diaspora is fascinating, especially his understanding of how group consciousness in fact forms diasporic identity. He, too, sees the issues of essentializing race and diaspora through group consciousness as juxtaposed against the desire to self-identify.

The idea of "Africa" is an exceedingly complex one, with multiple genealogies and meanings that make any extrapolations of "African" culture, in the singular or plural, any explorations for African "authenticity," quite slippery, as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency. (33)

The problem is that the metrics used to gauge a black person's love of self and love of community is based on a simplistic performance of blackness based on outdated tropes.

There is another way to discuss blackness without resorting to simplistic assumptions of what being black looks like. Blackness is not monolithic. *The New African Diaspora*, edited by Isidore Okpewho and Nkiru Nzegwu, is a timely and thoughtful collection of essays that address the social, cultural, and political issues regarding African immigrants and their descendants as well as the uneasy tension between African-born blacks and American blacks. While the collection focuses more on the complexities of identifying by nationality versus race, many of the authors do address, albeit briefly, the problematic nature of assessing race through a monolithic lens. Many of the authors coin interesting new terminology for which to discuss the diasporic community--transDiaspora, diasporized Africans, as examples--many of which complement or overlap each other.

By addressing the accepted “rules” of blackness and refusing them as concrete markers, the false positives can be avoided. False positives exile black people from their community-- these members are read as suspicious, or even dangerous, because not performing blackness means that these individuals do not love or affirm the community that nurtured their existence. To be misread as a *wannabe* (or worse, a *sellout* or an *Uncle Tom*),<sup>4</sup> creates serious emotional trauma, especially if these black people affirm and align with their community and their identity as black. While conversations of “authentic” blackness seem contemporary, black writers during the early and mid twentieth century also grappled with the question of identity as a way to assert their humanity, much in the same way black people do at this present moment. Okpewho alludes to this in his introduction chapter of *The New African Diaspora*:

It is a sign of the interflow of ideas and images in our increasingly transnational culture and in the present state of political awareness that black artists, wherever they are, are increasingly inclined to assume responsibility . . . for reordering the issues that unite or separate them across time and space. (23)

Okpewho here charges black artists with the task of interrogating the diaspora and even suggests that this contemporary moment is prime for diasporic work and identity construction.

This dissertation is not about white oppression. Many scholars have already addressed how the dominant white culture reinforces stereotypes of marginalized peoples, inevitably dehumanizing them. By categorizing marginalized cultures as inferior, provincial, or simply bad, the dominant culture creates a binary and a method of resistance against this binary employed by the non-dominant culture is to affirm what has been critiqued and found wanting. The issue addressed in this dissertation is that this binary, as a whole, has been commonly accepted within

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<sup>4</sup> An Uncle Tom is a common phrase in the black community which refers to the love of white people to the detriment of black people or to themselves directly. It is loosely taken from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.



the diasporic community which is inherently *contretemp* to an inclusive black community, so moving beyond the *why* of the construction of this binary to the *effects* of the binary is vitally important.

My inclination is to analyze what is happening within the diasporic community without dredging up the influence of colonialism, slavery, and systemic racism on generalized ideas of blackness, but instead dissect how the lasting effects--the creation of stereotypes--are policed from within. My work does not dismiss the influence of the white world on that of the black, but instead focuses on why those influences have become so ingrained in a black communal consciousness that there is no need for white voices to tell black people how to behave. I am intrigued by the categorical self-policing within diasporic literature--how black people in the texts push harmful stereotypes on each other--and how it translates into the black community as a whole.

My scholarship focuses deliberately on the ways that black mainstream ideologies, based on a binary of white and black behavior, influence and oppress other black people. In black contemporary popular culture, the phrase "not invited to the cookout" is used widely. The "cookout" is understood as a private, safe space for "real" black people. Since cookouts represent a space in which black people can express themselves freely, anyone who does not exhibit the agreed upon homogenous black behavior is regarded with suspicion and are, obviously, unwelcome around kinfolk.

It is important to expand the focus of blackness to reach beyond simply American blackness to that of an African diaspora. There are many consistent conditions for authenticity within African, Caribbean, and African American texts, many of which fall under two racial parameters: culture and oppression. The degree to which an individual identifies with the larger

racial community is much more complex than simply skin color and personality, and the difficulty in assessing blackness begins first with self-identification.

Vetta Sanders-Thompson, a black psychologist, discussed racial self-identification in her article, "The Complexity of African American Racial Identification," and suggests that racial identification goes beyond just skin color. Commonly, people both inside and outside the black community regard racial identity as an all-or-nothing concept (again, a binary), but Sanders-Thompson contends that members of the community do have agency in racially identifying.

Racial group identification refers to a psychological attachment to one of several social categories available to individuals when the category selected is based on race or skin color and/or a common history, particularly as it relates to oppression and discrimination due to skin color. (155)

An RCB who allies with the black community has the right to align with them--much like Carlton Banks in the pledging episode--but the community also may still reject the RCB. An RCB, assessed for fixed racial markers, is often isolated by the community as somehow being in collusion with the white community and thereby the white power structure which oppresses black people. In essence, determining who is (and who is not) black is vital for the community in combating oppression and abuse from the outside, even if it inevitably fails those being judged as not black enough.

However, embracing and perpetuating a monolithic blackness is not always broadly accepted despite the stakes. One of the most interesting contemporary writers to decry "true" blackness and its fixed markers is Percival Everett. His breakout novel, *Erasure*, deals with the unrealistic expectations of race. Lavelle Porter's article, "Percival Everett by Percival Everett," published in *The New Inquiry*, lauds Everett for constantly complicating notions of race. "His

entire body of work one finds an ongoing meditation on all the sloppy, simplistic, lazy, and inevitable ways that we rely upon such racial signifiers.” Everett is part of a new crop of writers and scholars, RCBs, that complicate race; writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zadie Smith, and Kevin Young. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mirrors this sentiment in her 2009 *TEDTalk*, “The Danger of a Single Story,” announcing that to allow a monolithic telling of any one people’s stories flattens their experiences, deprives them of dignity.

When a flat story becomes the only story, individuals, racially critical blacks (RCBs), outside of that narrative become homeless. They have no place to belong. Especially within the black diasporic space, there are three expected and problematic markers that make an individual either an insider or an outsider: Christianity versus indigenous spirituality, African derived religions, or atheism, creoles and traditional languages versus Standard English, and heterosexuality versus non-heteronormative sexuality. A racially critical black can exist on gradients of this spectrum--an RCB may be Christian, but not heterosexual or can codeswitch into a pidgin but practice traditional faiths. An RCB can reject all of the false requirements of blackness or only one, and, regardless, still be seen as an outsider.

The issue with assessing blackness through this narrow lens is that many people are left abandoned by their respective communities. In an article written by Nigerian-American anthropologist, John U. Obgu, titled “Collective Identity and the Burden of “Acting White” in Black History, Community, and Education,” the mainstream black community often puts social sanctions on members who do not conform to the collective identity. Obgu suggests that there is a tension between the understanding of conforming to white norms for racial upward mobility and that of meeting black norms in order to maintain membership in black communities. “Collective identity refers to people’s sense of who they are, their “we-feeling” or “belonging.”

People express their collective identity with emblem or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, *beliefs*, feelings, *behaviors*, and *language* or dialect<sup>5</sup>” (Ogbu 3). Ogbu’s discussion of “collective identity” is analyzed through the struggles of black people in work and school settings.

While Ogbu offers a powerful assessment of how black people navigate both white and black spaces, he only offers five different types of black people faced with the prospect of being cast out from their communities. His five types of people are organized by their choices in dealing with ostracization: cultural and linguistic assimilation, accommodation, ambivalence, resistance or opposition, and encapsulation.<sup>6</sup> Those who assimilate consciously abandon their community for the possibility of upward mobility, those who accommodate attempt to codeswitch, those who are ambivalent avoid any cultural negotiation, those who resist consciously reject any performance of “whiteness,” while those who encapsulate do not have the tools to “act white.” However, I believe that Ogbu has left one group out of his categorization: those who do not have the tools to “act black.” I make this distinction because one may have lived insularly with little to no interaction with the white world (much like encapsulation), but still fail at the expected behaviors for their black community. Despite the absence of the black members who cannot “act black,” Ogbu’s work is important as it highlights the neurosis that black people experience within and without their community as they grapple with the nuances of their black identity in spaces that are generally intolerant of their presence.

The neurosis experienced by black people can be counteracted by theories on black identity which hold particular importance for RCBs who, by their very nature, resist limiting

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<sup>5</sup>Emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Encapsulation is defined by Ogbu as a black person who has lived so insularly in a monolithic black community that this person has no knowledge of stereotypical whiteness and thereby would have no ability to perform it.

expectations. Sanders Thompson uses a nigrescence model of racial identification created from her race study which is more nuanced than an all-or-none approach (157). Nigrescence is term initially coined by Frantz Fanon as “to become black,” but has since been expanded in psychology and sociology as not only the process of becoming black, but the process of understanding one’s racial identity. In essence, the nigrescence model used by Sanders Thompson is born from the influence of the Negritude Movement.

In order to fully understand a racial identity that eschews a monolithic blackness, an understanding of its origins in negritude must be fleshed out. The Negritude Movement, which began in the 1930s and was inspired by the New Negro Movement and W.E.B. DuBois, addresses the importance of understanding blackness and runs the spectrum from subverting the political machine to affirming the individual African identity. In *Selected Poems of Leopold Senghor*, Abiola Irele’s introduction wrestles with the definition of negritude.

Among its various uses by different writers, it is necessary to distinguish two broad senses of the term ‘Negritude’. It can be taken to mean either the historical movement of French-speaking black intellectuals (and more narrowly the literary school that grew out of it), or the concept of a basic element that underlies the personality of black men and determines a fundamental sensibility, a collective ethos, of the black race. (9)

In this dissertation, the latter definition of negritude is most apt in analyzing the experiences of RCBs. RCBs are often isolated and ridiculed for non-conformity, but the larger idea of negritude insists that they, too, are part of the textured black experience. Irele’s definition of negritude is based most strongly on the poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor and less on his essays on negritude.

By looking at the fluidity of negritude, which allows for a heterogeneous blackness, ostracized black people can embrace their roots while also operating in predominantly white spaces. RCBs can retain their individual identity *and* be embraced by their communities, they can explode the problematic homogeneity of black communities.

Negritude suggests that the experiences of black people around the globe connect black people to each other and gives them voice. Reiland Rabaka in his book, *The Negritude Movement*, suggests that “it was a highly heterogeneous and discursively diverse intellectual and literary tradition” (Rabaka 156). Leopold Senghor and his contemporaries resisted an exclusionary racial performance and believed that negritude connects all individuals of the diaspora and reimagines black identity as inclusionary. Perhaps the heterogeneous nature of the movement is what makes it a strong lens to address black outliers, RCBs.

The reason negritude is an anchor in the discussion of black authenticity is primarily because the founders themselves are RCBs. Straddling two worlds--that of the culture and identity attached to their blackness and that of the formal education and exile that formed them in the white European world--the founders of negritude sought to reconnect with home and uplift it even as they were outliers of it.

There is a cleavage between those that study negritude and those that unconsciously practice it. The possibility of essentializing negritude is resisted by many black intellectuals while many of the black masses embrace essentialism, creating a schism between diasporan scholars and the people to which they wish to connect. It is far easier to claim superiority based on race and then essentialize the criteria of that race than it is to negotiate it and dismantle and remake it to be inclusive. The difficult work of both promoting negritude and criticizing and refining it is the heart of Bentley LeBron’s “Negritude: A Pan-African Ideal?”

The appeal of negritude is a sophisticated appeal likely to have little impact on the ordinary African workingman, or peasant, or housewife--unless indirectly. It is an expression, in other words, of a cleavage not only between black and white but between black intellectual and black peasant, so that to some degree the "alien and exile" theme carries directly into the heart of the African homeland. (272)

The tenuous position these founders faced in the construction and evolution of negritude is a strange dichotomy of having the privilege to make pronouncements about their homes and operating, in many ways, outside of it.

Using negritude for this work opens a discussion about RCBs who have consistently interrogated race and identity, even when they were met by suspicion from their own communities. The movement created by Damas, Césaire, and Senghor is a living movement determined to unify people of the diaspora based on the similar struggles of demanding humanity and celebrating their unique cultures. In *The Negritude Movement*, Reiland Rabaka is very clear on his take on the unifying nature of the negritude movement. “It could be easily argued that at its best the Negritude Movement documented, lamented, and celebrated the wide range and full reach of the continental and diasporan African experience” (46). Their own paths situated them as outsiders because of their elevated status of being educated abroad by the French (read: colonizers), but through their own conscious efforts, they forged a space for themselves, a space that was inclusive for all black people regardless of origin.

For the founders of negritude, the struggle against oppression and for true humanity is the only link that makes all blacks of the African diaspora family.

Ethnologists have often praised the unity, the balance, and the harmony of African civilization, of black society, which was based on the *community* and on the

*person*, and which, because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the community had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person. I would like to emphasize at this point how much these characteristics of negritude enable it to find its place in contemporary humanism” (Senghor 186)

One of the major reasons negritude has fallen out of favor is based on a misreading of negritude. Negritude is not a movement that reads all black people as the same, but instead sees oppressive experiences and the influence of the diasporic communities as similar, while still allowing black people to operate as individuals within these communities.

Senghor focused on negritude mostly as an active awareness, a decision to connect with African ideals as opposed to a performance of behaviors. In Senghor’s essay, “On African Homelands and Nation-States,” he states that negritude is the “awareness, defense, and development of African cultural values” (Senghor 49). In essence, blackness is not performance but a conscious connection to the shared oppression brought on by race. Reenvisioning negritude is necessary in order to shift from traditional readings of negritude which leaned on biological/genetic sameness which now manifests itself through the performance of spirituality, sexuality, and speech.

Leopold Senghor and his contemporaries resisted an exclusionary racial performance and believed that negritude connects all individuals of the diaspora and reimagines black identity as inclusionary. The Negritude Movement was heavily inspired by W.E.B. DuBois’s seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Reiland Rabaka calls DuBois’s work a type of “proto-Negritude,” affirmed by the icons of the Negritude Movement who referred to DuBois as a type of father.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>7</sup> By understanding the relationship between black American intellectuals and that of the founders of negritude, the connections throughout the entire diaspora more legitimate.



Souleymane Bachir Diagne's essay on Aimè Césaire, "Rereading Aimè Césaire: Negritude as Creolization," Diagne, focused on the constant misreadings of Césaire (and negritude) as essentialistic. In his analysis of Césaire, he also revisits Senghor's own position in the Negritude Movement by asking one vital question: "What does fidelity to "being nègre" mean?" (127). His question is necessary and complicated. Diagne asks, but never resolves, the question of loyalty to one's blackness and whether negritude is the answer.

The Negritude Movement begins in the 1930s. Many scholars suggest that the Negritude Movement was the African-Caribbean version of the New Negro Movement of DuBois (and sometimes the Harlem Renaissance); however, the movement focused less on overthrowing white supremacist regimes than the New Negro Movement and more on creating a unified space for people of the diaspora. The difference between the New Negro Movement and Harlem Renaissance as juxtaposed with the Negritude Movement is the timelessness of the latter. In Catherine John's work, *Clear Word and Third Sight*, John struggles in her introduction about the lasting effects of negritude. "Controversial is whether negritude is viewed as an event with historically bound dates or as a *consciousness-in-action* with systematic continuities and discontinuities over the course of time" (24). The biggest connection negritude draws across the diaspora is shared systemic oppression.

The triumvirate of the Negritude Movement--Leon Damas, Aime Césaire, and Leopold Senghor--used the template of the New Negro Movement to frame a diasporic understanding of blackness. While Damas is credited with creating the term and the movement, he is often left out of a scholarly conversation about negritude, perhaps because Césaire and Senghor were not only writers but were also major political forces in ways that Damas was not as he only served as a French National Assembly deputy for Guiana from 1948-1951, while each of their political

influences spanned nearly four decades.

Damas, Césaire, and Senghor created the movement, each in their own way, their own angle, as a way to dismantle the problematic good/bad binary between white and black culture. Leon Damas used the concept of *negritude* as a way to subvert racism, rather than a discussion of black identity, while Césaire and Senghor spoke more fully about the essence of blackness *in conjunction* with destroying systemic racism. Damas's concern was focused on the almost obsessive conversation of the "Negro problem" and the question of the humanity of blacks in relation to the white power structure.

While Damas was focused on *negritude* as a way to destroy the problematic narrative of what blackness is, Césaire and Senghor were focused on defining blackness in order to usurp the black narrative that defined black people as unevolved. Aime Césaire, younger than Damas by a year, believed in what he termed "departmentalisation" which in essence was the call for French Africans to be given the rights of white French while still staying under French colonization. Césaire did not mean for this idea to be permanent, but to be a foothold on the way to humanity. His ideology ultimately gained him a position in politics for nearly half a century in Martinique (1946 to 1993). Césaire was seen as contradictory in his writings and social stances because of his interest in making Martinicans seen as true French citizens, so despite his contributions to *negritude*, Senghor is a more nuanced scholar for my work.

Leopold Senghor, had similar inconsistencies, but spent more of his energy affirming an African identity that would later become Pan-Africanism. Much like Césaire, Senghor was heavily involved in politics from 1948-1982, eventually serving as the first black president of Senegal from 1960-1980. Senghor was a hybrid--both in and out of the western World--which influences much of his attempts to make *negritude* larger than a creative movement and

negatively affected his legacy as president. Rabaka addresses Senghor's outlier status in his book but does not explain why Senghor was seen as a failure in his own community. "The broader Senegalese public largely lacked Senghor's much-celebrated elite education, where Negritude may have very well succeeded as a cultural concept, it failed miserably as a social, political, and economic instrument" (Rabaka 224). In his early years, Senghor leaned heavily on essentialism--that there was some innate connection between black people of the diaspora--and also affirmed European culture in a way that bordered on worship. Leopold Senghor simultaneously affirmed African culture and European culture and considered them complementary. However, his claims on both cultures are reductive at best.

It was during this period, the post-independence period, that Senghor began to emphasize--much to the dismay of many revolutionary Pan-Africanists and African nationalists--that Negritude . . . also "welcomes the complementary values of Europe and the white man." (Rabaka 206)

Senghor's ideology, initially, fed into a flatness of diaspora culture, but with time and experience, developed to a more nuanced understanding of the textured nature of blackness. "As the Pan-African independence boom gained momentum, [Senghor] revised his Negritude and began to stress the importance of African views and values, African identity" (Rabaka 215). While Césaire believed that there was a biological sameness, a permanence of African identity, as Senghor matured believed that those of the African diaspora are connected not by biology, but by will. Despite his use of racial archetypes to discuss blackness, Senghor does something that Césaire does not. He gives the individuals the power to exist both in the European (read: Western) world and still have membership in the diasporic world.

While scholars like Reiland Rabaka deride Senghor for his seemingly assimilationist

stance, I suggest that Senghor opens up a space for black people who do not meet the binary expectations of race. The reason Senghor is resisted in contemporary scholarship is the belief that he allows too much room for black people like himself, RCBs, who operate outside of African essentialism. “Senghor sees Négritude as a complex of attitudes and dispositions which make up the collective personality of black people and determine their unique outlook on the world” (Irele 22). The importance here is the idea of the complexity of blackness--which when mined--allows a space and a crucial role for RCBs who generally are black outliers. While each of the founders had different or adjacent agendas, the only membership criteria agreed upon is systemic oppression. For this reason, their movement creates a place for black outliers.

Senghor’s expression of negritude is attached to a social awakening of the black consciousness, one that is active and that complicates ideas of a monolithic, innate blackness. “It is worth emphasizing that the Senegalese thinker [Senghor] who knew the weight of words did not speak . . . of a *synthesis*, a concept that could evoke the mechanical result of some dialectical superseding, but of a living symbiosis” (Diagne 124). The living symbiosis referenced by Diagne implies that Senghor’s understanding of negritude was one that rejects a concrete identity with standards supposedly innate to all black people. Racially critical blacks consistently reject “innate” blackness, but have been often left out of the conversation of identity.

The importance of discussing racially critical blacks in African, Caribbean, and African American texts lies in their similar work of showing, consciously or no, a desire to own a narrative. In 1956, the first Pan-African conference, *The Congress of Negro Writers and Artists*, which inspired the journal *Presence Africaine*, focused on diaspora literacy. The black American scholars understood Senghor’s vision that the “that aspect of negritude . . . it would appear that the American Negro, like the African, has an imposing interest . . . in the correction of the the

distorted image of himself in this society” (Arnold 33). Hughes simple words illuminate the need to discuss blackness from a global perspective.

In Senghor’s “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” Senghor explains that the heart of negritude is not an extreme black militancy nor an attempt to seek respect from the Western world.

[Negritude] is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation: it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one’s being. Negritude is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the *African personality*.” (183)

His ideology begins as a Senegalese, expands to the continent of Africa, and then to the entire African diaspora, with one major flaw: he seeks validation from the Western world.

Many of the writers who address the Negritude Movement often downplay the tenuous relationship between the founders of negritude and the colonizing entities that formed them, perhaps because these writers were invested in including the entire diaspora in their theories and the unique experiences these members. Irele explains:

Blackness, of Négritude, resides essentially in the participation, immediately or at a second remove (as in the case of the Afro-American) in a fundamental African spirit of civilisation. Thus Senghor has defined Négritude as ‘l’ensemble des valeurs du monde noir’. (22)

The translation of his statement means, loosely, “all of the values of the black world.” On first glance, this is inclusive for all members of the African diaspora, but on further analysis, there is a problematic essentialism that still affirms the binary between the diaspora and the West. While authors like Rabaka and Abiola present Senghor and his compatriots as bastions of

a Pan-African ideology, all of these founders of negritude have some elements of essentialism that limit the possibilities of the movement.

While I have centered Senghor in the discussion of negritude, it is negritude itself that is necessary to dismantle the isolation and in-group neurosis which determines whether an individual is “black enough.” Using Senghor is only important in how he uses the subjectivity of the black individual in conjunction with the collective identity. Irele asserts that “here we find a cardinal principle of Senghor’s theory of Négritude--the idea of subjective identification with other beings as a form of participation in the essence of the universe, which he ascribes to the African” (Irele 28). In other words, for Senghor, negritude is a conscious decision for a black person. The misreading of negritude latches onto biologism and essentialism. “This is not to say that the language of Negritude is not, often, essentialist. But what needs to be added is, then, that its essentialism is also permanently self-deconstructing” (Diagne 124). While Senghor does believe in an African core in all children of the diaspora, he still gives autonomy to these members. Senghor also creates a flat binary in which emotion and spirit is the sole purview of the African (and African descendants), while logic, reason, and innovation belongs to the white world. However, he still creates a space for those of the diaspora to consciously claim their role in an African collective identity and alter it from a caricature to a nuanced identity that destroys the foundation in which racist ideas of blackness sit.

In Negritude’s “new feeling” for, and approach to the “African heritage of values and of experience” lies an incredibly important challenge to anti-black racist, racial colonialist, and racial capitalist conceptions of who continental and diasporan Africans have been, who continental and diasporan African are now, why continental and diasporan Africans are they way they are, what continental

and diasporan Africans have historically done about it, and what we (contemporary Africans and our authentic Africanists allies) can actually do about it now. (Rabaka 329)

The essence of negritude can and should be used to build a healthier black collective identity--to help RCBs find their important roles in the diaspora.

My interest in this study is based in both a personal and an academic grounding. During my years of teaching, many of my black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) sought me out to help them find their place in the world, specifically within the black community. These outliers, these RCBs, were looking for an answer to the question of identity, so powerfully addressed by James Baldwin in an essay of the same name.<sup>8</sup> This is a dissertation about loss.

RCBs fight to be both in their world and outside of it. The characters, the literary figures, and the pop culture figures fight (and oftentimes lose) to retain an identity that is either stripped from them or willingly relinquished. How can they both find the path that will aid their families and their communities, if the process distances themselves from the very people they want to protect? The process is insidious; learn how to emulate the oppressors in order to become successful and improve the lives of their communities. Furthermore, this path might lead these individuals to reject the people that originally set them on the path to isolation. It might create an insurmountable chasm between RCBs and their loved ones--the intimacy of home--while they work towards a long term plan to bring them out of the oppression they so keenly feel. What is not considered is that over time, outliers may begin to believe that the oppressors are right. They may one day look up and realize that they have shunned everything they once loved for some

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<sup>8</sup> While Baldwin focuses on the American student in Paris, his essay on belonging and identity can easily be mapped on this conversation.

lofty ideal that convinced them that these people--their people--are beneath them.

Thankfully, RCBs are aware of the problem of duality and grapple with it at every moment. RCBs operate with an agency, an instinctual understanding, of the essence of negritude. Whether they have the ability to solve the problems of duality and isolation is not clear, but they know in a way that others do not, that a black/white dichotomy is poisonous and harms the ones that stand with one foot in one world and the one in the other. I intend to show that these RCBs are forced between two worlds, especially as their experience has the possibility of destroying a false sense of belonging and creates a new sense of the future. Spending too much time on the oppressive powers that construct these dichotomies is not the focus, but, instead and more importantly, on how we internally (and communally) reinforce it.

Our reinforcement of the dichotomy of whiteness as civilized and blackness as provincial hurts those assigned the role of the savior even when blackness is seen as resistance to racist power structures. RCBs must be the everyman, but successful in white spaces. Educated but expected to code-switch into vernacular. Use appropriate religious references but eschew traditional faith. It is a difficult game that most RCBs have difficulty navigating. There exists an unspoken rubric of blackness: black enough to show you haven't forgotten your roots, but white enough to be successful in a white world and "save" your family and community. The problem with a paradoxical rubric is that it removes autonomy from the individual. Specifically, the rubric of blackness creates neurosis and removes autonomy, in essence, to express oneself in ways that simply feel right.

The rubric of blackness is still painfully present in our contemporary moment. In the first chapter, titled "The Rigidity of Christianity," spirituality in black communities is dissected, specifically the importance of Christianity as a marker of blackness and the common disdain of



traditional faiths, especially African-derived religions (ADR). Christianity--specifically black Christianity like African Methodist Episcopal (AME)--is used as a marker of “true” blackness. Across the world, Christianity dominates black people’s religious practices. Christianity in the black community is lauded because of its proximity to both survival and upward mobility.

The framework for a discussion of rigidity in worship begins with the contemporary moment--that is, how does Christianity appears in black popular culture? From hip hop lyrics to YouTube videos, Christianity is woven into nearly every element of the black experience and by addressing how Christianity has been a method of upward mobility, the first chapter seeks to highlight mainstream black communities’ resistance to indigenous faith and atheism.

Balancing the pop culture treatment of spirituality with the lived experiences of RCBs who have rejected or denounced Christianity, the chapter suggests that the language of the church is decidedly black. It is important to establish the expectations of faith outside of the literature before delving into the fictional RCB characters who are isolated or punished for moving away from the Christian church and Christianity as a whole. The three authors who are the foundation of the first chapter and will also act as touch points in subsequent chapters. Randall Kenan, Michelle Cliff, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie all address the vicissitudes experienced by the RCB main characters in their novels.

*A Visitation of Spirits* by Randall Kenan, *Abeng* by Michelle Cliff, and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie all have main characters struggling with faith and the “appropriate” way to worship. The main characters of these texts, Horace Cross, Clare Savage, and Kambili Achike, respectively, deal with spirituality as they learn about other faiths and their communities’ relationships with non-Christian religions and mysticism. While the black communities do not dismiss alternate faiths as false, they instead see them as a threat to the

community as a whole. Practicing vodun or obeah is a backwards movement, filled with evil and proves the savagery of black people which is antithetical to a mainstream desire to be seen as equal (or, in some cases, superior) to whites. Spirituality is the marker of the inherent sainthood of black people, thereby making the practice of anything outside of staunch Christianity a characteristic of both sinfulness and whiteness.

Sinfulness also refers to sexual practices outside of heterosexuality. While both homosexuality and a rejection of black Christianity can be mostly hidden from the community, these secrets often come with great psychological trauma. Much like Christianity, performance of heterosexuality in the black community is expected. Heterosexuality, or at least performed heterosexuality, is the standard because homosexuality is divergent from blackness. In a 2015 article featured in *The Advocate*, “Why Can’t We Talk About Homophobia in the Black Community?,” Daniel Reynolds interviews Larry Duplechan, writer of *Blackbird*, a book addressing black homophobia. Duplechan states about being gay and out that, “you’ll lose your family. You’ll lose your culture. You’ll lose your community, because usually, you are ejected. Even now, that’s true” (Reynolds). Even black scholar D.A. McBride, interviewed in the article said that “to be a representative race man, one must be heterosexual.” In this way, sexuality and spirituality are inextricably linked.

The Christianity chapter connects directly to the subsequent chapter on sexuality--“Queer in the Diaspora”--because black Christianity generally reviles homosexuality and preaches the importance of having a traditional family and “normal” sexual urges. The three authors in the first chapter--Kenan, Cliff, and Adichie--anchor the sexuality chapter, though Adichie’s text *Purple Hibiscus* will be replaced with her latest collection of short stories, *The Thing*

*Around Your Neck*.<sup>9</sup> Adichie's collection addresses the internal struggle of the African RCB characters attempting to perform "Africanness" and "blackness" and their anxiety of being rejected for being unable to do so.

Much like the spirituality chapter, the sexuality chapter balances the non-fictional experiences of RCBs with that of the fictitious RCBs. Understanding the everyday truth of homophobia in the black community, reified in black popular culture, is crucial to dissecting the terror experienced by the RCBs fictionalized in the texts. The lack of sexual tolerance in black spaces throughout the diaspora pushes black queers into hiding or, worse, self-loathing. Being queer, especially in proud black spaces, means the destruction of blackness, the black family, and black power. Even the writers of these texts who question the "authenticity" of heterosexuality in their works experience isolation and vitriol by exposing black homophobia.

The connection between Christianity and homophobia is addressed in Elijah Ward's article, "Homophobia, Hypermasculinity, and the US Black Church," Ward critiques how black Christianity attached to both respectability politics and bionationalism cements a foundation of thought that heterosexuality is black.

Indeed, theologically-driven homophobia, aided by black nationalist ideology, supports a strong and exaggerated sense of masculinity within black communities that, along with homophobia, takes a significant but generally unexamined psychic and social toll on people's lives. (494)

The RCBs in the selected novels are suffocated by the heterosexual requirements placed on them by their respective black communities.

Respectability politics and bionationalism are relatively new buzzwords in the

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<sup>9</sup> The title is apt because all of the stories in the book deal with societal norms rejected by the characters and weigh them down, much like the albatross of Samuel Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

black academic community. Respectability politics<sup>10</sup> is a phrase used to highlight expectations placed on members of any marginalized community (sometimes attached to another popular phrase “model minority”<sup>11</sup>) to exhibit behaviors falsely attached to financial and political upward mobility. It is an elite notion that believes emulating the norms of the existing power structure will afford individuals with success and ultimately change negative stereotypes about oppressed groups. Bionationalism is more militant than respectability politics--but with the same end result of acquiring power--by suggesting that one of the most important ways for a community to achieve success as a whole is to procreate in order to save marginalized communities from extinction. In Jenelle Joseph and Wesley Crichlow’s review of David A.B. Murray’s book, *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Social Change in Barbados*, they weigh the issues of homophobia against that of the nationalistic position of the Barbados.

In Barbados, human rights narratives of Black communal solidarity and bio-nationalism are shored up by the discourses of family, sexual taboos, religion, morality, and so on, which are called upon to legitimize the rejection of same-sex sexual practices and identities. (242)

In this case, legitimizing homophobia is directly attached to black authenticity.

Authenticity in spirituality and sexuality seem clear, but authenticity in language initially does not seem congruent. The following chapter, titled “Talk the Talk,” addresses the complicated question of language as a point of pride. It is more than simply employing black speech; one must be able to move fluidly from the language of the outsider--the language of the

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<sup>10</sup>Respectability politics is an old concept, but has gained popularity in 1993, when Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham termed it in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. It is now often used in black social justice communities.

<sup>11</sup> “Model minority” is generally used to reference Asian groups, as a backhanded phrase that suggests that the group behaves in a way that is submissive and unobtrusive to the larger, white majority affording them socioeconomic success and praise.

wider community (LWC)--to that of the language of the insider. Codeswitching is paramount in the black community to determine one's authenticity. One must be fluent in black language and dialect, but employ LWC in white spaces. Black language--African American Vernacular English, patois, Haitian creole, pidgin, and the like--has often been seen in the wider community as broken, incorrect, and a symbol of being uneducated. Scholars and writers like Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o all discuss the importance of the native tongue, even while codeswitching into LWC. However, within these communities, the use of these languages and dialects represents wisdom, familiarity, and independence. Much like the distinction between black Christianity and white Christianity, black speech distinguishes itself from formal language as a method of resistance.

Black speech both acts as a resistance to Standard English and a conscious claim to black identity. Wall Street Journalist, Jason Riley, in his book, *Please Stop Helping Us*, focuses on the white savior trope and the necessity of black communities addressing intraracial issues without white interference. "They [black children] had determined that 'sounding white' was something to be mocked in other blacks and avoided in their own speech." I discuss how racially critical blacks (RCB) are isolated because of language based on perceived whiteness through the use of LWC. Randall Kenan and Michelle Cliff's novels are anchors here--again--to highlight the expectations of language. However, instead of Adichie, it is Chinua Achebe's *Anthill on the Savannah* that presents the issue of language in West African literature.

While speaking in vernacular, especially in informal settings, is decidedly a pushback against normalizing whiteness as right, the other two markers--Christianity and heterosexuality--embrace the influence colonization and slavery on people of the diaspora. Perhaps, this idea is incomplete because both heterosexuality and black Christianity are seen as divorced from the

Western ideas that formed them. These are also other push backs--though more murky--in the way that praising in a black church looks starkly different from a white church and heterosexuality is attached to a belief that maintaining the nuclear black family unit will save the community.

Resistance is an important theme throughout the book, as the mainstream black community create rules of behavior that reject (or repurpose) white expectations, while RCBs reject societal rules altogether. RCBs, being neither embraced by white communities, nor accepted in black spaces, find themselves homeless. The final chapter, "I Did it My Way: Returning to the Cookout," focuses on the ways that RCBs reconcile themselves with their communities by consciously consenting to elements of their communities, sacrificing themselves for the community, or becoming the voice of their community. However, the reconciliation happens as a result of an epic journey of the RCBs which force them to leave home, reclaim the identity taken from them while away, and then become healed and resolute in their blackness.

Reconciliation through negritude can operate as an inclusionary movement. What actions can be taken by RCBs to claim their seat at the cookout? By attaching negritude to descent versus consent, as initially discussed by Werner Sollors in his text *Beyond Ethnicity*, RCBs can retain their identity *and* their community. Sollors asserts that identity can be created by acknowledgment of blood or a conscious decision to be part of their people.

Descent language emphasizes our position as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and "architects of our fate" to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems. (Sollors 6)

While Sollors focuses on descent and consent in American society, generally applying to

white Americans, his vision can be applied to black societies. Furthermore, his definition of consent works well with Senghor's vision of negritude.

Sollors suggests that there are two ways to exist successfully within an ethnic community. The first, descent, is seen as a belonging that comes from an innate connection to one's ethnic group--through blood, lineage, and that which is ineluctable. Sollors makes a strong claim that using ethnic or ethnicity creates linguistic problems.

I use the word "ethnicity" here, I do it more and more hesitantly. In the absence of a better vocabulary, "ethnicity" and "ethnic" shall serve as vehicles which make it easier to talk about conflicts between consent and descent . . . for the purposes of investigating group formation, inversion, boundary construction and social distancing, myths of origins and fusions, cultural markers and empty symbols, we may be better served, in the long run, by the vocabulary of kinship and cultural codes. (39)

The issue with descent for the racially critical blacks of which I am interested is that descent implies that there is one monolithic experience--a truth--that all members of this culture can express. Descent erases the individual--membership either given or withheld and is assessed from the outside.

Sollors suggests that consent is a healthier way of dealing with the difficult question of identity and membership. Consent gives RCBs agency because they choose how and where they wish to belong--it is assessed from within. Curtis Smith further explains Werner Sollors interest in consent over descent in his review of the text. "[Sollors] reserves his rare anger for those who make absolute or extreme statements, notably for those who defend what he calls 'biological

extremism”<sup>12</sup> (65). However, within black circles, descent is generally accepted over consent, perhaps because of the simplicity of the notion that blackness lies in the genes and not in the mind.

Racially critical blacks do not always accept descent because racial expression is marked through performance, not simply a physical blackness, and just like any other performance, it must be learned. The second way, consent, suggests that the members must accept the conditions of citizenship. Through consent, racially critical blacks can gain entry into the black community through a conscious effort, as opposed to an expected innate behavior. Consent, as understood by Sollors, looks eerily similar to the essence of negritude as Senghor terms negritude as a conscious acknowledgment of a group experience and a search for humanity.

Consent will be discussed in conjunction with Reverse South Migration. Reverse South Migration--also called Return South Migration--is the movement of black people to Southern spaces--both that of their origins or to the origins of other people of color. It is the response to the major movements of black people to the North--The Great Migration and the Windrush Movement, to name a few--and reflects the desires of black people to reconnect to ancestral spaces (even if those spaces are not directly theirs). My research suggests that the conscious act of Reverse South Migration is an option that may give racially critical blacks the tools to be accepted *and* to retain their individuality.

Reverse South Migration is a clearer term than Return South Migration in that it refers to both people who have roots in the South and those who are primary migrants. In “‘Call to Home?’ Race Region, and Migration to the U.S. South, 1970-2000,” Hunt, Hunt, and Falk address the desire of black people to move to the South through Reverse South Migration.

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<sup>12</sup> His use of “biological extremism” is not different from bionationalism within the black community.



Reverse South Migration is explained as an exodus of black people to the American South-- though I will extend this to a Global South--as both an economic and cultural move.

While often referred to as a “return” migration, the movement of African Americans to the South from other parts of the United States is better conceptualized as a “*reverse migration*” containing two distinct types of moves: return and primary. *Return* migrants are persons who were born in a region, moved away, and make a literal return to the region or place of their birth. *Primary* migrants are persons who are not native to the destination to which they make a move. (Hunt 120)

Reverse South Migration aids RCBs because they are able to connect to an experience that predates the limiting narrative of blackness. By traveling to a space that is *less* beholden to a contemporary black performance, they are able to consciously reconnect to a decidedly black identity. Performing blackness is already limiting for those who have the script, but for those who have experiences outside of “keeping it real,” it proves to be painfully exclusionary. Much like the colloquial phrase “invited to the cookout,” the phrase “keeping it real” is a private term used to define authentic black behavior. “Returning to the Cookout” will address the reconciliation between RCBs and the mainstream black community. For this reason, I am using texts that figure racially critical blacks at the center of the story, specifically across a swath of West African, Caribbean, and African American texts, to show the journey from exile to homecoming.

Racially critical blacks within the literature can forge a place within the black community, despite their isolation and exile, through migration. While the Great Migration is a commonly discussed movement (much like the Windrush Movement), less has been said about

the reversal--termed Reverse (or Return) South Migration--of blacks to the South. I intend to use the trend of Reverse South Migration to show how these characters claim black authenticity. In an article titled "After Nearly 100 Years, Great Migration Begins Reversal," in *USA Today*, Greg Toppo and Paul Overberg write that shortly after the end of the Great Migration, blacks began moving *back* to the South in large numbers--and continue to do so--and that this exodus reflects more than just the push for economic opportunity.

Reverse South Migration addresses the current movement of blacks to the South; however, Reverse South Migration is not simply a financial or opportunistic move. The locations that benefit from Reverse/Return South Migration tend to be cities, states, and countries with either high concentrations of black people or have deep historically black roots. The majority of Historically Black Colleges and Universities exist in the South, many transplants have relatives that still live in the South, and Caribbean and African immigrants have called places in the South, like Atlanta, the "Black Mecca." William Frey laid out the reversal in painstaking detail in his book, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America*, and insists that the reversal is not easily quantifiable. Frey says recent migration, especially to prosperous Southern states like Texas, Georgia and North Carolina, is less a push than a pull. "It's an economic pull, plus those traditions and that cultural tie," he says. "Even for those who have never set foot in the South, the South is a familiar place."

There is a distinct difference between Return South Migration and Reverse South Migration. Return South Migration refers to the movement of blacks to the regions of their elders or ancestors. They are returning to the states and cities that their people fled from during the Great Migration. Reverse South Migration is the movement of people of color to to the South who do not have ancestral ties to these southern regions. Since many of the people of color

moving into the South are from Africa, the Caribbean, and South America, they are moving to these places for reasons that are not connected to direct roots. Furthermore, the texts from diasporic literature show that the South in all of these texts act as a loci for identity and authenticity. In this scholarship, this is particularly important for RCBs, who are battling to prove their legitimacy in the black continuum.

Of the texts I will use to outline the experience of isolation and the use of Reverse South Migration, Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* best embodies the racially critical black experience in all three markers. I include *Purple Hibiscus* and *Praisesong for the Widow* for their discussion of spirituality, *No Longer at Ease* for speech, *Abeng* for sexuality, and a cross-section of James Baldwin pieces to show these recurring issues. However, I am referencing *A Visitation of Spirits* here because the main character struggles with all of the problematic markers I am foregrounding. Unfortunately, *A Visitation of Spirits* does not include a successful migration for the main character. Horace Cross is judged by his family as he pulls away from the Christian church, gossiped about in the community for his sexuality, and tormented by his peers for his speech. Instead of fleeing, Horace attempts to transfigure himself into a hawk so that he could travel south from his community and yet still return. When he fails at this metamorphosis, Horace commits a gruesome suicide.

Black outliers are separated not only by behavior, but by class. In "Rulers Against Writers, Writers Against Rulers: The Failed Promise of the Public Sphere in Postcolonial Nigerian Literature," Ayo Kehinde suggests that in order to contribute to the greater black community black hybrids (whom I have termed RCBs) must eschew the privileges they are granted by white people for being "not quite black."

The [black] hybrid<sup>13</sup> class, in its attempts to play a redemptive role in the society, faces two hurdles. In the first instance, the members of class need to abandon their social status as members of the ruling class. Secondly, they need to immerse themselves in the mass of ordinary people, that is, identify themselves with the people and become part of them”. (12)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*, and Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* reflect Reverse South Migration; however, Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong of the Widow* and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* focuses more firmly on migration to the South as a way to return home and round out the chapter.

The South offers RCBs currency--despite their exile based on spirituality, sexuality, and speech--that allows them to find a home in the black community. James Baldwin once announced in an interview: “You never leave home. You carry it with you. Or else you’re homeless,” and, in a later interview used in the documentary *The Price of the Ticket*, admitted that his time in the South reconnected him to his southern parents. Racially critical blacks may be connecting with their racial community in a unique way, but the ways in which they’ve been exiled are quite familiar. The racial markers used to ascertain RCBs tend to go unquestioned within the black community and act as evidence that racially critical blacks have abandoned their roots. By acknowledging how these markers isolate racially critical blacks makes the way that they use Reverse South Migration to reconnect more powerful. Moving away from arguing the problematic nature of this policing and forced performance, the conclusion addresses will the estrangement and the reconciliation.

The works outlined seek to explain racially critical blacks’ isolation from the larger black

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<sup>13</sup> Hybrid can be the intersection between race and class, race and sexuality, or race and faith.

community and also begin healing the rift between them through Reverse South Migration. During the first annual Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, a conference that was a negritude conference in all but actual terminology (as it was attended by Césaire, Senghor, Baldwin, and Fanon, to name a few), and later published in *Presence Africaine*, Emmanuel Paul discusses the importance of analyzing the ways blacks (specifically outliers, my RCBs) need a way to reconnect.

Precisely what we look for in these studies of African antiquities is the re-awakening of an historical consciousness on the scale of the millennial past of our race. The Negroes scattered throughout the world, and who, under the cultural pressure of the West, still hesitate to deny themselves, and prefer to find their own way, have a real need of these motives of pride and these reasons to believe, so as to cling to life. (153)

While the anchor of this work is racially critical blacks in literature of the diaspora, it will be peppered with the lived experiences of isolated blacks and pop culture references that reflect that rigid black performance is not only happening in literary fiction but also in music, television shows, and movies. By recognizing that the isolation of literary RCBs also exist outside of high-brow art and bleeds into everyday life is crucial to understanding the severity of intraracial policing.

Racially critical blacks have much to offer the larger black community. They can shatter stereotypes that have maligned blacks for centuries by ending the narrative of a monolithic blackness and offer new ways of embracing black identity. In other words, the things that make these outliers isolated are the very things that can change the black experience and free black people from a stifling, destructive script. By giving voice to RCBs, the process of dissecting,

discussing, and challenging people about their ideas of racial performance and identity will alter teaching pedagogies, classroom dynamics, psychological studies, or, simply, human interactions. Ideally all.

## 2 THE RIGIDITY OF CHRISTIANITY: THE SPIRITUALITY CHAPTER

“I don’t think there’s a natural religion for anybody, there’s always an agenda ... and it’s more often than not controlling people.” Cecile Emeke, episode 7, *Strolling*, (00:07:26-00:07:38)

In Cecile Emeke’s *Strolling*--a web series dedicated to black people across the diaspora--the interviewee, Abraham, spends a significant amount of time discussing religion in Nigerian culture. He shares his views on feminism, colonialism, and, of course, religion. The running narrative is that faith is the backbone of the black community, from the Negro spirituals to the creation of the African Methodist Episcopal church, as it is believed to be one of the defining factors of black survival through colonialism and slavery. However, when spiritual faith is discussed within black communities, the overall expectation is that faith means a Christian faith.

Despite the presence of many different non-Western religions, many of them directly connected to African roots, Christianity stands as the marker of being black. Catholicism in Africa and the Caribbean, Baptist and Methodist in the United States, these spiritual systems based in Christianity are the *status quo*. The Pew Research Center, a non-profit fact tank and data mining organization, regularly conducts public opinion polling and demographic research to enrich public dialogue. According to their research on religion, Christianity is the major faith in Africa and the Caribbean, while in the States, 79% of black Americans identify as Christian, with less than 4% practicing other world religions (Religion Landscape Study). In essence, most black people in the diaspora are Christian, a reality which puts pressure on non-Christian blacks to

either hide their faith or lack of it.

It is important to put the conversion of black people of the diaspora into context. In Albert Raboteau's famous work, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, he traces the evolution of black people's spiritual faith while under the yoke of slavery. In his introduction he poses a powerful question: what factors allowed Christianity to sweep through slave communities? Throughout his book, Raboteau discusses the enforced conversion of Africans as a concerted effort to weaken enslaved Africans in order to protect the slave system.

Slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify slaves and this enable them to resist or rebel . . . One of the most durable and adaptable constituents of the slave's culture, linking African past with American present, was his religion. (4)

However, the attempt to cut enslaved Africans from their culture was misguided at best; the folly was in believing that the rich spiritual faith systems in Africa were primitive and easily replaced with Christianity. Instead, these enslaved peoples used their adaptable and variegated religions to create a style of Christianity that not only strengthened them, but was distinctly theirs.

One of the most notable black writers, and widely believed to be the first published black poet,<sup>14</sup> Phillis Wheatley, wrote often of the blessing of the institution of slavery, as it brought Christianity to Africans. In her poem, "On Being Brought From Africa," the poem most often taught in African American literature classes, Wheatley speaks to the importance of Christianity for slaves who previously did not know they needed it.

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<sup>14</sup> According to Henry Louis Gates Jr, the actual first black published poet is not Wheatley, but Juan Latino in 1573, enslaved by the Spanish, and has been erased almost entirely from the black literary timeline.

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,  
 Taught my benighted soul to understand  
 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:  
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
 "Their colour is a diabolic die."  
 Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
 May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (171)

This short poem, here in its entirety, expresses a notion that has become part of the black consciousness. Even while lambasting slavery, the mainstream black community still sees Christianity as a gift. Over time, Christianity has been passionately embraced by blacks and seen as not the purview of whites but as a possession that is the sole ownership of blacks.

Africans, and later African-Americans and black Caribbeans, armed now with their own new faith, used this faith to gain freedom and upward mobility. Historically, black preachers who helped their congregation mobilize during and after slavery, were often the most literate in the community and were economically better off than their black counterparts. For several decades, and arguably to this day, the preacher was the most prestigious position in the black community. Especially as newly freed blacks were discouraged from worshipping in white churches, the black preachers began creating churches specifically for black parishioners, such as the African Methodist Episcopal church. As time progressed, black preachers and their churches became indispensable in battles for racial justice through speeches and sermons. Combine the sermons of black preachers with the several civil rights movements spearheaded by the church, it is no wonder that Christianity became associated with blackness.



By the time Christianity became firmly cemented in black culture, black writers like James Baldwin, who articulated a departure from Whitley's adoration, began seriously criticizing it. He contended that Christianity operated as crutch or a salve for black people, and even though they accepted it as *their* religion, the black iteration of Christianity was as paralyzing and limiting for 20th century blacks as it was for the enslaved and colonized people who were forced to convert. In the interview clip used in the documentary of his life, *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin implies that black people have accepted Christianity, absorbed it as their own as a way to push back against racial oppression, but that their vision of Christianity was outdated at best, and misguided at worst.

BALDWIN: In the Baptist church within which I grew up, in all but actual fact, all but actual vocabulary, assumed that the saved were black, and all the doomed were white. It was kind of fantasy revenge. And it was, very importantly, a way of getting them, from one day to another, through their lives, as it turns out through generations. But times do change.” (*The Price of the Ticket*, 00:27:14 - 00:27:55)

Baldwin is one of the first black writers to critique Christianity in the black community as his works like *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner* highlight the rigidity of the church. A boy preacher from 14 to 17, Baldwin often used religious language and tropes throughout his writings, even while pointing out the hypocrisy of the church and its ability to sedate poor black people to remain in their place, which for him is vastly different from blacks' role, in society. His take on spirituality is jaded and most assuredly attached to his sexuality--he was openly queer--and position in the black community as an outlier.

Baldwin resists--but does not reject--Christianity as hymns and biblical verses often appears as epithets in his work, but as warnings to the characters and to the readers. He does not

practice Christianity, but he still employs the language of the church as recognizable markers for the black masses who still worship. Notable black icons have often used Christianity in their speeches, artistic creations, and movements. One only needs to look at Martin Luther King Jr, perhaps the biggest black icon, to see how Christianity is tethered to blackness. The Southern Christian Leadership Coalition (SCLC) was instrumental to MLK's push for civil rights and that perhaps more than the historical timeline of religious conversion has become part of true blackness. Even people who do not subscribe to following a strict Christian background still apply Christian language and understanding to their work.

On a more global scale, Senghor, Damas, and Césaire all use religious language in their poetry. Like Baldwin, the founders of Negritude use only the rhetoric of Christianity, not the strict elements that are often the mainstay of the Black church. Senghor initially intended to study and become a man of the cloth, but, after being told he was not suited for the church, completed his studies in a secular university. However, his use of religious language still permeated his writings. In Senghor's poem, "In Memoriam," he blends animism with Catholicism.

Yesterday was All Saints' Day, the solemn anniversary of the Sun,  
And I had no dead to honor in any cemetery.

O Forefathers! You who have always refused to die (15-17)

Senghor's reverence of the ancestors throughout the poem represents traditional faith, while marking the event as All Saints' Day represents his Catholic background.

Much like Senghor, Baldwin and the contemporary writers of the diaspora grapple with Christianity. The biographer David Lemming called the question of religion and James Baldwin a "knotty question" (Price of the Ticket, 00:12:36-00:12:42). Baldwin, Senghor, and other

writers after Wheatley either reject Christianity outright, or navigate a complicated relationship with religion that has long been the mainstay of the black community.

## 2.1 Christianity in Black Pop Culture

The complicated relationship black writers have had with religion also presents itself in black popular culture--as pop culture icons must also grapple with the notion that Christianity and blackness are aligned. Tupac Shakur, also known as 2Pac, Tupac, and simply Pac, wrote several songs referencing religion in the verses. Tupac had as much of a “knotty” relationship with religion as Baldwin. In his song, “Only God Can Judge Me,” Tupac waxes poetic about heaven. “There’s a ghetto up in Heaven and it’s ours / Black Power” (40-41). In this lyric, he echoes the same sentiment of the parishioners of Baldwin’s church who believed that Heaven belonged to blacks as their blessing for their struggles on earth. Another 2Pac song, “Thugz Mansion,” describes black heaven as a place where all the black icons interact and are finally free from the struggles of the lives they have lived. Shakur, who does not exist outside of mainstream black identity, falls in lock in step with the notion that Christianity provides blacks with a reward. Even non-practicing black Christians, like Tupac Shakur, understand and use the rhetoric of Christianity.

Tupac is not the only black artist that has used Christian rhetoric in lyrics, songs, or albums highlighting the tense relationship between blacks and Christianity; even black artists who do not directly identify as Christian know the importance of using its rhetoric in their art. Contemporary rap artist, Kanye West, most often known for his ability to stay in the public eye through his often hotly debated statements, released “Jesus Walks” on his breakout 2004 album, *College Dropout*. On this track, Kanye discussed the ways in which Jesus protects us all.

However, the examples he uses can mostly be attributed to black people in the inner city--those affected by police brutality, poverty, crime, racism--and offers hope that Jesus walks with them.

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the scrippers<sup>15</sup>

(Jesus walks for them)

To the victims of welfare feel we livin' in Hell here, hell yeah

(Jesus walks for them)

Now, hear ye, hear ye, want to see Thee more clearly

I know he hear me when my feet get weary

Cause we're the almost nearly extinct (30-34)

The distinction is that while Tupac focuses on the promise of the afterlife, Kanye focuses on being protected in this life. Both rappers still use the rhetoric used by black preachers to assuage the injustice that blacks experience in this world. "My mama used to say only Jesus can save us / Well Mama I know I act the fool / But I'll be gone 'till November, I got packs to move" (Kanye West, 20-22). In these lines, Kanye is suggesting that he is not a model Christian, but Jesus will guide him, as well as implying that when his mother says "only Jesus can save us," she is referring to black people. In these cases, a backslider is still seen as black, but to not embrace Christianity of any flavor is tantamount to racial treason.

Criticizing Christianity in the black community is often met with vitriol--as blackness is often attached to Christianity. Once a video clip of the black comedic icon, Chris Rock, resurfaced on YouTube, his ideas on religion was seen by the masses as treasonous. Rock joked in an outtake of his 1989 stand up, *Who is Chris Rock*, that "a black Christian is just a black person with no fucking memory." His sentiment was that Christianity was used as the precursor

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<sup>15</sup>Scrippers is slang for strippers or exotic dancers.

to chattel slavery and the colonization of Africa. His footage was uploaded to YouTube in recent years, titled “Chris Rock - On Finding God (1989),” and was discussed on several sites about black celebrities who did not identify as Christian, like *Atlanta Black Star*. Several of the comments on the video regarding his critique of black Christians were angrily defensive, insulting, and overall judgemental.

*Atlanta Black Star* magazine’s website, dedicated to black issues, posted an article titled “8 Black Celebrities Who Don’t Believe In Jesus” and received a number of telling responses. One commenter went as far to imply Rock was a sellout and when he falls from grace, he will cry racism. “Chris Rock I see a few dollars will make a person breed contempt, Hold On to your little a pinion , for a fool and his money will soon part, then you blame that on Slavery too” (*Atlanta Black Star*). The implication is that Chris Rock’s rejection of Christianity is a rejection of black people and that in the future he will learn through adversity. Another poster highlighted the fallacious connection between Christianity and the success of black people--albeit unconsciously--by suggesting that the the lack of Christian faith is a contributing factor to the possible extinction of black people.

This is the reason why black Americans are on the decline. Despite the struggles during slavery and Jim Crow black folks still believed in God and led moral lives. *Now blacks are following behind whites*<sup>16</sup>[ ... ] and believing what are coming out these devils mouths. I don't care if the whole world don't believe in Jesus and God. I know the truth. Without God I am nothing. (*Atlanta Black Star*)

The poster assumes that black people have taken on the mantle of Christianity, just as Baldwin mused his church members believed decades earlier. This is perhaps because 8 of 10

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<sup>16</sup> Italics mine.

black Americans express higher religious belief than whites in a study conducted by the Pew Research Forum's *US Religious Landscape Study*. Compound Pew's research with the reality that the majority of private Historically Black College and Universities (commonly known as HBCUs) are Christian schools<sup>17</sup> or founded by black churches or other Christian institutions, reflecting the way that blackness is attached to faith. Often, black institutions of higher education were founded in churches or through church funding, following the ideology of Phillis Wheatley and the original black American preachers. In order to survive and then succeed, they insist that blacks should center a Christian god in their lives.

If blackness is attached to faith, then why the attachment, in literature and life, to Christianity rather than African-based faith? Black Christianity is a marker of the moral compass of black people, and the belief that Christianity is expressed more authentically by black people than by whites is highly problematic. Not only does it reflect a deep racial binary by viewing whites as sinners and blacks as saints (back to Baldwin's discussion of his church's fantasy revenge), but it also enforces respectability politics.

Respectability politics is a term used to define behaviors that prove to the wider community that minorities are moral, civilized, and deserving of respect. Operating as a way to police those within marginalized communities, respectability politics, at its heart, seeks to show that the values and mores of marginalized peoples are compatible with the mainstream white world. In essence, respectability politics in relationship to Christianity exists to forward minority communities socially, politically, and financially in a world that defines their existence as beneath the white Western world, as well as to prove that these people can be more Christian than those that enforced Christianity on them. Historically, African religions were seen as evil,

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<sup>17</sup> Morehouse College, which was founded in the basement of Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia, is currently dealing with issues of inclusion for non-Christian students as every event on campus opens with a Christian prayer that many students feel isolates them from their classmates who are generally Christians.

primitive, and inferior to Christianity, so to accept them--in the vein of respectability politics--harms the vision of being seen as equal to white communities and therefore a detriment to the black community.

The belief that Christianity is a path to success or progress for black people is not isolated to black Americans. In Africa and the Caribbean, being involved in modern variations of indigenous religions like Obeah, Voodoo, Santeria, Candomble, and Vodun is often a source of shame and isolation for families with practicing members. Much of the rejection of indigenous religions stem from a conscious desire of blacks to refute European claims of barbarism in the diaspora.

In Zora Neale Hurston's text *Tell My Horse*, Hurston seeks out traditional faiths in the Caribbean and finds that, at least initially, there is a strong desire to appear distanced from any pagan spirituality. Her book, an ethnography of African derived religions (ADR) is useful in both the conversation of hidden faiths and hidden roots. "Under the very sound of the drum, the . . . Haitian will tell you that there is no such thing as Voodoo in Haiti, and that all that has been written about it is nothing but the malicious lies of foreigners" (83). Caribbean people hold fast to respectability politics as much as black Americans have, and perhaps more fervently. Even though these countries have thriving non-Christian faiths, most people are reticent to discuss them. There is a blending of faiths, a creole of Christianity, a syncretism that is rarely discussed. The creole of Christianity here is, at best, a practice of staunch Christianity in public and indigenous faith in private, and, at worst, a vocal repudiation of any non-Christian worship and ex-communication of any practicing family members.

Returning to Cecile Emeke's *Strolling* series used in the epitaph, Abraham, her British-Nigerian interviewee puts a very fine point on the disjoint between RCBs and black traditionalists.

It's frustrating to think that Christianity was something that was forced upon us, and now Nigerians won't let it go. So when I learn the history, of missionaries, colonialism, and the atrocities that went on there, it's frustrating because obviously knowing that, there's no way in hell I would ever accept that religion but my mother can't see it that way, nor people of her generation . . . it's ridiculous that they gave us this religion, mess up the country, leave, and and now a hundred and fifty so years down the line, I have to sit in church and listen to some bullshit sermon, because my mum, her generation had no chance against the enforcement of Jesus. (Cecile Emeke)

Abraham's frustration with being forced to perform Christianity is notable because he realizes that for his mother, Christianity is simply how Nigerians worship. He is trapped in black performance and is well aware that RCBs who do not practice Christianity are seen as a source of shame for their family members, often met with the common phrase, "I'll pray for you" under the hope that the offending family member will return to the fold. They pray that these RCBs will once again embrace their religion and, by extension, their black community.

## **2.2 Heathens and Sinners in African American Literature**

The belief in prayer as salvation for black people may only be lightly touched on in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, but the power of his trauma and the failure of Christianity to save him resonates throughout the novel. Rufus, the central character is a black jazz musician from Harlem, relatively distant from his family, who commits suicide, leaving his loved ones to



attempt to heal and connect through his death. Rufus, Baldwin's linchpin for the novel, barely appears. He opens the novel with his despair, reflections on his life, and then his suicide. However, Rufus's brief physical presence in the novel impacts the surviving characters in frighteningly powerful ways. His lovers, his creative friends, and his little sister all grieve his death and seek ways to understand his life and his struggles.

Rufus's suicide is breathtakingly tragic. He walks the streets of New York and then, impulsively, jumps off the George Washington Bridge. Rufus's despair is refined into one belief: God has forsaken him. The promise of a Christian God protecting black people, comforting them, giving them deliverance, has proven false for him. His distance from Christianity might seem to be Rufus's sinful ways--he drinks, he drugs, he plays jazz, he beats his white girlfriend--but that would be a flattening of his experience. Rufus's experiences impress upon him that his life is worthless and that realization is what drives him further and further into self-medication through vice. As he stands on the edge of the bridge, knowing he would never return to the city, his friends, or his family, he curses the God thrust upon him by his family.

He raised his eyes to heaven. He thought, You bastard, you motherfucking bastard. Ain't I your baby, too? He began to cry. Something in Rufus which could not break, shook him like a rag doll and splashed salt water all over his face and filled his throat and his nostrils with anguish. (Baldwin 87)

Rufus's final scene reflects how despite his rejection of the church, he does not escape his Christianity, evident in his final conversation with God, which he learned in Harlem through his neighborhood church and forgot as he went downtown to the white world.

Rufus's younger sister, Ida, enters the story as the only black character outside of Rufus's brief appearance (and the legacy of his memory). She represents the life Rufus left behind to

becomes a jazz musician. It is obvious that Ida blames his white friends for his death; for her, they led him on the wrong path to sin and debauchery. During the funeral, Vivaldo, Rufus's closest friend, recognizes Ida's silent accusation that these white people destroyed her brother and are accomplices to his death. The other mourners--entirely black--seem to echo Ida's accusation through their behavior.

No one really spoke to me except Ida and she didn't say much. And they all looked at me as though--well as though I had *done* it--and, oh, I wanted so bad to kiss that look off her face and make her know that I didn't do it, *I* wouldn't do it, whoever was doing it was doing it to me, too (Baldwin 113).

Throughout the novel, Ida critiques Rufus's friends for their racism, willful white innocence, or perhaps ignorance. She refuses to yield or forgive them for their lack of understanding of the racial dynamics that plagued her brother. As the only black living character in the novel, Ida Scott is representative of her community and is inextricably tied to the black church.

During Rufus's funeral, the memorial service is decidedly accusatory, even while reflecting on the love these black people have for their lost son. The only white people in the church are Vivaldo and Cass, who go mostly unacknowledged by the rest of the mourners. In the eyes of the rest of the church, they do not deserve to be there to witness this grief. When Reverend Foster begins his sermon, he announces that "ain't none of us really strangers" (120). His statement, while seemingly inclusive, is actually not, as every mourner--with the exception of Cass and Vivaldo--live, work, and worship in this Harlem community. Shortly after, Reverend Foster touches on Rufus and his path away from his people--marked by his absence from the church, the bulwark of the black community.

Someone we loved and laughed with and talked with--and got mad at--and prayed over--is gone . . . A lot of our boys get into a lot of trouble and some of you know why. We used to talk about it sometimes, him and me--we was always good friends, Rufus and me, even after *he jumped up and went off from here*<sup>18</sup> and even though he didn't attend church service like I--we--all wanted him to do. (Baldwin 121)

In this part of his sermon, there is a bit of pleading; if he had stayed close to black people, stayed close to the Lord, he would still be alive. In essence, Reverend Foster's homegoing service is a warning to the bereaved--stay with your people, stay with your God.

While the novel focuses more on the tenuous relationship between whites and blacks in New York, *Another Country* ascribes Christianity to the purview of blacks. Ida Scott consistently brings up race while alluding to her connections to religion. Her flavor of Christianity is black. Ida consistently references the church throughout the novel, but what is most telling is that while Rufus had a full break from the church, she still feels the draw of the church in her bones even after Rufus's death. While spending time with Vivaldo after the funeral, as over weeks they move towards a romantic relationship, Ida finds herself drawn back to the gospel.

"What are you humming?" he asked. She had been humming to herself for a block or so.

She continued humming for another second, coming to the end of a phrase. Then she said, smiling, "You wouldn't know it. It's an old church song. I woke up with it this morning and it's been with me all day."

"What is it?" he asked. "Won't you sing it for me?" (145)

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<sup>18</sup> Italics mine.

Ida initially resists, but as she reflects on the influence of the black church on her life, she relents. Vivaldo is impressed not only by the power of her voice, but the passion of the song. He gets a glimpse into her world, a black world, and is smitten.

“You still *do* have religion,” he said.

“You know, I think I do? It’s funny, I haven’t thought of church or any of that stuff for years. But it’s still there, I guess.” . . . “It seems to go away,” she said in a wondering tone, “but it doesn’t, it all comes back (146)

It is at that moment that Vivaldo confesses his adoration of Ida. While his adoration is based in fetishization, Ida is, too, smitten with him. However, their love affair is fraught with complicated racial problems based on Ida’s relentless critique of the vapid understanding Rufus’s friends have about race.

Her disdain for the white people that surrounded Rufus in life can be attached to her belief--and that of her community--that what Rufus most needed were his own people and Jesus. She does not see Rufus as an RCB, but instead as a lost sheep who only needed to extricate himself from white people in order to survive.

However, Rufus *is* an RCB and his internal struggles could not be helped by the Christian church. He was outside of expected “respectable” black behavior by not buying into the black church, and, for mainstream blacks, this choice proves to be his downfall. Actually, it was the claustrophobic nature of performing these behaviors while struggling with depression and despair that led to Rufus’s suicide. “And he had fled, so he had thought, from the beat of Harlem, which was simply the beat of his own heart” (7). Early on in the novel, Rufus’s flashbacks reveal his experiences with racism in the South, his drug use, and his volatile relationship with his white girlfriend, Leona. He struggles with being isolated and he sees himself as a spectacle for white

people, but he cannot go home or return to the church.

In the hours before his suicide, Rufus spends time with Vivaldo, drinking bourbon, listening to Bessie Smith records, and confessing his sins--perhaps as a last rite before death. "Now that Rufus himself had no place to go-- 'cause my house fell down and I can't live there no mo', sang Bessie--he heard the line and the tone of the singer, and he wondered how others had moved beyond the emptiness and horror which faced him now" (49). His despair is echoed by the Bessie Smith song causing him to consider that nothing--not the church, not Vivaldo, not Ida--can resolve his mental distress.

The black church is notorious for addressing mental issues through prayer, baptism, and becoming "born again." In a scene in the James Baldwin documentary, *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin's friend and his brother reminisce on their time with Baldwin and sing "Have a Little Talk With Jesus" written by a Southern Baptist black preacher, Cleavant Derricks.

Now let us, have a little talk with Jesus,  
 Let us, tell him all about our troubles,  
 He will, hear our faintest cry,  
 And he will, answer by and by (Derricks 20-23)

For James Baldwin, Rufus Scott, and the protagonist of *A Visitation of Spirits*, Horace Cross, that answer never comes.

Horace Cross, another RCB, in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, also looks for an answer from God to explain his role in his community. Ever since he was a young boy, Horace recognizes himself as being outside of his black community of Tim's Creek, North Carolina. Despite being born into a sanctimonious family, a family of deacons, Horace is unwilling to become a man of the cloth, like his grandfather, uncles, cousins. Horace also resists the call to

teach, like his cousin Jimmy Greene--both preacher and principal--in the desire to become a writer, an artist.

Horace could not hear, but he knew the pastor was praying, that his supplication was for all God's children, to deliver them from sin. Horace did not have to hear, he knew that everyone within the sound of Reverend Barden's voice heard, but he did not have to hear to know he was excluded. (82)

It is this exclusion that prompts him to conjure, to transmute, himself into a red-tailed hawk. This spell is conjured at the opening of the novel, as he seeks to flee from the constraints put on him by the black community of Tim's Creek, North Carolina. "No longer would he be bound by the human laws and human rules that he constantly tripped over and frowned at . . . for he had stumbled upon a passage by an ancient mystic" (12). For Horace, the church, this flavor of Christianity, was a yoke which he wanted to throw off. He searches for his freedom through sorcery and when his transmutation does not work, he turns to suicide.

Horace Cross does not meet any of the stringent requirements accepted in his family or in his community. Horace's father was a sinner, but a sinner that still fell into the expectations of black society. Sammy Cross drank, womanized, and abandoned the church. His resistance to the church is one of racial frustration--why would God allow black people to live in this way? He even suggests that the Christian God worshipped by black people has enslaved them. However, he still has enough of appropriate blackness--virility, for example--that he is still accepted.

Uncle Lester established early on that he was not preacher material. He and my Uncle Sammy became the family hellraisers, two handsome, big strong men made to work hard in the field all day; their minds were not on prayer meetings at night. They were loyal sons who apparently never considered leaving the family, but

they reserved self for self, never went to church . . . But the community loved the both of them, admiring their independent minds and charming ways. (Kenan 117)

Horace--his progeny--is not so lucky because he meets none of the traits accepted in the community, much less in the Cross clan.

The community of Tim's Creek gives Horace special treatment because of his lineage. Given the important status of preachers in black communities, Horace is treated differently, as though he was part of the legend and myth of the freedom of the blacks of Tim's Creek.

Because of [his grandfather] people in the community were slightly more congenial toward Horace, slightly more respectful, slightly more deferential than they were to every other little snout-nosed boy running around with his shirt tails hanging out. (Kenan 71)

His town looks to him as the next great Cross armed with the potential of being another Cross to take the charge of representing the best of the blacks of Tim's Creek.

During the evening of Horace's madness and subsequent suicide (interesting that both Rufus and Horace commit suicide as the impetus of the novels), he wanders the town reliving pieces of his life in snapshots. Several memories Horace relives take place in the First Baptist Church of Tim's Creek, spliced together to create a cohesive understanding of his relationship with spirituality. After the demons he has conjured--either in life or in his mind--incite him to break into the church, Horace is confronted with two opposing feelings: familiarity and distance. "Horace pushed through the doors to the sanctuary and walked inside. The sanctuary of Tim's Creek was grafted to Horace's memory as strongly as his home or the look of his face in the mirror" (Kenan 70). He realizes that the black church, the black community and the Crosses are all inextricably tied and yet he is on the outside. In this case Horace's distance from blackness is

self-imposed--he knows that he is different, not the spiritual savior that others expect he will be-- and much of this comes from the other ways in which he is an RCB.

Horace's questionable sexuality, his speech, and his white friends are all things that the community find suspicious and dangerous, but they are not sure if Horace is truly an outsider. It is only Horace, awaiting their judgment, who understands that their final assessment would separate him from his people.

Here was a community, not a word but a being. Horace felt it as though for the first time. Here, amid these singing, fanning, breathing beings were his folk, his kin. Did he know them? Had they known him? It was from them he was running. Why? (Kenan 73)

Through Horace's isolation and despair, he turns away from the church and into the streets, much like Rufus, and after being unable to find the peace he sought, turns to black magic. "His father and his father's father before him were church leaders, and it had fallen upon him to lead, to guide, to counsel his people, their people . . . he was the grandson of a shaman" (Kenan 72). Believing that the spiritual men of his family were imbued with power, Horace is convinced that he can change his life without Christianity.

In the first section of the novel, Horace begins his study of magic in secret, pulling on several different religions and beliefs. His hybrid faith is decidedly outside of black Christianity, but not outside of the vision of negritude which combines atavism with contemporary Christianity. Senghor and others believe that faith--within the black community--is larger than the accepted Christianity brought by the missionaries. In his essay, "The Spirit of Civilization," Senghor ruminates on the divine as it relates to people of diaspora. "The supreme good, and the whole activity of man is directly solely towards the increase and expression of vital power. The



Negro identifies being with life, or, more specifically, with the vital force. His metaphysics is an existential ontology” (53). The vital force that Senghor references is larger than a staid religion or faith. Unfortunately, Horace does not know that spirituality can be larger than Christianity, and neither does his community. Precisely because of their narrow understanding of spirituality, Horace prepares his work in secret.

His grandfather, Ezekiel, is unaware of Horace’s secret work--one he would no doubt consider colluding with the devil--because as long as Horace is a quiet and good student, he is mostly ignored. After making the decision to transform into a red-tailed hawk a migratory bird native to the region, Horace goes about the arduous work of compiling all the magical and mythical texts he can to find the spell that will change him forever. “In one of these volumes that he found the key, and he spent weeks checking and double-checking, cross-referencing, correlating, compiling his facts and perfecting the perfect spell” (Kenan 18). Horace consults books that his grandfather would have burned, had he known he had them. When the transformation fails, Horace is crushed--now forever forced to be trapped in a community that cannot accept his selfhood.

It is at that moment Horace hears a voice that he believes is the demon he conjured, and, with no hope left, he clings to it as his only escape.

The voice merely said, Walk. He did, his body mottled in clotted wood ash and mud, his skin cool but not cold, listening, listening for the voice that now seemed his only salvation. Salvation? Was that it, now? Beyond hope, beyond faith? Just to survive in some way. To live. (Kenan 27)

The voice Horace hears leads him to embrace death through a long night in Tim’s Creek which highlights all of Horace’s pain, confusion, and isolation.

For it was just as preachers had been preaching all the years of his life, warning: there are wretched, wicked spirits that possess us and force us to commit unnatural acts. It was clear to him now: he had been possessed of just such a wicked spirit, and the rain was a sign to prove that he could not be purged. Why fight any longer? said his brain (Kenan 28)

Horace believed he had the spiritual power of his ancestors, atavistically passed down to him so that he might use it in a different form, to use it for his freedom, but he is horrified to discover that he has become aligned with the very wickedness that his elders often warned him about.

The power Horace believed in, the power he believed in by virtue of his Cross bloodline, fails him and showcases that he is not a true Cross, and through that, not a true black man.

How he wished he could be his grandfather and at that moment he was overwhelmed by sadness both red and blue, and at that moment he realized he could never be like his grandfather, never be his grandfather, and, most painfully, that he really did not want to be his grandfather after all. (86)

Horace's realization is important because Ezekiel Cross is the novel's embodiment of blackness and to see Horace's inability (or lack of desire) to emulate him, enhances his loneliness and despair. Believing he could use the spiritual power of the Cross class that is considered his birthright to deviate from Christianity, Horace's failure to transmute is proof that he is not the man his forebears were.

Horace's realization moves him away from the black community of Tim's Creek and into the motley group of demons who are mostly white.

The voice began again, this time with a hearty guffaw that rose, Horace was sure,

from the very depths themselves. Don't you see? Don't you see now? It's better this way. Better. It had to be this way. There is no other way. You belong. (Kenan 87).

The demon Horace hears reminds him that he does not belong with his community, he belongs with the demons, wraiths, and strange creatures. Horace is, in effect, possessed by this demon, pushing him to act; however, the demon is only showing Horace the problems of his community through their unconscious pressure on Horace to behave "appropriately" black.

Because of the pressure of being the child of iconic black men, men of the cloth, Horace finds himself lost. He knows he can never be his predecessors and he puts more judgment on himself for his lack of faith than his community does, but because he understands what script he is expected to follow and consciously refuses to do so. When he chooses to engage in magical work and becomes possessed, he runs into his older cousin, Jimmy Greene, preacher and school principal in the schoolyard near the woods.

JIMMY: If you're not Horace, then who are you?

HORACE (laughing): Well, my name ain't Legion, cause I ain't many. But I suspect you get the picture, Preacher-boy.

*(JIMMY suddenly swings around to face HORACE. His look is once again full of anger and disbelief.)*

JIMMY: Oh, come on, Horace. If you expect me to fall for this possessed bullshit, you've got another thing coming. I don't know what you've got up your sleeve young man, but blaming it on the devil is not going to get you out of the hot water you're already in.

*(HORACE raises the gun. A calm, unperturbed look is on his face. He cocks the*

*gun, the end of the barrel no more than two inches from Jimmy's head.)*

HORACE: Now you can go on preaching, Preacher-boy. Or you can do like I say. Cause if you get on my nerves, I'll just blows your fucking brains out. Just that simple. You read me, Parson?

*(Jimmy's eyes grow wide in horror. He swallows.)*

JIMMY: I'm supposed to believe my cousin has been possessed? By a demon?

HORACE: Yeah. Something like that. (Kenan 43)

Moments later, Horace shoots himself with the gun, forever traumatizing his older cousin Jimmy.

While Horace's subsequent suicide is based on more than just his rejection of Christianity, it does highlight how RCBs struggle, often unsuccessfully, with the menace of black Christianity. The black church espouses that everything from mental illness to terminal diseases can simply be "prayed away."

I remember fear. . . . I remember worrying about the claws and paws or just hands reaching out from under the bed and taking me away. I remember my grandfather saying, Just say your prayers and the angel of the Lord will protect you. I remember saying back, but I can't never see it, and him saying back, But you can't see God neither, can you? And I said, yeah, and he has, But you believe in him anyway, don't you? And I said, yeah, and he said, Well then, and I said, But I'm still scared. (Kenan 248)

RCBs who reject this belief are often seen as having left "the path" and, of course, the solution is to pray for them as well. The cost of rejecting the black church is high and RCBs often live under the aggressive expectations of Christian doctrine.

### 2.3 RCB Women and Religion in Caribbean Literature

Spirituality in the Caribbean does not exactly mirror black American spirituality, but it does offer an interesting parallel. Both cultures have adopted Christianity as the common faith, and both have incorporated African religions and rituals into them which make them stand out from white Christianity. However, the Caribbean flavor of Christianity tends to give more room for belief in vodun, obeah, santeria, and other variations. Even in denouncing these spiritual practices, people in the Caribbean still believe that they exist, or, at the very least, recognize them enough to argue that one should not “play with that foolishness.”<sup>19</sup>

The relationship of black Caribbean people to religion is complicated. While in word, Caribbean people embrace Christianity, often in practice, they embrace or acknowledge faith systems born of African cultures. The public image of religion in the Caribbean is also attached to respectability politics. In “This is a Christian Nation: Gender and Sexuality in Processes of Constitutional and Legal Reform in Jamaica,” Latoya Lazarus discusses the way Christianity operates as a bedrock in Jamaica, and, through implication, the rest of the British Caribbean.

For many English-speaking Caribbean peoples, religion (particularly specific forms of Christianity) has a far-reaching influence on their everyday lives. . . . Christianity has always been imagined in the Caribbean by some of the more conservative groups of Caribbean Christians as purely sacred, with unquestionable rules. (119)

Much of the disconnect between the public and private faith of black Caribbeans is built on the same ideas that exist in black American culture. Christianity is a marker of upward mobility--the distinction here is that it only has to be seen and acknowledged in public spaces.

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<sup>19</sup> My grandmother often got angry about my interest in African-derived religions (ADRs), calling them both foolishness and badness, despite my claims to my great-grandmother practicing these faiths.

Conservative Caribbean Christians see religion as proof of their humanity, as proof that they are as civilized as their oppressors. While similar to the black American notion of Christianity, black Caribbean Christianity sees the power (and subsequent status) to be gained through faith; however, Christianity in the Caribbean is not a tool for freedom, but instead social and political status. These ideas might seem at odds with one another, but they actually exist for the same purpose: the ability for black oppressed peoples to acquire power.

The way that black Caribbean people cling to Christianity in public, does not reflect their relationship to the traditional religions in private. Many people believe in the old religion, even if they do not practice it, but present themselves as god-fearing Christians. In many Caribbean cultures, people who practice non-Christian faiths are treated with respect...and distance. Those that use traditional faiths are not necessarily seen as false, but, instead, as a deterrent to the progress of the black Caribbean community (much like African American ideas of Christianity as a method of empowerment), but their beliefs--true or no--inform some distinctly non-Christian customs practiced by those who are Christian-presenting. These customs, while generally understood as African holdovers, are rarely discussed in public not only because they are seen as backwards, but because they legitimize the obvious ties the Caribbean has with Africa.<sup>20</sup>

In Michelle Cliff's novel, *Abeng*, rituals and old magics seem outside of time, a holdover from slavery. We are introduced to Mr. Powell, a teacher in a rural school, who returned from America after his experiences with Harlem Renaissance writers, like Zora Neale Hurston, and the New Negro Movement. His disdain for the old practices is obvious and negatively affects how he interacts with the community he claims to want to liberate. He is condescending,

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<sup>20</sup> It is common for Jamaicans to adamantly reject any connection with Africa, slavery, or other blacks of the diaspora. The exception is Rastafarian communities which claim direct descendancy to ancient Israelites and to Ethiopian king, Haile Selassie. However, most Jamaicans view Rastafarians as counterculture to true Jamaican culture.

pretentious, and standoffish. Much of his ire stems from his idea of Jamaican progress, which is at odds with the lives lived by the people of his township.

For Mr. Powell, Obeah is backwards, while Christianity, formal education, and the acquisition of wealth represent progress. However, he does believe in Obeah, Vodun, and other distinctly African faiths; he simply does not approve. Mr. Powell's negative perception of these faiths is apparent when he muses over one of his closest American colleagues, Zora Neale Hurston, after reading her book, *Tell My Horse*, which while only glossed over earlier has serious impact on Powell in this novel. "No island woman would travel into the Haitian bush alone to study *vodun* when everyone knew that Haiti was just crawling with zombies and snakes and all manner of badness" (86). Powell believes that there are dangers to that "foolishness" which suggests that he does believe in it, but a black woman should know better.

As he ruminates on the major obstacles to Jamaican progress--which one can only assume means becoming a world power or, at least, gaining respectability--he continuously falls on an idea of making the rest of the world see Jamaicans as equals and he demands that others share the same vision.

Zora accentuated the African customs too much, what remained of them, far too much; those things that had left so many of the country people he knew superstitious. . . . This was not the way Jamaica should take--these barbarian things should be made as little of as possible. (Cliff 87)

Mr. Powell believes in nationalism and the idea that to improve Jamaica, one must abandon any African holdovers. His nationalism defines what he believes is "proper" for a Jamaican, and though Jamaica is "out of many one people,"<sup>21</sup> he is thinking, almost entirely, of

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<sup>21</sup> "Out of Many One People" is the Jamaican motto and appears on Jamaican currency.

black Jamaicans.

Indigenous religions, in common thought, inhibit the progress of black people as a whole, and Mr. Powell affirms this belief. Powell's experience in America is worthy of note here because of the relationship between black Americans and the church, which he witnessed firsthand. Armed with his new experiences, compounded with already conservative notions in Jamaica, Mr. Powell then rejects the mother of his "friend"<sup>22</sup> Clinton, a man who drowned, because of her spiritual practices. Clinton's mother, known only as Mad Hannah, is an Obeah woman considered insane and is later institutionalized from grief regarding the loss of her son. He thought of her:

And that old mother of his, the one they came and finally took her to where she belonged, nothing but a damned witch. . . . These people--whom he never forgot as his people--had to be taught to rise above their past and to forget all about the nonsense of *obeah* or they would never amount to anything. (87)

The importance of Mr. Powell's passionate rejection of these faiths is that he believes that to follow and practice "the nonsense" is a marker of failing to understand the importance of imitating the West, which is necessary to gain power and independence as black people. He does not call Mad Hannah a sham or a trickster; he calls her a witch which suggests he believes in other faiths. Lazarus explains Mr. Powell's reasoning for resisting African-derived religions:

Christianity, cannot be excluded or seen as marginal in serious analyses of Jamaican nationalist projects in the twenty-first century . . . It is undeniable that Christianity has long had a tremendous influence on societal views and the conceptualisation of 'appropriate', 'respectable' and 'acceptable.' (121)

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<sup>22</sup> Cliff seems to suggest that Clinton was Mr. Powell's lover.



As man of respectability, a “true” Jamaican nationalist, Mr. Powell naturally rejects Mad Hannah and her heretic ways.

Publicly and privately mocked in her community, Mad Hannah was once known as the local Obeah woman. She is the only holdover from the mythology surrounding Mme Alli, a slave on the Savage plantation who used her herbs and magics to strengthen the slaves enough to revolt and gain their freedom. Mad Hannah’s appearance in the novel is after her fall from grace, her descent into madness and grief, perhaps to show the ease with which the community exiles her. When her son dies by drowning in the watering hole--later named for him--her first action is to prepare an appropriate burial by Obeah standards.

Clinton, rumored to be gay and a “dear” friend of Mr. Powell, drowns in the watering hole while onlookers jeer him and mock him as he drowns because he is a suspected homosexual. After his death, the community turns their harassment and ridicule on Mad Hannah. She has no one to help her bring his body home, so she must carry his corpse on her back and prepare his body alone. “After his death, no one came forward to assist her in the rite of laying the duppy at peace” (Cliff 63). Funeral rites are important in the African diaspora and to not properly handle the deceased’s homegoing, the return to the spirit realm, causes the spirit to remain in a state of unrest. In Jamaica, the deceased can become a duppy, or a ghost not put properly to rest, forever haunting the community and those who may have done the deceased any wrong. Despite the waning of Obeah in Jamaica and despite a rejection of its origins in Bantu folklore, many people still believe in duppies.

The contradiction between believing in traditional faiths and reviling them allows the community to reject Mad Hannah and yet still fear the wrath of Clinton, now duppy.

And yet when they buried their dead they themselves took all the precautions she

had been unable to take. They knew how Clinton died and that his duppy might seek them out, so they put tobacco seeds over their doorways to keep him away, and made circles of coffee and salt around their yards to fend off his duppy. They chopped down pawpaw trees near their homes, because duppies could taint the fruit of that particular tree and bring death. (Cliff 65)

Just like Mr. Powell, these people both attacked her faith and acknowledged its power. Mad Hannah, after her failed solitary attempt to put Clinton to rest, is convinced that her son is now a duppy haunting the community, hidden in trees, and becomes obsessed with journeying and finding the tree which houses his spirit and freeing him to the ancestral realm. “They didn’t stop to consider their actions. To ponder her relationship to magic. Or to think about her journeys as ceremonies of mourning, as expressions of her faith. They thought her foolish and crazy” (65). The difference in the treatment of non-Christian faiths in the Caribbean in relationship to the United States is that while it is seen as a blight on blackness and illegitimate, it is still seen as *real*.

While Mad Hannah grew up in obeah, Clare Savage does not initially deviate from Christianity because she knows nothing else. It is only reading, widely, that brings her away from staunch black Christianity. Clare’s relationship to Christianity comes through her obsession with the Jewish Holocaust. She finds herself aligned with the persecuted Jews and her concern for their experience causes her to become ostracized in school and at home. By searching for the answer for the genocide of millions of Jewish people, Clare is also searching for the meaning of her own identity. Her interest in this historical moment of terror and death concerns her teachers and parents--she need only be a good, pious young girl and take her mind off of the atrocities of the past. Clare is doubly isolated in her community--she is biracial with a colored mother and

white father--and is an outsider in both worlds. This may be why she turns to *I Am Alive*, a book about a Holocaust survivor, for solace.

During Clare's school lectures, the white teachers attempt to explain the Holocaust in flattened, simplistic ways for the children to grasp. However, Clare, as an RCB, senses that there is more to the Holocaust than the teachers are willing to discuss, and she asks increasingly probing questions. Many of these questions stem from her understanding of her difference. By allying herself with Jewish people, Clare sends a clear signal that she is outside of expected notions of identity. While she is not ready to address identity in relationship to race, she begins to question it in relation to faith. "Clare had learned that just as Jews were expected to suffer in a Christian world, so were dark people expected to suffer in a white one"(77). Her teachers explain that, in essence, anyone who did not practice Christianity was doomed to suffer.

While the teachers do not explicitly attach race to faith, they do suggest that the oppression of black people is a spiritual consequence of their "primitive" religion.

The suffering of the Jews was similar, one teacher went on to say, to the primitive religiosity of Africans, which had brought Black people into slavery, she explained, but did not explain how she had reached this conclusion. That is, both types of people were flawed in irreversible ways. (71)

In some ways, if they had only been Christian from the start, they would not experience the inferior status they have at the present moment.

The white teachers are attempting to inculcate Clare into the belief in the necessity of Christianity for the redemption of black people, they do not say so explicitly. However, it is unnecessary to explain this in detail to young Clare--Jamaican culture has long accepted Christianity as a *de facto* national religion.

The important roles played by various Christian churches- such as the Baptist, Anglican, Seventh-Day Adventist, Church of God and Pentecostal . . . at different periods of Jamaica's history have played a part in inculcating the widespread impression that Jamaica is "essentially a Christian country". Simply put, according to this view, not only do a large number of Jamaican citizens identify with some form of Christianity, but Christian mores and values are embedded in the very foundation of the Jamaican nation. (Lazarus 122)

Despite the inclusive national motto of Jamaica, Jamaica is still associated with people of color. So when Clare becomes obsessed with the Jewish Holocaust and her teachers evade her questions, she asks her father. His response to her questions reflects his frustration with Clare operating outside of appropriate behavior. As Lazarus notes, “[Questioning Christianity] is seen by such people as being outside the reach of scrutiny, interrogation and theorisation. To transgress by questioning how it is that we arrive at certain truths and privilege certain knowledge is therefore a sin against God” (119). Clare’s need for a greater understanding of faith is stamped out by her father who abides by the same limiting lens of spirituality as Mr. Powell.

#### **2.4 Pagans and Sinners in African Literature**

Leopold Senghor in his discussion of negritude and black culture talks of the spiritual element present in the language of those of African descent. However, his take on spirituality is larger than the narrow understanding of faith in black communities. Spirituality is how we breathe, not how we worship, thereby freeing RCBs from going to the river.<sup>23</sup> Freedom from baptism. The RCB does not need it to express blackness or to express faith.

In 1956, during *The First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists*, Thomas Ekollo, one of

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<sup>23</sup>“Going to the river” generally means the process of being baptized--historically, baptisms happened in the river despite river deities existing before Christianity.

the most prominent Cameroonian pastors of the time, spoke at length about Christianity and Africanness. *The First Congress of Black Writers and Artists* was a conference on negritude in all but name. Nearly all of the authors in attendance influenced negritude and throughout the conference, Christianity and blackness were passionately discussed, suggesting that there are inextricably linked. Transcribed and published later in *Presence Africaine*, Ekollo challenges in a discussion the notion that Christianity exists to improve the culture of people of the diaspora.

“Only, I am not in agreement with you when you say, “Is it not humanising and therefore de-valorising, the teaching of Christ to see in it nothing but a means of perfecting some national culture?” I would say that perhaps you have read my Paper[sic] a little too quickly. In fact, it is not part of my intention to say that Christ came upon Earth to bring a culture. Not at all. (215)

Despite being an evangelical preacher, Ekollo divorces Christianity from a national culture and from a monolithic black culture, and as one of the important speakers during the conference, seems to echo the intent that negritude is not to be tied to religion, even as Christianity is one of the largest faiths in African nations.

Christianity operates as a marker of status in African American and Caribbean culture, as well as in African culture. Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* pits the traditional against the modern in this tale of government upheaval in the midst of family, abuse, and traditions. Kambili, daughter to Eugene Achike, finds herself exiled from both the traditional Nigeria and the modern Nigeria in which her family lives. Her isolation is increased by her father’s physical and emotional abuse.

The novel outlines the influence of Catholicism on the Nigerian landscape and Kambili’s slow trek away from this faith of her father’s, towards the traditionalism of her grandfather,

Papa-Nnukwu. The patriarch of the Achike household, Eugene, represents for their cosmopolitan town of Enugu, his hometown Abba, and, perhaps, all of Nigeria, that of the best representation of Nigeria. He is a successful businessman, funds the prestigious *Standard* newspaper, and is deeply religious. The community adores Brother Eugene; his family fears him. The community lauds him, though the community is unaware that Eugene Achike is both rigidly pious and sadistically abusive.

His children, Jaja and Kambili, struggle for his approval and their drive to emulate him both fuels and silences them. He is a nationalist and his faith is intrinsically tied to his Catholic faith. Conversion of Nigerian outliers motivates Eugene, who seeks to be the image to which his compatriots can look up to and find salvation.

He intoned the Blessed Virgin in several different titles while we responded, “Pray for us.” His favorite title was Our Lady, Shield of the Nigerian People. He had made it up himself, If only people would use it every day, he told us, Nigeria would not totter like a Big Man with the spindly legs of a child. (Adichie 11)

For Eugene, the salvation of Nigeria comes through strict anglicized Catholicism, believing that Catholicism will bring Nigerian people out of the past and ensure their success in the future. This is similar to both *Abeng* and *A Visitation of Spirits* because in all texts the conversion of blacks in both countries is attached to upward mobility.

Eugene is a symbol of respectability politics, reflected through his faith, but what is important is that embracing Catholicism as a path to empowerment is in line with a desire to create a positive, monolithic view of Nigeria. A true, proud Nigerian would most assuredly practice Catholicism and reject traditional faith for the betterment of the community. In Stefan Höschele’s work, “Culture, Change and Christianity in Africa,” Christianity in modern Africa is

seen as forward-thinking, a marker of progress which inherently required a rejection of traditional faiths. “Opposition to tradition is not so much a matter of spiritual principle but as a result of intelligent choice . . . this was the standard model of both the missionary attitude and African Christian identity” (130). Since Eugene is affirmed and given a high status in his community, he acts here as the mainstream black Nigerian consciousness which virulently rejects traditional faith, as his children, Jaja and Kambili, reflect the isolated, reviled citizens of Nigeria.

Kambili and Jaja are the RCBs of this text, outcasts, driven by the fear of being attacked and rejected by their father. Their household operates as a microcosm of general Nigerian society. Kambili’s driving purpose is to please her father, the volatile Eugene Achike, which is evident not only in her inability to speak anything except phrases her father might find pleasing, but also to express a blind devotion to her Catholic faith. The tension arises as Kambili realizes that her faith is based on fear of her father and through him a fear of God. Her tense journey keeps Kambili constantly outside of the Nigerian community, earning her ridicule for her distance, but by the close of the text, Kambili has reconciled both the traditions of her forebears and that of her present moment.

The experiences of Kambili’s youth juxtapose appropriate Christian behavior against the sinful heathen ways of those still too ignorant to convert. One of these “ignorant” people in Kambili’s world is her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. She knows little about him, except for the fifteen minutes a year she spends with him during the Christmas season, but her father has impressed upon her the sinfulness of her grandfather. “[Eugene] prayed for our protection from ungodly people and forces, for Nigeria and the Godless men ruling it, and for . . . the conversion of our Papa-Nnukwu” (Adichie 61). All she understands is that Papa-Nnukwu needs

to become Catholic because he is holding his family back, and thereby, limiting the progress of Nigeria as a whole. Stephan Hörschele explains this further:

Christians naturally dominates the public discourse. This leads to the common assumption that there are respectable, modern religions--Christianity and Islam--and "backward," "superstitious" types of faith, which may not even be called "religion." (131)

Kambili, her voice stunted, does not question her father's pronouncement--until she spends time with his nonconformist sister, Ifeoma, and her traditionalist grandfather.

After Aunty Ifeoma insists that Jaja and Kambili spend some time with them in the southern Abba, before they return to Nsukka and Enugu, respectively, Kambili gets her first taste of spiritual rebellion against the staid Catholicism that informs her entire existence. Ifeoma takes the children on a tour of Abba, but fails to tell them that she is bringing Papa-Nnukwu. Jaja and Kambili are horrified--good Nigerians do not interact with pagans--and Kambili becomes even more concerned about her grandfather's godlessness. She reflects on her search for the depravity her father said was most certainly in her grandfather. "I examined him . . . looking away when his eyes met mine, for signs of difference, of Godlessness. I didn't see any, but I was sure they were there somewhere. They had to be" (Adichie 63). Forced into the close quarters of the car with her heathen grandfather, watching her aunt and cousins behave as though nothing was amiss, confuses Kambili. Her aunt and cousins were also Catholic, so their tolerance of Papa-Nnukwu's ways seem heretical.

Heretical as it initially seems to Kambili, Aunty Ifeoma does not tell them that she is taking them to the city square to see the traditional masquerades. Kambili is both curious and terrified of breaking the firm rules set by her father, especially as she remembers his feelings



about the holiday rituals. “Papa had driven us past the crowds at Ezi Icheke once, some years ago, and he muttered about ignorant people participating in the ritual of pagan masquerades . . . *Devilish Folklore*. It sounded dangerous the way Papa said it” (Adichie 85). However, knowing her father’s feelings regarding these events, she and Jaja watch and enjoy them. Kambili begins her journey away from acceptable Nigerian behavior at this moment, and the novel follows her change from a respectable Nigerian girl, to a girl of her own choosing.

As the novel progresses, Kambili and Jaja spend time with their widowed aunt and cousins in the city of Nsukka, learning a much more hybridized form of Catholicism. She meets Father Amadi, a young Catholic priest, who encourages her to play, wear shorts, and talk freely about God. In the Achike household, strict Catholicism is sacrosanct; however, in their time in Nsukka, both Jaja and Kambili deviate from appropriate Nigerian Catholicism. Dumbfounded, she listens as Ifeoma prays for Papa-Nnukwu. She is even more perplexed when Father Amadi, after hearing that Papa-Nnukwu’s health was improving, cheerily announces “Our God is faithful, Ifeoma” (163). Kambili begins to question her faith, and, when Ifeoma explains about Papa-Nnukwu’s faith and prompts Kambili to watch him in his morning prayers, her rigid understanding of faith begins to unravel. “He was smiling as I quietly turned and went back to the bedroom. I never smiled after we said rosary back home. None of us did” (169). Kambili begins to wonder if the stifling requirements of Nigerian Christianity is necessary.

She does not get much time to ponder this new idea before word comes to Eugene that she and Jaja are under the same roof with Papa-Nnukwu, and she is sharing a room with him. Eugene arrives immediately to take them home and is startled by the announcement that Papa-Nnukwu died earlier in the day. Instead of grieving, he only asks if their father was given extreme unction--that is, if he was made to convert during his illness. When they return to

Enugu, Eugene chastises them for the obvious change in their personalities from their short time in Nsukka. “He asked God to cleanse his children, to remove whatever spirit it was that made them lie to him about being in the same house as a heathen. ‘It is the sin of omission, Lord’” (191). He later punishes them severely by pouring boiling water on their feet and admonishing them for walking into sin.

For the first time, his punishment does not stick--Kambili feels no shame as she has already moved away from his strict Catholicism to a more inclusive one. When she talks to Amaka on the phone about Papa-Nnuwku’s funeral rites, Kambili no longer mentions her grandfather as a heathen. Instead she humanizes him and wishes she could break from her father’s rules and participate in the ceremony. “‘He will rest in peace,’ I said. I wondered if she could tell that I, too, wanted to wear white, to join the funeral dance of the grandchildren” (203). Kambili has already defected.

Kambili, who at the start of the novel was a paragon of perfect Nigerian adolescence, has now become an RCB. She has become aberrant in the eyes of her father, the paragon of Nigerian excellence. It would be remiss to ignore that Kambili’s influences that change her into an RCB are characters who--in some ways--are RCBs themselves. Her relatives are far more Western than her nuclear family. So is Father Amadi--the modern Catholic priest with whom she falls in love. They do not subscribe to expected Nigerian values--even Ifeoma criticizes her female students for dropping out of school in favor of marriage--setting them as being antithetical to true Nigeria. For the first time, Kambili is faced with a rebellion against Nigerian mores. When she asserts that her grandfather is godless and should be shunned when she first is forced to spend time with him, Auntie Ifeoma gently corrects her.

“Because Papa-Nnukwu is a pagan.” Papa would be proud that I had said that.

“Your Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan, Kambili, he is a traditionalist,” Aunty Ifeoma said.

I stared at her. Pagan, traditionalist, what did it matter? He was not Catholic, that was all; he was not of the faith. He was one of the people whose conversion we prayed for so that they did not end in the everlasting torment of hellfire.”

(Adichie 81)

For Kambili, before she embraces her RCB status, Eugene is the true marker of a respectable black Nigerian. His voice is the voice of Nigeria. After her experience in Nsukka, Kambili becomes critical and wonders if, perhaps, Aunty Ifeoma is the marker of a true Nigerian. Aunty Ifeoma and her children embrace Catholicism but do not shun animism. They are comfortable with being a fringe element of Nigerian society. Their surety influences Kambili, and she, eventually, accepts her own place as an RCB.

While Kambili Achike of *Purple Hibiscus* has the ability to choose how she identifies religiously, Beatrice Okoh of *Anthills of The Savannah* does not. Her acceptance of a non-Christian faith is thrust upon her. In the novel, the main protagonists struggle with their traditional identity and their modern sensibilities. They are markers of the progress and success of Abazon and, with that praise, are pressured into performing respectability politics. Three of the main characters in Achebe’s text represent racially critical blacks (RCBs): Beatrice Okoh, Ikem Osodi, and Chris Oriko. All three characters have difficulty connecting with the community they seek to serve, but the men of the novel more so because of their condescending nature towards those less educated. In this way, Chris Oriko’s girlfriend, Beatrice Okoh stands apart as she seeks to connect with her history and her familial traditions. Unfortunately, while these characters find themselves unable to connect with the citizens of Kangan (and of the

outskirts, Abazon), Beatrice singularly fights the belief that a good Nigerian is a Christian one--much like Kambili--and that the traditionalists are forgotten fossils. Despite being as much of an outsider as her male counterparts, much of her isolation comes from her inability to mask her disdain for the fanatical Christianity as well as her attempt to cling to the old ways.

When growing up, Beatrice's mother encouraged her to understand the ways of their elders and their ancestors, but her father discouraged any connection to animism and the traditionalist ways of her mother. Beatrice's father, focused on the future of Nigeria (much like Eugene Achike) sees only Christianity and education as the path to being committed to one's people. This ideology, of course, is mired in patriarchal notions which lead Beatrice's father to name her Nwanyibuife after he is disappointed that his wife did not bear a boy. Her birth name means "a female is also something," which her father and her community never once use after she receives her communion name Beatrice.

Raised by a strict Christian father and a traditional mother, she finds herself at odds with the expectations of modern Nigeria to be staunchly Christian. Beatrice's birth name, Nwanyibuife, is truly her only tie to the Igbo tradition. Being trained in the British-Nigerian hybridity, Beatrice is aware that most of Nigeria now subscribes to Christianity and Western customs, while, much like in the Caribbean, still acknowledging the powers of the old ways.

Beatrice Nwanyibuife did not know these traditions and legends of her people. She was born as we have seen into a world apart; was baptized and sent to schools . . . she did carry a vague sense more acute at certain critical moments than others of being two different people (96)

Her father, like Eugene, pushes for modernity through education and religion. Beatrice, far more rebellious than Kambili, resists her father and refuses to feel emotion for him. His

expectations are strict and often followed with beatings, yet tied to an ideal of upward mobility for his family and his people.

*Cleanliness is next to godliness! Punctuality is the soul of business!* (A prelude this, she recalled with a smile now, to the flogging of late-comers to school on rainy mornings.) And then that gem of them all, [her father's] real favourite: *Procrastination is a lazy man's apology!* A maxim of mixed mintage, that; half-caste first fruits of a heady misalliance. Or as Ikem would have said, missionary mishmash! (100)

Even in Beatrice's memories of her father, he is presented as a man who values Christianity and seeks to stamp out paganism.

Ikem, Chris, and Beatrice all see the hypocrisy of Nigerian Christianity, yet it is Beatrice who feels it most keenly. She sees the problems not only in her father--representative of the successful Nigerian populace--but also her maid, Agatha, who is part of the everyday masses converted into "one of these new rapturous churches with which Bassa is infested nowadays" (76). She feels the judgment of her well-to-do father as well as the judgment of her servant for refusing to live a pious Christian life. Chris and Beatrice come into the kitchen after making love and Beatrice meets Agatha's scowling face. Chris asks:

"What's eating your maid?" he asked as soon as she had returned to the kitchen.

"Nothing. She is all smiles to you."

"Familiarity breeds contempt, then?"

"No, more than that. She is a prophetess of Jehovah."<sup>24</sup>

"And you are of the House of Baal."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The implication is that she is part of a strict Christian sect and the term "prophetess" is only a cynical response to her fanaticism.

“Exactly. Or worse, of the unknown god.” (106)

Beatrice bears the brunt of the disgust hurled at RCBs for refusing to accept Christianity as part of being Nigerian. Beatrice has no use for Christianity, but has no training or wisdom in the traditional faith. She is aware that unlike her house servant, Agatha, she cannot bend to Christianity, no matter how much Igbo culture is folded into it. However, Beatrice does not ascribe to any faith, until faith comes for her.

Her friends, her fellow RCBs, recognize spirit of the ancestors and tradition in Beatrice, even before she is aware of it. She is called “priestess,” “prophetess,” even “goddess” at different times in the novel, and she, while flattered, is lukewarm to this designation. Beatrice is Christian because she has a Christian name and, being separated from knowledge of her ancestral history, mocks their proffered title. But Achebe asserts,

“But knowing or not knowing does not save us from being known and even recruited and put to work . . . baptism is no antidote against possession by Agwu, the capricious god of diviners and artists. (96)

And so it is. Beatrice becomes a prophetess and begins her path to traditional faith. As more than half of the Nigerian population identify as Christian, Beatrice is outside of expected behavior. Just as Kambili complicates “authenticity” by embracing both experiences, so does Beatrice.

All of the major characters of the novel are RCBs, but in different ways. What is telling is that Beatrice is the only one to survive the corruption, silence, and executions that her comrades face. She grows throughout the novel to become a spiritual and political leader for the those left behind in the wake of the civil uprising due to the General naming himself “President-for-life,”

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<sup>25</sup> Baal is a demon considered to be second-in-command to Satan.

When talking to Chris Oriko after their intense, nearly spiritual, lovemaking, she tells him of her vision of the trouble to come.

“You called me a priestess. No, a prophetess, I think.”

...

“It comes and goes, I imagine.”

“Yes. It’s on now. And I see trouble building up for us. It will get to Ikem first.

No joking, Chris. He will be the precursor to make straight the way, But after him it will be you. We are all in it, Ikem, you, me, even Him. The thing is no longer a joke.” (105)

The only people who respect her and see her as being committed to her country and her identity happen to also be RCBs in their own right. The difference is while they all reject Christianity, she is not an atheist; she has faith even if she is unclear about what to do with this faith. Somehow, while still being on the fringe of her community, Beatrice forces her community back into the religion that has served them for generations.

When her companions are all murdered by the General, Ikem’s girlfriend, Elewa, discovers she is pregnant and Ikem is dead. Beatrice, once again moved by the gods, decides to hold a proper naming ritual for the child. Not fully knowing all of the rituals, Beatrice creates her own ritual for the child and the guests embrace her. She is still an outsider, much like any reconciled RCB, but she is welcome at the cookout.

The RCBs dealing with the rigidity of Christianity understand or feel that rejecting Christianity in any form is the rejection of their blackness. Christianity has, historically, improved the status of black people of the diaspora for more than a century and, for this reason, to turn their back on something that uplifts them and their community is treasonous, even if it is

oppressive to those who practice it. However, despite this, many RCBs leave the church and find their own paths to faith even if it means exile. Horace of *A Visitation of Spirits* confesses, “I remember being happy that I was taking a chance with my immortal soul, thinking that I would somehow win in the end and live still, feeling immortal in a mortal’s arms” (Kenan 250). It is their path to autonomy that drives them away from the church and into something more tangible, perhaps into the religion of their ancestry or into someone’s arms.

### 3 QUEER IN THE DIASPORA: THE SEX CHAPTER

Like the rest of those Sodomites  
 Even though you had beautiful kids and a wife  
 He still bent both ways, ain't no due process  
 For boys that become guls or verse vica [sic]  
 Field niggas control this  
 Pin the hollow point tip  
 On this gay rights activists  
 Goodie Mob, “Fly Away” 1998, *Still Standing*, 35-41

In these lyrics from the iconic Atlanta group, Goodie Mob, death is the punishment for a man who is queer. While not uncommon in rap and reggae songs, this song’s verse is important as it references “field niggas.” The general understanding is that enslaved people that were relegated to working in the field, instead of the big house, were more authentic, more black, more revolutionary. The house slaves are stereotypically known as having a better lifestyle than the field slaves and thereby were comfortable with the dehumanizing system of slavery. In other words, the house slaves upheld the system and aligned with whites, while the field slaves were



“truly” black. Goodie Mob’s verse suggests that they are field slaves and thereby in a position to punish gay blacks as being the traitorous house slaves. Rampant homophobia in black communities is nothing new.<sup>26</sup>

Violence is the order of the day, be it Jamaica, New York, or Nigeria. Dancehall reggae icon, Buju Banton, is most well-known for his song “Boom Bye Bye,” a song which encourages shooting and burning homosexuals.

Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head

Rude bwoy nah promote the nasty man, dem haffi dead

Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head

Rude bwoy nah promote no batty man, dem haffi dead (Banton 6-9)

This chorus is repeated three times in the song and opens with the sound of the gun, killing the gay man, and suggests that he does not promote that “nastiness.” Despite its virulent lyrics, “Boom Bye Bye” is still one of the most popular dancehall songs of all time. Part of its popularity in the states, the Caribbean, and Africa is its charge against homosexuality, especially as dancehall represents a sex-driven, gangster lifestyle, but also, that many people have no idea what the lyrics actually say--especially blacks in the states.

Even without fully understanding the lyrics of Buju, the sentiment is echoed throughout the diaspora, even in the works of the most educated members. Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, while considered at the time to be a groundbreaking work, and he, a scholar and a man of the people, aligns homosexuality with whiteness. Here, the dichotomy between field and house slaves rears its head again. A true black person would cling to that which could further the

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<sup>26</sup> Even as I write this, the black waitress serving me is disgusted by the two African men playing pool because she believes they are “batty bwoys,” also known as “battymen,” a derogatory term for gay men (batty = ass).

black race--i.e. birthing black babies. To not do so, reveals a lack of commitment to ending racial injustice.

In his 1968 work, Cleaver takes aim most pointedly at writer, James Baldwin, a forced representative of all homosexual black men, and suggests that what gay black people want more than anything is to be whitewashed by interracial sex. In Kathryn Bond Stockton's book, *Beautiful Bottoms, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer,"* she passionately states that for Cleaver, the black intellectual is no different than the black homosexual because to be mentally influenced by whites is the same as being sexually influenced by whites. The issue here is Cleaver's assumption that black queerness is always a sexually attraction to white queers. Flat, of course, as this idea is based on affirming slave stereotypes of black hypersexuality wherein heterosexuality is an act of defiance and homosexuality is an act of submissiveness and inferiority.

Cleaver states that the black intellectual "becomes the white man's most valuable tool in oppressing other blacks," (*Soul on Ice* 103), finds his "extreme embodiment" in the "black homosexual." Having the white man in or on your mind is apparently analogous, by Cleaver's belief, to having him inside you. And having him inside you deranges the mind. (Stockton 159)

At the heart of this is Cleaver's (and others) belief that black homosexuality is a rejection of being black. It is highly problematic because Cleaver's claim highlights a stereotype of black hypersexuality that was created from outside of the community and continues the storyline that blacks are inherently heterosexual and breed like animals, and that therefore homosexuality is a rejection of blackness. Cleaver's work has influenced generations, convincing them that homosexuality is attached to whiteness and reveals a deep racial self-loathing. Douglas Taylor's

“Three Lean Cats in a Hall of Mirrors: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver on Race and Masculinity,” analyzes Cleaver’s bionationalist stance. “Cleaver ridiculously reads Baldwin’s homosexuality as a symptom of a racial death wish . . . Cleaver prefers Mailer’s romanticized and stereotypical representation of black masculinity and violent, sexual, spontaneous, and rebellious” (87). In one breath, Cleaver attacks white power structures, and, in another, embraces the stereotypes created by those structures.<sup>27</sup>

Never mind that James Baldwin focused predominantly on the racial injustices levied against black people, never mind that gay black intellectuals have always been willing to put themselves on the line for racial justice (see Langston Hughes or Claude McKay), or that the false narrative of black sexuality was created from white external forces, only to be policed from black internal forces. Homophobia within the black community actually plays into stereotypes about black savagery and animalistic urges, suggesting that black bodies simply seek out sex and that sex is hardcoded into black genes. To affirm this, affirms the racist fears of black men stalking and preying on white women. To affirm this, affirms the death of Emmett Till, the false incarceration of the Central Park Five, and the countless purse-clutching, 911-calling, paralyzing fear that white people have of the animalistic black man.

While this seems obvious, perhaps simplistic, there is a long history of rejecting black homosexuals--also RCBs--from the larger community by virtue of this notion. Early on, heterosexuality, or at least performed heterosexuality, was instilled as the standard by black nationalists and pan-Africanists because homosexuality is seen as divergent from blackness. The type of Pan-Africanism that exists today is a far cry of negritude which the only true factor of connecting, unifying, and affirming black identity is a common struggle of racial oppression.

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<sup>27</sup> It is worthy to note that Cleaver not only embraced those stereotypes, but attempts to embody them as he once confessed to practicing rape on black women in order to prepare to rape white women.

During the 1956 *First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists*, each participant discussed racial oppression and the need for racial pride. It is important to reference this conference because of the presence of three of the most influential writers in the Negritude Movement: Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, and Franz Fanon. In the introduction of the journal, the anonymous writer makes a bold claim: black identity is, and should be, both communal and individualistic. Leopold Senghor echoes this sentiment in his piece, “The spirit of civilisation[sic].”

That does not mean that the Negro . . . of to-day must turn their backs on reality and refuse to interpret the social realities of their background, their race, their nation, their class, far from it. We have seen that the spirit of the African Negro civilisation became incarnate in the most day-to-day realities. But always it transcends these realities so as to express the meaning of the world. (Senghor 64)

While Senghor did not directly reference homosexuality or gender identity, his statement suggests a place for blacks of differing backgrounds united to face the common racial struggles regardless of their individual experiences which can be easily applied to black queers. Unfortunately, Senghor’s call to unify is lost in contemporary ideas of Pan-Africanism which holds fast to concrete expressions of blackness and rejects queer RCBs as being traitors to the race. The fear of being discovered as gay is to be seen not only as worthy of loathing, violence, and perhaps, death, but also dangerous to the black community.

Simply put, homosexuality is, within this monolithic black mindset, a white thing. In Elijah Ward’s article, “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity, and the US Black Church,” Ward discusses how the combination of black nationalism and black spirituality influences communities to reject black homosexual members in a manner which Ward (and Crichlow) term

*bionationalism*. Bionationalism essentially refers to an ideology which considers being heterosexual as an act of rebellion against white supremacy.

The fallout from this ideological joining together of religion-driven homophobia and bionationalism has been that whiteness and homosexuality are both understood to connote weakness and femininity; conversely, black masculinity has been constructed in hypermasculine terms. (496)

However this does not address the presence of homosexuality in Africa predating the presence of colonists and slave traders. In Bisi Alimi's article in *The Guardian*, "If You Say Being Gay is Not African, You Don't Know Your History," Alimi speaks to the erasure of homosexuality in Africa.

African culture is no stranger to homosexual behaviours and acts.

For example, in my local language (Yoruba), the word for "homosexual" is *adofuro*, a colloquialism for someone who has anal sex. It might sound insulting and derogatory, however, the point is there is a word for the behaviour. Moreover, this is not a new word; it is as old as the Yoruba culture itself.

In the northern part of Nigeria, *yan daudu* is a Hausa term to describe effeminate men who are considered to be wives to men. While the Yoruba word might be more about behaviour than identity, this Hausa term is more about identity. (Alimi)

In many African nations, terms to define queer members have existed long before any Western influence but an understanding of homosexuality in the idealized pre-colonial Africa has been erased as bionationalism becomes a tenet for true blackness.

### 3.1 Queerness in Black Lives and Black Pop Culture

With this bionationalist view, it is no wonder that racially critical blacks displaying non-heteronormative behavior are excluded and even tormented. In the 2016 movie, *Moonlight*, the main character, Chiron, must deal with his sexuality in an environment in which black masculinity is not just expected, but required. Chiron lives in Liberty City, a poor, drug-infested, violence-driven community in Miami. At ten years old, Chiron is already excluded from his peers because of his shy, effeminate nature. In a city where “hard men”<sup>28</sup> prey on their weaker counterparts, Chiron has already been set in his role as the victim and his classmates as “hard men” in training. His mother, Paula, is in a dwindling spiral of drug addiction and frequently takes out her loss of control on Chiron. She resents his presence and uses Chiron’s then-perceived sexuality as an attack on him. While we do not often hear what she says to him in her periods of withdrawal, it is clear by her facial expressions and muted screaming, as well as Chiron’s looks of quiet shame, that Paula is berating him for his sexuality.

In the first chapter of the movie, titled “Little,” Chiron is quite clearly alone. His community bullies him, his mother is relatively absent, and he must fend for himself. Chiron retreats deeply into himself and fears confronting his homosexuality that his mother has already pinned on him, until he meets Juan, the Cuban local drug dealer. Juan steps in as a social father, a non-biological father figure to a terrified and lonely Chiron. Battling his self-loathing, placed on him by his mother and his community, Chiron seems to believe he will always be something of a pariah. He is not a “hard man,” and there’s nothing worse in these black communities than to be perceived as “soft.”

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<sup>28</sup> “Hard man is a term that originated in Great Britain in the 19th century to define a man who is tough, aggressive, and self-assured, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but has been adopted by both African and Caribbean colonized peoples to describe a man of machismo.

As a point of departure, the debate in social media about the male romper falls neatly into this fear. After a fashion designer launched a series of rompers for men--a one piece shorts set--the black community took to social media to decry it. Memes went viral of people threatening to beat their friends if they caught them wearing it. Black twitter created a firestorm of hate, suggesting that wearing the romper automatically made the wearer gay. In response to the hateful comments around rompers, Terrence Craft of *Blavity* wrote a thinkpiece on homophobia in the black community, titled “How Male Rompers Highlighted the Toxic Male Fragility and Homophobia in the Black Community”:

Early on black boys are taught that being gay is perhaps the greatest sin they could commit—a sin worse than murder, rape or violence in some households. For many black boys, simply living in the truth of their own sexual orientation becomes a fate worse than death. Some families go as far as to disown their gay black sons, and to threaten violence against them. Black boys must follow an obscenely strict gender standard, rooted in exaggerated machismo and emotionlessness. (Craft)

Craft’s claim reifies that black queer people experience by simply “living in their truth.” It is no wonder that Chiron is terrified. He is clear about what this realization--his sexuality--means for his entire existence. He is young, still working out his sexuality, but his mother, in some ways, has already decided that for him. Chiron’s social father, Juan, sees Paula smoking crack in the open and confronts her. He loves Chiron. He has not bought into the rejection of Chiron because of his sexuality. Their exchange is awkward and painful, as it is one of his lackeys that sold her the crack.

Paula: Motherfucker. And don't give me that "you gotta get it from somewhere shit" nigga, I'm getting it from *you*. But you gon' raise my son, right? (smokes crack and blows it towards Juan.) You ever seen the way he walk, Juan?

Juan: Watch your damn mouth.

Paula: You gon' tell him why the other boys kick his ass all the time? Huh? But you gon' raise my son. (Moonlight)

The underpinnings of this scene is that both of them understand the difficult life Chiron has ahead of him. While Juan would rather not address it directly and focus on nurturing the child, Paula is hellbent on instilling shame into Chiron, making sure that his shame about his sexuality distracts him from her addiction and poor parenting.

Black queers who are completely immersed in a black environment may escape the menace of racism, but still feel the sting, trauma, and isolation brought on by black homophobia. While Chiron experiences this throughout his life, viewers only get a slice of life of Lionel Higgins's experience in another breakout movie, released in 2014, *Dear White People*. *Dear White People* takes on issues of interracial dating, black militantism, and homophobia at the fictitious predominantly white college, Winchester University. Lionel Higgins is a quiet, introverted student, a writer (we must give a nod to James Baldwin here), and is initially completely isolated from the black students on campus because of his homosexuality, much in the way that they are isolated from the white majority for their race. In one scene, Lionel discusses transferring into the black dorms after being bullied by his white roommates, and it is evident that being immersed with other black people is the last thing he wants.

Dean Fairbanks: I might have an opening. Maybe it'd be good to be around...you know.



Lionel: Dean. The worst thing about high school, and believe me it was a long list, were the Black kids.

Dean Fairbanks: Maybe it's in your head. Sure, sometimes our folks can be intolerant around people like you. Homo --

Lionel: -- I don't believe in labels. (Dear White People)

Lionel already knows what to expect in an all-black space. He is terrified. In a later scene, Lionel awkwardly enters the black cafeteria--located in the dorm he has now been reassigned--and he is sitting barely five minutes before the black militant students start interrogating him. Initially, it seems that they are interrogating him because he is new, but a more insidious reason begins to rear its head. They want to know if he identifies as black and with their cause, and their rationale is his decidedly "not black enough" behavior, marked by his homosexuality.

Reggie: Finally made it in.

Curls: You must have been terrified when you saw "Armstrong/Parker" written on your moving assignment.

Lionel: I was just finishing up. (he prepares to leave the cafeteria)

Reggie: Do Black people scare you?

Lionel: (realizing it's true) No.

...

Reggie: How come you don't come to BSU?<sup>29</sup>

Lionel: I listen to Mumford and Sons and watch Robert Altman movies. You honestly think I'm Black enough for the union?

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<sup>29</sup> BSU is the Black Student Union.

Dreads: Yo, I love Robert Altman. Mutha fucka goes in.

Curls: (after a beat) We're not all homophobes you know. Black folks?

...

Reggie: You're the "Black voice" of the Bugle now. We're just trying to decide if you are friend or foe. (Dear White People)

One of the reasons both *Moonlight* and *Dear White People* attracted such attention, especially in the black community, is the honest portrayal of the tensions between being marginalized by race and doubly marginalized by sexuality. Art reflects life, and the problematic ostracization of black queers is more than common knowledge. Often, black and latino queers are excommunicated from their communities--both from their families and from their churches. According to Emily Bridges from *Advocates For Youth*, black LGBTQ teens experience a staggeringly disproportionate amount of verbal and physical abuse in their households than their white counterparts, leading to many LGBTQ adolescents to run away from home. An example would be the community of the piers in the 1970s and 80s in New York City that were predominantly populated by queer people of color. These children, sometimes as young as 10 or 11, lived on the streets of NYC. While only 3% of the black community identifies as queer, 42% of homeless teens are LGBTQ and 65% of all homeless people are people of color (Bridges).

Yet, the rejection of black homosexuals is far from being limited to black Americans. Several African leaders support the terrorization, incarceration, and death of African LGBTQs--presidents from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Gambia to name a few. Alimi, who explained that queerness existed before colonialism, takes black homophobes even further to task:

One factor is the increased popularity of fundamental Christianity, by way of American televangelists, since the 1980s. While Africans argued that

homosexuality was a western import, they in turn used a western religion as the basis for their argument.

Alimi suggests that it is the influence of Western culture that has created intolerance, *not* homosexuality, among Africans. The connection between Western Christianity and homophobia in the diaspora is clear. According to Tim Padgett of *Amnesty International*, homosexuality is still illegal in 38 African countries. I believe the same can be said for intolerance in the Caribbean, as 11 Caribbean countries have anti-sodomy laws which the punishment ranges from incarceration 8 years to life if the offenders manage to not be killed or maimed by local vigilantes. Jamaica was named the most homophobic place on earth by Tim Padgett for *Time* magazine in 2006.

Jamaica may be the worst offender, but much of the rest of the Caribbean also has a long history of intense homophobia. Islands like Barbados still criminalize homosexuality, and some seem to be following Jamaica's more violent example. Last week two CBS News producers, both Americans, were beaten with tire irons by a gay-bashing mob while vacationing on Saint Martin. (Padgett)

The main thread that runs through homophobia in the diaspora is a belief that homosexuality is not part of black culture. Homosexuality represents submissiveness, weakness, and moral depravity which for black countries asserting their independence is antithetical to their cause. In essence, black independence is thwarted by black homosexuality. There is a corporal hierarchy in the discussion of black authenticity and race trumps sexual orientation.

Even if a member of the black community is active and vocal in causes surrounding racial justice, the individual could possibly be denounced or erased. James Baldwin is one of the greatest examples of the insistence of black nationals that one must be either black or

homosexual. James Baldwin, an African American writer during the decades leading up to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, often wrote about racial injustices in the United States as well as taking part of several movements focused on civil rights. Baldwin's isolation comes from outside of himself. Branded effeminate, flamboyant, and emotional, Baldwin is seen as not a "true" black man. In Kendall Thomas's "'Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing': Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity," he analyzes why Baldwin's contemporaries (and successors) felt that Baldwin's "poor" performance of blackness justifies his exclusion from the black literary pantheon. "[There is a] heteronormative logic that conditions the ascription of 'authentic black identity on the repudiation of gay or lesbian identity'" (Thomas 59). It is not Baldwin's contribution to black literature, nor his involvement in the Civil Right Movement, nor his oratory, but his sexuality that he is being judged against. "Baldwin's detractors magnify his sexuality in order to renounce him" (59).

Richard Wright, literary icon and Baldwin's mentor, also joins in on this attack. James Campbell's book, *Exiled in Paris*, highlights Wright's attack of Baldwin. "[Wright] felt uncomfortable in his presence. . . . 'Yeah, he can write,' a friend of Baldwin's recalled Wright saying at the time, 'but he's a faggot'" (32). Later on in Campbell's text, he suggests that Wright believed that Baldwin attempted to shame him in front of a white woman; a situation practically inexcusable, especially given Wright's notions of black solidarity. Here is the end of Wright's recollection:

I said nothing. I let him empty himself of his abuse of me in public. Finally Balwin [*sic*] and his white lady friend rose and left. Himes rejoined me.

"That was horrible," Himes sighed.

"Well, I guess it's better for it to be said openly than just thought of in private," I

said.

“But he said that in front of that white woman,” Chester Himes voiced the heart of his and my objection.

“That was the point,” I said. (113)

Luckily, Campbell also includes Himes’ and Baldwin’s recollection of the same event, which prove to differ from Wright’s account. However, the actual account is not what is notable. What is important is Wright’s creation of a Baldwin who is racially disloyal and that his belief is affirmed by another black male writer.

The heart of the issue is that his racial disloyalty is tied to his homosexuality. And yet, Baldwin is not the only black writer to experience exclusion because of sexuality. Contemporary Jamaican writer, Staceyann Chin, is widely known for her scathing comments regarding the binary between national identity and homosexuality. In her book, *The Other Side of Paradise*, she shares stories of her childhood and her acceptance of her otherness. Chin explains about the homophobia rampant in Jamaica and how it was her impetus to emigrate to the United States. Kelly Baker Joseph’s “Dissonant Desires: Staceyann Chin and the Queer Politics of a Jamaican Accent” references Chin’s retelling of her experiences as an alienated queer Jamaican woman:

For Chin, migration to the United States in 1997 meant the liberty to live and love publicly ... the difficulty Chin faces in maintaining a connection between her ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and race was evident even in this model safe space. ... In her work, Chin struggles to hold these realities together; she struggles to be Black, Lesbian, Caribbean without the gaps that hyphenated identities necessarily involve ...

I will not be forced to choose

To mark one side of me invisible so you can see me

One dimension and frail

I am Black

And Lesbian

And anything else--this body can hold it all

Asian

And Activist and Artist (S. Chin, "Part I")

For these reasons, Staceyann Chin tends to get most of her press and her notoriety within queer and/or feminist circles, but little to none within straight Jamaican circles, or black circles for that matter, despite that she is bringing necessary attention to black Asian Caribbean writers.

Michelle Cliff, another Jamaican writer, also shares her experiences with her race held in opposition to sexuality in her essay, "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This In Fire," in her books of essays of the same name. Much of the essay is retooled in her novel *Abeng*, a quasi-autobiographical novel of her childhood in Jamaica. In this account--which does not appear in the novel--Cliff is twenty-seven and reconnecting with her cousin abroad when they are faced with racism at a local bar where they are not being served. She is angry; her cousin incredulous. However, when they shift venues to a bar staffed by gay Italians, her cousin joins in with the white men in mocking the gay waiters. When he leans in and whispered to her in a conspiratorial tone: "'Why you want to bring us to a battyman den, lady?' (*Battyman* = *faggot* in Jamaican) I keep quiet" (Cliff 22). Her cousin, in fact, her entire family, does not know yet that she is lesbian and his comment cuts her to the core. "The realization that home (especially for the

“lesbian of color”) is often a site of alienation as well as identification” (Chin 136). The ease with which a black man who was denigrated just one bar earlier, now shares in the denigration of homosexuals in the next bar, speaks to the trauma black Caribbean LGBTQ writers experience that often lead them into silence in order to keep their position in black society.

### **3.2 RCBs and Queerness in Black American Literature**

While I have only discussed the issue of homophobia in pop culture, it is even more virulent and traumatic in literature because writers heighten the experiences of LGBTQ black people by simply giving the readers a snapshot, rather than a detailed account of daily microaggressions and physical threats, both real and perceived. However, in all of these accounts, in literature and in lived experiences, the repetition, the drum beat, tells all queer black people that their sexuality excludes them from being truly black.

“True” blackness set against queerness is depressingly hashed out in *A Visitation of Spirits*. Horace Cross deals with reconciling these identities. Blackness for Horace is attached to his family line, the Crosses, and his sexuality is attached to the world outside of his family.

The Cross family is plagued by their pasts, specifically their lineage and their ties to the church. Three Cross men act as the protagonists of the novel: the elder, Ezekiel Cross (Zeke), the young preacher, James Malachai Greene (Jimmy), and the troubled teen, Horace Cross. Jimmy Greene acts as the bridge between the two Crosses and their experiences. Jimmy Greene is a preacher and a school principal who struggles with holding fast to “ol time religion” and his modern education. Ezekiel represents the “ol time religion” and the traditions and expectations of the small tobacco town of Tim’s Creek, North Carolina, while Horace speaks to Jimmy’s more modern sensibilities that push against rigid constructions of identity.

The novel is a mix of narrative styles, ranging from first person narrator to screenplay

dialogue, as well as a constant shift between main characters. However, the anchor of the piece is Horace's gruesome suicide in front of Jimmy. Not surprisingly, Horace's death is rarely talked about by the survivors. Horace is an aberration, a blight on the Cross legacy, and his death, while tragic, is also a relief for the Cross clan. Better him dead than living in sin. He is considered by the Cross men in their mind, but never aloud, and most often with remorse for failing him--that is, failing to "straighten" him out. In the novel, the timeline of Horace's life is non-linear, shown as flashbacks that both the final Horace and the readers witness. I have pieced it together more chronologically in order to see the progression of Horace's despair.

Horace Cross frightens his family because he is the last of a long, respected line of Cross men. He is supposed to be virile and continue the long line of holy men, ensuring that the Cross family retain their near mythical identity for eternity. It seems that every Cross man is chasing the legend of their forefather Ezra Cross, comparing their power and virility against his looming legacy. Ezra Cross, a former slave who amassed over a hundred acres of land in Tim's Creek after Emancipation and fathered twelve children, is more than just a memory for the Cross clan. He represents the spirit of the town--in fact, the First Baptist Church of Tim's Creek sits on the land he acquired. When Ezra's son, Thomas, bequeaths Johnnie Mae, his favorite daughter, the second largest parcel of land next to his eldest son Ezekiel, Johnnie Mae then marries Malachai Greene "another farming family with an exceptional amount of land for a black family in the 1920s," and the family becomes cemented as the most respected and powerful family in Tim's Creek (Kenan 116).

The progeny that follows all chase the shadow of Ezra. Jimmy constantly ruminates on the men that preceded him. In fact, he sees himself as a Cross, not a Greene, simply because of the Cross legacy. Ezekiel Cross, now one of the eldest living Crosses, uses his father Thomas



Cross and Ezra Cross as his own litmus test of himself. “There he was, again, measuring thing by his father. Had he not come to terms with the fact that he was not Thomas Cross and that it was alright--alright--to be Ezekiel Cross?” (Kenan 55). The family, despite the power and presence of Johnnie Mae (though she has a masculine name), is decidedly patriarchal and heterosexist.

Their values are shared not only within the family, but within the entirety of Tim’s Creek. Tim’s Creek operates as a microcosm of insulated black communities everywhere. In order to be seen as throwing off the yoke of oppression, these communities cling to bionationalism and become rigid, intolerant, limiting. In Maisha Wester’s article, “Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan’s Re-inscription of Difference in *A Visitation of Spirits*,” Wester discusses the trauma the Crosses inflict on Horace in an attempt to preserve their powerful and “good” black identity.

The Crosses are particularly determined to maintain stable racial identities and loyalties, and therefore suggest how heteronormative constructs of patriarchy are traditionally grounded in ideals of racial purity as well . . . the Cross lineage are sexually threatened as much by contact with miscegenated bodies as by homosexual transgression. (1041)

Once again, a limiting notion of “good” black behavior becomes a yoke by which RCBs are strangled.

Horace, the RCB of *A Visitation of Spirits*, is trapped on several levels, but most powerfully by his sexuality. Horace, the youngest and last of the Cross clan bears his own cross--his homosexuality. When he becomes aware of his sexuality, he is gripped by fear. His family, his community, his black world would disavow him. As a Cross, this is the worst possible fate. He is expected to uphold the image Crosses worked so hard to create, and further the image of

the strong black men of Tim's Creek.

He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as the community was concerned. First, he loved men; a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. And second, he didn't quite know who he was. That, I don't fully understand, for they had told him, taught him from the cradle on. (Kenan 188)

As he realizes that he cannot escape his sexual identity, Horace turns to Jimmy, perhaps the most liberated of the Cross clan, for advice. Jimmy, too, struggles with his deviation from the Cross requirements--a bit too educated, a bit too modern, a bit too soft, perhaps even bisexual.

JIMMY (*becoming visibly concerned*): What is it, Horace, you're--

HORACE (*quickly*): I think I'm a homosexual.

(*Jimmy pauses; makes no motion, but is obviously thinking.*)

JIMMY: You "think"? Why do you think? Have you been with a man?

HORACE: Yes.

JIMMY (*smiling, puts his hand on Horace's shoulder*): Horace, we've all done a little...you know...experimenting. It's a part of growing up. (Kenan 113)

At this point, Jimmy announces that he has had sexual relations with men, but it was a phase. He tries to convince Horace that it is a phase for him too, except Horace is not convinced. Exasperated, Jimmy insists that if Horace would only pray, he would chase away his deviant nature. At that moment, Horace realizes that Jimmy, while progressive, would not be a supporter or even a listening ear for Horace as he grapples with embracing his sexuality.

As Jimmy observes, Horace's homosexuality, though unacceptable, is merely a

“simple, normal deviation” among the community. However such “deviation” becomes and unforgivable “flaw” when compounded by Horace’s refusal to align himself with their racially essentialist ideologies and behavior. (Wester 1046)

And Horace knows it.

The strict heterosexist ideology of Tim’s Creek is clear to Horace even before he accepts his own “deviant” sexuality. When in the seventh grade, Horace is faced with Gideon Stone, a boy in his class rumored to be gay, he is horrified. The kids circle around Gideon, hurls insults while Horace looks on, nearly invisible. At this age, Gideon has already accepted his role as the person to whom the entire community can expel their hatred and their ignorance. This is the moment that Horace learns the rules, the need to present himself as a man. Horace recognizes this and is baffled by Gideon’s confidence in the face of their bullying, praying that they do not sense that Horace is more like Gideon than like them. However, Gideon knows, senses perhaps, and taunts Horace into joining in the black boys’ witchhunt. “Before the laughter died down, like a snake going in for the kill, Gideon’s voice darted out: ‘So Horace? Aren’t you going to join in on the queer-baiting?’ Gideon looked both amused and bored” (Kenan 99). With the audience of his classmates, Horace nervously stumbles on some insults in an attempt to align himself with the bullies.

“‘Faggot.’ Horace almost whispered the condemnation, but it sizzled in the air.

Gideon turned around and looked at Horace. He paid no attention to the snickering boys who stood about Horace; he just fixed Horace with a gaze whose intensity frightened him. . . . Now, looking at the phantoms, Horace realized how it has seemed to be more than an angry glare. It was more of a curse. A prophecy.” (Kenan 100)

Horace as he reviews his life before he commits suicide with his grandfather's rifle, comes to terms with the truth: he would never be able to escape his sexuality, nor perform heterosexuality, and Gideon knows it.

The major difference between Gideon Stone and Horace Cross is lineage. The Stones are the polar opposite of the Crosses. While the Crosses represent perfect blackness--heteronormative, religious, upstanding, wealthy--the Stones are represented as deviant, lazy, backsliding bootleggers. Kenan describes them in emasculating language: the men are weak, the women overly strong and big-boned. The Crosses are bastions of respectability, hence why the male children are mostly named after biblical figures--James, Thomas, Ezekiel, to name a few--while the Stones' male children go by nicknames which are effeminate--Bo-Peep, Boy-boy, Hot Rod, and the like-- and therefore do not represent an upstanding patriarchal family. Creating the Crosses on one end of the spectrum and the Stones at the other--even their surnames belie black respectability politics!--Kenan sets the stage for Horace's deep-seated fear of being more of a Stone than a Cross.<sup>30</sup> He fears, justly so, that the community will revile him for not being the "right" type of black man.

His anxiety is only heightened when he is forced years later, in high school, to complete a group project with Gideon. In other circumstances, Horace would have jumped at the chance, as Kenan makes it clear that Gideon is brilliant. However, Horace fears being associated with Gideon, fears that he will not be able to resist his urges. His only hope is to use the Stones' position in the community to convince his family to insist he does not work with Gideon. "Then he realized--it had almost been an afterthought--what his family would say about him working so closely with the son of a bootlegger. He knew he had stumbled upon the solution" (Kenan 147).

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, their surnames reflect their positions in the community and their value. Crosses are the religious leaders of the community--forcing readers to think on the cross, the burden that Jesus took on for the sins of man--while the Stones are the lowlifes and have earned the isolation and attacks hurled at them like stones.

Unfortunately, his plan backfires. Ezekiel Cross chastises him for judging the Stones--even though we see Zeke judging people consistently throughout the novel--and insists Horace work with the one boy who is causing him to question his sexuality.

Perhaps, if Zeke knew the battle that was raging in Horace, he would have said no, but discussing sexuality in the Cross household, in Tim's Creek, is nonexistent. Wester analyzes Tim's Creek and its determined ignorance of homosexuality as a lens for the larger black community.

*A Visitation of Spirits* repeatedly illustrates how formulations of black identity based upon sexual othering are problematic and how contemporary black refusal to challenge these formulations perpetuates oppression within their community.

(Wester 1035)

By willfully pretending that homosexuality does not exist in this community, these citizens stifle and traumatize their queer members.

Horace is suffocating long before his first time alone with Gideon. In some ways, it is Horace's defining moment. Alone with Gideon, Horace must battle himself and his desire.

At one point Horace shifted his position, and to his embarrassment noticed a tension in his pants. Terror clutched at his heart [ . . . ] Images of Viola

Honeyblue Stone throwing an entire car engine after him, her face contorted into a mask of hatred, yelling, Faggot!, the other men busting guts from laughing.

(Kenan 152)

The image Horace conjures in his mind is that of a large, masculine-looking woman attacking and berating him, marking his homosexuality as weakness, and, coming from a patriarchal family, he recognizes this as blight on his manhood. However, this is no ordinary

woman, she is a Stone, and she represents the type of blackness that he has long been indoctrinated to resent. “Women especially shunned Viola, saying no more than Good day, and even that grudgingly” (Kenan 98). If Viola rejects him, a mannish woman considered the lowest of Tim’s Creek, then he truly has no place in the black community.

The heterosexist nature of Tim’s Creek--and the Cross clan, specifically--does not allow for any deviance. Blackness as lauded in this novel is not uncommon--it is the very definition of bionationalism. Even Jimmy accepts this ideology as he feels shame about how the Cross clan seems to have fewer and fewer children with each generation. The men were expected to populate the Cross clan, so there would always be enough Crosses to work the tobacco farm and preach in the church. Even the idolized Thomas Cross falls short by only having five children (Kenan 115). Since bionationalism is closely attached to black identity, producing heirs is vital to maintaining the bloodline.

[Kenan] not only challenges African American communities to recognize the multiple ways they perpetuate various oppressions but also how their exclusion of certain bodies only harms the very community they seek to protect and maintain. (Wester 1051)

For the youngest and final Cross child to be homosexual--thereby unable to produce a Cross heir--is harrowing for the ideal black family in Tim’s Creek. Horace must do his duty as a black man, as a Cross man.

He tries. Horace decides to avoid any interaction first his first love and first sexual experience, Gideon, and get a girlfriend. He goes steady with Gracie Mae and distances himself from Gideon and starts hanging out with the white students. He has sex with her a few times, but their relationship fizzles and he is relieved (Kenan 161). He is relieved because his image as a

potent black man is now accepted, but he also does not have to pretend to be sexually interested in her either. Unfortunately, his sexual orientation has not changed and he finds himself struggling with an attraction to a white male classmate. “Horace was pondering his feeling about Rick, telling himself that the sensation he felt in his stomach was camaraderie not attraction, admiration not lust” (Kenan 161). Jarred from his thoughts, Horace is confronted by Gideon, who now feels like a jilted lover, and must face his fears yet again.

This time, Horace is committed to his performance of heterosexuality. Gideon attempts to seduce Horace in the locker room and is rewarded with a vicious punch in the face. Time stands still. Horace realizes that he has hurt the one man he loves, not just physically, but emotionally, and there is no possible reconciliation. Gideon, hurt to his core, tells Horace the one thing he does not want to hear: he is gay and nothing will change it.

I see what you think you’re doing with your ‘new’ friends. But remember, black boy, you heard it here first: You’re a faggot, Horace. You know? You’re a faggot. You can run, you can hide, but when the shit comes down ... you suck cock, you don’t eat pussy. (Kenan 164)

The fact that he calls Horace “black boy” is telling. Gideon is suggesting that Horace will have to reconcile being both gay and black, not one or the other.

It is impossible for Horace to live both aspects of his identity; not with his family operating as the true marker of blackness. In Eva Tetterborn’s “‘But What if I Can’t Change?’ she suggests that Tim’s Creek is built on exclusion based on single traits and these traits align the excluded with whiteness.

Horace is faced with the decision to be accepted as a black man by his peers, or to be perceived and sexually deviant and socially white; in either case he is faced

with a denial of specific object attachments none of which can be removed from his psyche without wounding it severely. (252)

Horace can embrace his homosexuality while surrounded by white peers (which happens later), but he will have to hide his blackness. He can embrace his blackness, but he will have to hide his homosexuality. Gideon is offering a third choice: embrace both. However, Horace has too long been trained to accept this type of hybridity and lashes out again at Gideon, calling him sickening. "I'm sickening. At least I know what I am" (Kenan 164).

Gideon sees Horace's struggle, but since he is not required to be a pillar of the community, a person to be emulated, he has long embraced his identity and has a lack of empathy, while Horace flees into a white circle where he can explore his sexuality. Especially since Tim's Creek is quite segregated, Horace can experiment without circulating any rumors about his queerness. However, instead of finding peace, Horace now becomes a pariah in Tim's Creek for his new social circle, and comes to the realization that just spending time with his white friends creates the very rumors he wanted to avoid.

At first, the black male students start avoiding him. Soon, his family starts noticing a change. When he arrives at Thanksgiving dinner late, with a newly pierced ear, the Crosses unleash their disgust.

HORACE: All the guys. That is...the group, the boys...I...we--

JONNIE MAE (*to ZEKE*): Uh-huh. you see, Zeke? You see? What did I tell you? Now it starts this way, but how will it end? (*Stands.*) No better sense than to go on and follow whatever them white fools do. You'd follow them to hell, wouldn't you?

HORACE: I--



RUTHESTER (*moving to comfort her*): Mamma, it ain't that bad. He just--

JONNIE MAE: He *just* pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts. (184)

In this scene, Horace's grandmother attaches Horace's earring with sexual deviancy which is, according to black people, part of being white.

Their suspicion and resistance to his new circle of friends only serves to distance Horace from the black community. He joins a drama troupe in Crosstown, made up of a motley crew of white, black, and Latino actors engaging in a complicated orgiastic lifestyle. It is here that Horace can fully explore his sexuality with no burden of being seen as a "pervert."

Unfortunately, his new world leaves him hollow; he does not experience the intimacy and safety that he felt with Gideon and his blackness is either ignored or fetishized. With Gideon, he is black, gay, and a Cross, while in this space he is flattened to a sex object. He is alone.

There is one other black man in the troupe, Everett Church Harrington IV (ECH IV, in Horace's mind), who Horace pines over. Everett carries himself with importance, as much importance as Horace should as a Cross, and Horace is drawn to it and also embittered by it. "[Everett's] father was a law professor, a descendant of Boston freedmen with Beacon Hill addresses; his mother of old Washington, D.C., stock and position." (Kenan 218). His anger is born of Everett's confidence, and while he has prestige, Everett reminds him of Gideon. Everett has the promise of being a lover that will allow Horace to be black, gay, and a Cross; like Gideon, Everett is vicious and mean, but unlike Gideon, he directs it at Horace.

Horace recoils and seeks out another racial outlier, Antonio Santangelo, who is Puerto Rican and Italian from Brooklyn, to be his lover. Antonio is not Gideon, nor is he Everett.

Horace liked Antonio. Physically. They were not tender, they were animal; they

were not loving, they were sex partners. He did not *love* Antonio. Now that he tasted the forbidden fruit, he was filled with regret. Now he wished he had something more than sweat and orgasms. (Kenan 224)

During their interactions, they toss racial epithets at each other which initially seem a bond between the two racial outcasts of the group (or course with the exception of ECH IV), but instead it marks their personal struggles within a group of predominantly white queers.

Horace still resists being defined by his sexuality, just like Lionel from *Dear White People*, and does not subscribe to labels--one of the biggest markers of RCBs. However, the pressure he feels as the last hope of the Cross family, of the “right” type of black man, still looms large. Horace reveals a bit of his familial pressure to Antonio after they have had sex.

“You know, I often think of how I’m going to make my family proud of me.”

“Don’t you think they’re already proud?”

“No I’m mean really proud. I’m the next generation.”

“How?”

“I got my plans.”

“Look out world. Superfag is on the move.” (Kenan 224)

Horace hates being called fag as it reminds him of Gideon on that fateful day. They have sex again, but clearly the line is drawn. Antonio doesn’t understand the pressure Horace faces which keeps their relationship purely sexual, never intimate.

Starved for a deeper relationship, Horace is still enamored with ECH IV. Horace, braver than he was with Gideon, deigns to tell ECH IV his attraction. It is spectacularly awkward. However ECH IV is not Gideon. He is cruel, his heart is calcified, and has no interest in a black boy from rural Tim’s Creek. After Horace tells him--in person this time, not in a note--Everett

rejects him and tells him he already has a lover. We later find out that the lover is the white blue-eyed Southerner, Edmund. Horace is crushed; he understands everything about his rejection. Everett has chosen his sexuality over his blackness; he is a light-skinned black man with a good pedigree (the city version of Horace), favored by white men, and adored by all.

While Horace is attempting to belong to a new community, one that will accept his queerness, he is becoming increasingly rejected from his home.

Cocksucker.

Oreo.

He grabbed the gun and stood and ran to the front door, through the shadows, past the voices. His heart once again reminded him of his mortality, as he begged,

Stop. Stop. Oh, please. Stop. The voices grew louder, harsher.

Homo-suck-shual!

Ashamed. Be ashamed. (87)

Their suspicion is that Horace has turned away from his blackness; they believe because he is homosexual and interacts with whites in an area that is socially segregated, he has abandoned his identity. In his descent into madness, Horace believes it too.

Envisioning a doppelganger of himself, Horace watches as his clone paints himself white in the costume barn of the drama troupe. “What are you doing? But the reflection of himself continued to cover his entire face with white goo, deftly, expertly, with fingers, Horace’s fingers, that seemed accustomed to this odd activity. As if it were normal” (Kenan 220). The sentence “as if it were normal” stings here. It alludes to his embrace of his sexuality in lieu of his black identity, much like ECH IV. His apparition exists in a space where his queerness is forefront and his blackness is invisible, except to fetishize him, and it is attempting to mask blackness under

white face paint. Whiteface.

Whiteface is important here because Horace--and the rest of his community--see whiteness through stereotypes which include homosexuality, effeminacy, and deviancy. It is the other side of the spectrum from which blackface derives. Blackface is theatrical makeup used to make non-white people appear black, which portrays the blackened character as hypersexual in heterosexual terms, masculine, and animalistic. "Such a definition of black self likewise perpetuates erroneous mythologies of normative identity that inevitably prove destructive for the entire community" (Wester 1035). Horace's realization dawns on him as his double silently urges him to paint himself too. "Something awaited him. Something grave. With an ominous movement, and with delicacy, the image picked up a tube of the same white greasepaint he had used and handed it to Horace, who eyed it with caution. He had no intention of taking it" (Kenan 220). What Horace realizes is that his time in Crosstown would be seen as an intentional whitewashing in favor of his sexuality.

This is the second displacement of Horace within Tim's Creek and the black community as a whole. In terms of Horace's difficulty, negritude reappears. He is expected to "naturally" adhere to the expectations of black men which he cannot. His community wants descent, not consent. As the lone heir of of the Cross clan, he is *descended* from the right type of black men and by being the aberrant family member thrusts him out of his family, his town, and the black community as a whole. Horace's sexual deviation might as well be a physical abnormality, transforming him into a white man.

### **3.3 RCBs and Queerness in Black Caribbean Literature**

Homophobia as a standard is not limited to the African American community; it is present in the Caribbean and African community perhaps moreso in the lived experiences of

these peoples and only implied in the literature of these peoples. In Caribbean literature, homosexuality is only alluded to, never quite addressed straight on, and its place in the shadows only illuminates the problems of corporal hierarchy in the diaspora.

Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* hints at the homophobia rampant in Jamaica. It is the follow up to *No Telephone to Heaven*, *Abeng* details the childhood of Clare Savage, the main character in both novels. *Abeng* is important to this research as the novel addresses both gay and lesbian experiences. To simply address homophobia directed at male queerness would thin the discussion of racial identity politics in the diaspora. While the novel alludes to homosexuality in men--specifically two male characters, Clinton and Clare's uncle Robert--I'd like to focus more on gay women here, especially as it connects to bionationalism, lineage, and black "authenticity."

The Savages are very much like the Cross clan, an old family tied so closely to the freedom and history of the blacks of the region that they have become the stuff of legend. Both families have histories of taking land from slaveowners and creating black communities on the forced reparations from these people. Even the pairing of couples--Kitty Freeman mirrors Johnnie Mae--work to create an even greater legacy. Just as Johnnie Mae marries into the Greene family to acquire more land and increase their success, Kitty Freeman marries into the Savage family. "[The Freemans] were as old a family as the Savage family" (Cliff 54). This is important because the pressure of performing "authentic" blackness is strong for the members of families that are the bastions of their community.

There are a few differences though. Clare Savage is a mulatto girl--born of the white Savage line and the black Freeman line--while Horace Cross is a brown skinned boy whose family refuses to acknowledge the white Crosses. Some of Clare's struggles stem from her

position as both black and “buckra;”<sup>31</sup> she is a light skinned girl with green eyes that can use her white privilege and her blackness, but has no idea how to do so. She wants to be associated with the history of blacks on the island and resists the white blood in her veins because she understands that it is strong black women who form her current experience.

The legend of the freedom of blacks in Jamaica is tied to women--unlike the Cross legend which is tied to men--and directly to Mma Alli and Inez. Inez, repeatedly raped by Judge Savage, relies on Mma Alli to help her get rid of the child and draw new strength. Mma Alli--the mythic obeah woman--is rumored to be lesbian. However, her aid to the slaves in the region outweighs her possible “deviance.”

Mma Alli had never lain with a man. The other slaves said she loved only women in that way, but that she was a true sister to the men--the Black men: her brothers. They said that by being with her in bed, women learned all manner of the magic of passion. (Cliff 35)

In this quote, Mma Alli shows that sexuality and race do not have to be at odds. Her sexuality was not her defining factor; instead, it was her passion for liberation that defined her.

When Mma Alli helps Inez through her abortion, using herbs and spiritual chants, the event is spiritual and sexual. Mma Alli sucks Inez’s breasts, strokes her body with hands dipped in coconut oil, and chants over her. The experience leaves Inez a changed woman. Instead of despairing about the enduring rape from Judge Savage, she plans. She plans for the freedom of the slaves and escapes from the Savage plantation to the Cockpits to petition for land for the soon-to-be freed people. Her power comes from her experience with Mma Alli which marks the balance of sexuality and racial identity. When the slaves who survived Savage’s rage escaped--

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<sup>31</sup> Buckra = white in Jamaican patois.

he burns down the plantation killing most of the enslaved people--they ran to Inez.

Not all died that night; some escaped into the interior of the island and managed to find Inez. There she was waiting for them with land and tools. They told her that the fire began at the cabin of Mma Alli and that the old warrior woman--their strict teacher and true sister--had been trapped as the flames caught the thatch and tightly woven palm collapsed inward. (Cliff 40)

The wisdom that Mma Alli bestowed on Inez and the other women through intimacy, the loyalty she showed her brothers, were not in spite of her sexuality, but in conjunction and perhaps because of her sexuality.

The idea of sexual fluidity was not uncommon historically, until generations later, notions of homosexuality as a Western import presents itself. By the time Clare Savage is born, Jamaicans have embraced the idea of a corporal hierarchy--race above sexual identity. The manners in which contemporary Jamaicans have resisted LGBTQ individuals are discussed in Rosamond King's "Sex and Sexuality in English Caribbean Novels." She talks about the silence of sexuality in Caribbean texts.

These [homosexual] portrayals exists in a heteronormative frame that assumes homosexuality is 1) abnormal and immoral 2) engaged in primarily by white and non-Caribbean folk and Caribbean people only involved out of desperation of loneliness or poverty, and 3) that when homosexuality does exist it should remain unseen and unacknowledged. (33)

Ideas of the origins of homosexuality in Jamaica mirror that of the African American ideology as portrayed in *A Visitation Of Spirits*.

Much like Horace, Clare feels the pressure of her budding sexuality. As she starts to

consider womanhood and victimhood through reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, she considers the strain on women to protect each other. “She tried not to think about the women who guarded other women” (77). She does not know Mma Alli, but her presence is felt as Clare digests her place as a woman and her place as a black person--a victim much like the Jewish people killed in the genocide of the Holocaust. Clare’s understanding of what it means to be a woman is at odds with the truth of her sexuality.

Every summer, Clare is shipped off to St. Elizabeth, her black mother’s hometown, to spend time with her grandmother, Miss Mattie. Miss Mattie, finding that Clare has no female friends, sets her up with a local girl, Zoe, and they become fast friends. They have clear boundaries based on class and skin color set by their elders--Zoe is poor and dark-skinned, Clare is wealthy and mixed--but as children, it has little effect on the depth of their relationship. For Clare, there is more to her relationship with Zoe than just friendship. She desires her.

Clare’s desire slowly becomes apparent through seemingly minor interactions. Clare and Zoe fight over Clare’s swimsuit, which Miss Mattie gave explicit instructions not to let Zoe wear, and during their reconciliation, Clare tries to make it right through an act of tenderness. “Clare got a flame-red blossom of hibiscus and put it behind Zoe’s left ear and told her friend that she should be a princess and that Clare would be the prince” (101). In that moment, Clare has started her narrative of Zoe as her romantic partner. She does not make them both princesses, nor both princes, she rewrites a homosexual relationship into an appropriate heterosexual fantasy narrative.

Naming Zoe princess and her, prince, Clare begins a movement towards a decidedly less heterosexual space. The next important scene between these two is their secret reading of an illicit tabloid subscribed to by Clare’s uncle. The tabloid is of the garden variety, sensational,



fabricated type of periodical--*The Sun* or *Weekly World News*, for example--but the girls believe it wholeheartedly. They read a story about a rare disease which turns girls gradually into men. This story takes place in Edinburgh--which interestingly enough, ties again with homosexuality and whiteness--Zoe is stricken. They both believe that they will be one of the few to catch the disease. Clare attempts to comfort her and declares they could marry each other and keep the disease a secret. Zoe, even more horrified, insists “don’t make game, man, gal can’t marry gal” (103). This option is not horrifying for Clare; in some ways, the “curse” would actually be a relief. She could be with the girl she loves without the menace of homophobia, colorism, or class. She has already learned what happens to those who do not embrace the expected performance. Her uncle, Robert, a presumed homosexual commits suicide because he was not allowed to be with his dark-skinned American lover whom he called his “dearest friend.”

To be a true Jamaican is to be pure, untainted by the Western world. Clare desperately wants to be a true Jamaican, and upon hearing about homosexuality from Dorothy, the Savage’s housegirl, begins to hope it is only aberrant between men. “The family talked of how there was no room for such people in Jamaica. It must have been caused by inbreeding. Or the English residents and American tourists--they brought all manner of evil to Jamaica” (Cliff 126). Clare believes this because she knows she should be categorized with evil behavior; however, “Clare herself had a dearest friend who was dark” (126). This is Cliff’s marker of Clare’s homosexuality and soon-to-be outcasted state.

Clare, albeit unconsciously, chooses to resist the roles set for her by her class, mixed race, gender, and sexuality. She is as much an RCB as Horace. Jennifer Thorington Springer addresses this in her essay, “Reconfigurations of Caribbean History: Michelle Cliff’s Rebel Women,” in which she analyzes the women of *Abeng* and their fight for visibility and individual

identity. “Clare’s childhood experience suggest that [identities] are unchangeable and static; as a result, Clare often feels the need to retaliate by breaking the rules and attempting to change what appears to be “fixed” (Thorington Springer 51). By refusing to follow appropriate codes of behavior, Clare battles the monolithic image of blackness as performed through gender.

Clare’s refusal is brought to a head at a hog killing ritual, one not much different from the one in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*, as the hog killing represents masculinity and independence. In Kenan’s novel, the hog killing has slowly been phased out, but the importance of the ritual remained. The women cooked the spoils and the sides, the men butchered the wild thing. It is a rite of passage. Young boys became seen as men the day they killed a hog--usually the biggest, meanest hog. Kenan writes, “Some older man will give a young boy a gun, perhaps, and instruct him not to be afraid, to take his time, to aim straight. The men will all look at one another and the boy with a sense of mutual pride, as the man . . . beats all the hogs back except for the largest” (8). There is something sacred, masculine, heteronormative about the positions that men/boys and women/girls play in this ritual.

We experience it through Kenan’s male gaze, but Cliff shows it through a female gaze. Clare has no idea what the ritual is about, but she knows she is excluded. “She saw his father, her uncle, her mother’s brother, laugh and hand the boy his knife . . . When Joshua returned, he was smiling and laughing and carrying something wrapped in a leaf” (Cliff 57). She later finds out that they boys have taken the hog’s genitals and intend on cooking and eating them to make them “hard man” and that she cannot be a part of their ritual. The rest of the scene sets up the positions of men and women in the community, and just like Tim’s Creek, Jamaica (and in this scene, St. Elizabeth) has clear patriarchal and heteronormative roles.

Their exclusion is the impetus of Clare’s desire to hunt and kill a hog and prove her

personhood. However, her personhood is attached to her sexuality. She does not want to perform femininity and heterosexuality, as she realizes that power and personhood lies with men in this place. I am not conflating gender with sexuality here, but simply acknowledging that her sexuality is burgeoning at the same time she is aware to the distinct scripts based on gender roles. Unfortunately, Clare Savage's attempt to escape the script fails miserably.

In her obsession with proving herself through killing a hog, Clare stumbles further in her realization of her sexuality. Thorington Springer writes:

Cliff explores and validates the experiences of queer Caribbeans; their presence and encounters have not been thoroughly developed or examined in Caribbean literary texts. In addition, her inclusion of the depictions of homosexual relationships in Caribbean communities further complicates monolithic interpretations of Caribbean identity as masculine. (55)

While Zoe is reticent about their quest, as a country girl who understands and accepts her place in relation to gender and class, Clare is single-minded and naive to the fixed rules of black performance. Killing the biggest, meanest hog--Massa Cudjoe--is a symbol for Clare, proof that she controls her identity, and she must do so in order to feel free of all the restrictions Jamaican culture has placed on her.

Early morning, Clare steals her grandmother's rifle, just as Horace stole his grandfather's, and sets out in hunt of Massa Cudjoe. "She was a girl, she had taken gun and ammunition; perhaps that was forbidden act enough. She had stepped far out of place" (Cliff 115). After a few hours of aimless searching, Zoe confesses that Clare's idea is destined to end badly. Clare is defeated by Zoe's claim that Clare is not one of them.

Wunna no know what people dem would say if two gal dem shoot Massa Cudjoe.

Dem would talk and me would have fe tek on all de contention. Dem will say dat me t'ink me is buckra boy, going pon de hill a hunt fe one pig. Or dat me let buckra gal lead me into wickedness. (Cliff 117)

Zoe stands as the monolithic black community, placing Clare outside, educating her on how to perform, and what it means to be black. A black girl does not assert herself, does not take liberties, does not step out of line. That can only come from being tainted by whiteness.

In order to keep the peace and reconnect, they decide to go swimming in a secluded river hole. Without swimming suits, they strip naked and jump into the water. After frockling in the water, they lay out to dry naked. Clare keeps her grandmother's rifle with her, much like Horace wanders Tim's Creek naked with his grandfather's gun, and ruminates about her sexuality in their sanctum. Unfortunately, they are interrupted by a cane-cutter whose presence reminds them of their place and jars Clare out of her languor. "In the moments before the cane-cutter startled them, she had wanted to lean across Zoe's breasts and kiss her" (Cliff 124). The cane-cutter accidentally stumbling on their private grotto and encroaching on their independence represents the larger black Caribbean community destroying the rare moments RCBs have when they can be free of performing.

Clare and Zoe are not only startled, they are frightened. What they understand at this stage of their lives is that black men chase after young girls and "violate" them. No choice. It's a part of the story and they have to accept being raped, perhaps pregnant, then shunned, ashamed, while he moves along. They've been told not to travel alone, and here they were faced with what every Jamaican mother has warned against. Zoe finds out long before Clare, when she asks her mother about a classmate who cannot hold her urine. Her mother explains that the girl was alone and some boys--at least a mixed boy and a white one--violates her and the girl's

mother should have made sure she understood she was not to travel alone (Cliff 105). Met with the terrible threat they have been warned about because they stepped outside of their performance, Zoe cowers, Clare fights.

Clare fights because she has chosen to reject the rules of black Jamaican culture. She has a gun, she is naked, she stands up to an adult man, and she uses formal “buckra” speech. Clare, loosely based on Cliff, abandons every “appropriate” performance of blackness in this moment, for her dignity, for her friend.

As one whose white Creole identity perhaps enhances her ability to understand the multilayered nature of cultural identity, Cliff not only shares her personal struggles with structured cultural categories, but she also re-envision the collective experience of “other/the othered” Caribbean subjects. It is important for Cliff to explore the limitations of traditional Caribbean cultural identities often interpreted as masculinist and heterosexual. (Thorington Springer 44)

Cliff’s exploration of limitations, through Clare, reflects the rigid expectations of black Caribbean society not only for color, class, and gender, but also for sexuality.

She fires the gun, intending to scare off their intruder to this sacred place and accidentally kills Miss Mattie’s bull--Old Joe. Now, instead of proving themselves, they have shamed themselves by asserting their independence, and Clare by wading into consciousness of her sexual desire for Zoe. Clare confesses her sin to her grandmother, consciously leaving Zoe out of the story. As Clare is awaiting her punishment, her grandmother makes the inevitable condemnation for Clare, the same sort of condemnation Horace experiences when he pierced his ear and deemed as both emulating “little girls” and “white boys.” “No good, a-tall, a-tall. A girl who seemed to think she was a boy. Or white” (Cliff 134). Miss Mattie has defined Clare as

“off.” Later, Clare ruminates on her uncle Robert, a man deemed “funny.” While Clare does not make the connection between the intolerance in Jamaica and her uncle’s death, it is apparent that suicide is common for LGBTQ people in her community.

And finally Robert did what Clare understood many “funny” “queer” “off” people did: He swam too far out into Kingston Harbor and could not swim back. He drowned just as Clinton--about whom there had been similar whispers--had drowned. The stigma was removed, the family became more relaxed. (Cliff 126)

The family is not concerned about the members of their family, but only the image of the family, much like the Cross clan. While Horace Cross, too, commits suicide, he does so with his grandfather’s gun whereas in Cliff’s novel the queer RCBs kill themselves through drowning. It is also important to note that swimming throughout this novel has been connected with sexuality, as both Robert and Clinton die from drowning, and Clare is aroused by Zoe at the watering hole. Suicide in the Caribbean as a personal punishment for homosexuality is nothing new. I return to Hurston’s book as spirituality and sexuality in the diaspora are linked. In Zora Neale Hurston’s 1938 *Tell My Horse*, a Jamaican lesbian woman is possessed by the spirits, climbs a tree, and jumps to her death.

Yet both Cliff and Chin discuss sexuality in a way more deeply than Hurston and humanizes LGBTQ Jamaicans perhaps to offset the way that these individuals are demonized in popular culture. “If the Buju Banton controversy represents a manifestation of how such questions have recently erupted in the realm of the popular, Caribbean literary production has traditionally maintained a conspicuous silence around issues of gay and lesbian sexuality” (Chin 129). The silence around these issues are attached to Caribbean notions of homosexuality and whiteness. “*Abeng* reveals that . . . homosexual relationships are [not] tolerated. This intolerance

is a result of the society's problematic acceptance of heterosexuality as the norm both in traditional and contemporary contexts" (Springer 54). *Abeng* not only opens up difficult conversations about sexuality, but shows how sexuality and race are inextricably tied together leaving RCBs without a community as shown in Clare's forced exile from her family.

They may not be clear that they are exiling her because of sexuality--Clare understands that to be "funny" is also to be excommunicated like Robert, like Clinton, and these traits mean that these people are somehow defective, tainted by whiteness or not truly of the community.<sup>32</sup> "Maybe Kitty thought it was whiteness--and the arrogance which usually accompanied that state--which had finally showed through her daughter's soul. But should she save her daughter from this--or give in to it?" (Cliff 148). Kitty and Boy Savage decide to send Clare away, indefinitely, to live with a bigoted white woman. They have decided that she is no longer mixed; she must embrace that her deviance is what makes her white.

### 3.4 RCBs and Queerness in Black African Literature

While both Kenan and Cliff deal with homosexuality and race explicitly, many African writers tend to skirt the issue by making their homosexual characters either Western, white or Arab, as Wole Soyinka does in *The Interpreters*. When we meet the light-skinned black American, Joe Golder, it is clear that he is consciously asserting his blackness to atone for his queerness. He desires to be accepted into this African community, so he must heighten his black performance in order to diminish the isolation that will inevitably come from the knowledge of his homosexuality. In Chris Dunton crucial work, "Wheyting be Dat?," Dunton discusses several African novels and their treatment of homosexuality as a Western import or as exploitation from the West.

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<sup>32</sup> Clinton, Mad Hannah's son, is taunted as he drowns and the community refuses to help Mad Hannah perform the appropriate funeral rites for him. He is not a Jamaican in their eyes.

[Golder] struggles to impress the fact of his blackness on his friends and his colleagues . . . It is in itself a *function*, a means by which Golder wills himself closer to an African society from which he is excluded--in a weak sense, as a foreigner, but more crucially as a homosexual. (440)

Soyinka is unforgiving of Golder and paints him as manipulative, using his race as leverage to pick up men or to acquire friends.

Joe Golder is passionate about connecting to other blacks--to belong--but he is acutely aware the problem his sexuality proves in this endeavor. Senghor mentions this in his speech, "The Spirit of Civilization," in which he explains the difficulty of wanting to connect and create the "we-feeling" as expressed by Ogbu, but being painfully aware of his outsider/Other status.

He feels that he feels, he feels his *existence*, he feels himself; and because he feels the Other, he is drawn towards the other, into the rhythm of the Other, to be re-born in knowledge of and of the world. Thus the act of knowledge is an "agreement of conciliation" with the world, the simultaneous consciousness and creation of the world in its indivisible unity. (Senghor 64)

Since homosexuality is attached to the West, and thereby white culture, Golder attempts to perform blackness and keep his sexuality ambiguous until necessary because of the underlying resistance to homosexuality in Nigeria. "Certainly Golder's sexual behavior tallies with the standard image of the voracious Western homosexual, and the reactions of the Nigerian characters to him projects his status as an outcast" (Dunton 440). In the novel, it is not Golder's American status or his lighter skin color that separates him from the community he craves, it is his sexuality. Soyinka does not allow Golder to be a part of the central group of protagonists--he is not an interpreter, despite his artistry being on par with the others--he merely keeps him at the



fringe. Soyinka acknowledges, though does not resolve, the complicated intersection between sexuality and race. “In relating Golder’s neurosis over race to his negotiation of his sexuality, Soyinka attempts to explore the social psychology of a homosexual--and this is a rarity in the context of African writing” (Dunton 444). Still, it is a forward movement from the extreme silence of other African writers in relation to queerness.

Nearly forty years after Soyinka penned *The Interpreters*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also reflects on sexuality in her collection of stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*. She is not the only African writer willing to address issues of sexuality and race; however, since my focus on African literature is predominantly Nigerian, she will be one of my contemporary writers in the hopes that her work will serve as a linchpin for understanding homosexuality in African contemporary literature. Lindsay Green-Simms, in “The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century,” transitions from discussing the forebears like Soyinka to the young Nigerians writers of the moment. “What twenty-first century Nigerian writings often does, then, is to resist the dominant in ways not previously done before or to tell diverse stories about same-sex desire that are not monothematic nor moralistic” (Green-Simms 143). Green-Simms analyzes Chris Abeni’s *Graceland*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and Jude Dibia’s *Walking With Shadows*, among others. Her read of Abeni’s protagonist is telling; he is homosexual, a cross-dresser, and an Elvis impersonator.<sup>33</sup> She is even more probing in her understanding of Adichie by attaching Adichie’s voice against national laws against LGBTQ to her collection of stories featuring queer and questioning characters.

In three separate stories, Adichie introduces queer characters who seem outside of appropriate Nigerian behavior. In one, a Nigerian woman desires a black American woman--a

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<sup>33</sup> The whiteface he attempts mirrors Horace Cross of *A Visitation of Spirits*.

nod to homosexuality as a Western notion--but never has an opportunity to act on it before realizing the fickleness of her object of desire. Titled "Monday of Last Week," the short story recounts the experiences of Kamara, a Nigerian transplant, as she takes a job as a nanny and finds herself attracted to the reclusive artist, Tracy. Adichie does not address the possible stigma of Kamara's lesbian desire except to suggest that her closest friend, Chinwe, would chide her. "A fellow woman who has the same thing that you have? Her friend Chinwe would say if she ever told her. *Tufia!* What kind of foolishness is that? Kamara had been saying this to herself, too" (Adichie 80). Same sex desire is ridiculed. The gentle stroke here is Chinwe using an Igbo word in her admonishment of Kamara, which loosely translated means "God forbid," reminding her of who she is. She's Nigerian. She should know better.

The Senegalese woman in "Jumping Monkey Hill" should also know better. Unlike Kamara's imaginary conversation with Chinwe, the Senegalese woman--who is strategically unnamed--is reprimanded by the white workshop leader at a writing retreat for aspiring African writers. "Edward chewed his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really. "Which Africa?" Ujunwa blurted out" (Adichie 108). The Senegalese woman, while a secondary character, helps to strengthen the protagonist, Ujunwa, a Nigerian writer struggling to find her place at the retreat. They are both RCBs, slightly on the fringes of the other black African characters. Throughout the story, both the Senegalese woman and Ujunwa are sexually harassed by Edward, who sees these African women as sexual objects to satiate his desires. Unfortunately for him, the Senegalese woman is lesbian and she not only rebuffs him but affirms her nationality, race, and culture by shouting during the workshop in a fit of rage at his determination of what is and is not African.

This may indeed be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family she is homosexual?" Edward asked. The Senegalese burst out in incomprehensible French and then, a minute of fluid speech later, said, "*I am Senegalese! I am Senegalese!*" (Adichie 108)

The British workshop leader attempts to both shame the writer and reinforce the notion that homosexuality is not "authentically" African.

The final story that presents an African queer character is "The Shivering." This story is focused on Ukamaka, a Nigerian woman in America, grieving over the possible death of her ex-boyfriend Udenna in a plane crash. She meets Chinedu, a neighbor who is also Nigerian and they develop a friendship. However, Chinedu has several secrets: he is squatting in a friend's apartment, does not attend university, and is gay. Adichie plays this quite well, Chinedu's queerness is the most minor of the reveals.

"So tell me. Tell me about this love. Was it here or back home?"

"Back home. I was with him for almost two years."

The moment was quiet. She picked up a napkin and realized that she had known intuitively, perhaps from the very beginning, but she said, because she thought he expected to show her surprise, "Oh, you're gay."

"Somebody once told me that I am the straightest gay person she knew, and I hated myself for liking that." He was smiling; he looked relieved.

"So tell me about this love." (Adichie 159)

Perhaps as the third of the stories with queer characters, this is an evolution, an attempt to normalize homosexuality, especially as Ukamaka does not reject Chinedu for his sexuality. However, each story takes place in the West, suggesting that African homosexuality can only be

discussed when it takes place on Western soil. In essence, queer Africans are humanized outside of Africa, and they are only visible without the menace of contemporary African notions of sexuality. As Chinedu recounts his story of lost love and betrayal, the same experience Ukamaka has been telling him over the course of weeks, he tells her that his lover married and then introduced him to the new wife as his “very good friend” (160). This echoes the coded language in Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* when Clare hears about her uncle Robert bringing home his boyfriend as his “dearest friend.”

These stories of queerness in the diaspora all follow a similar thread. Homosexuality is not black and to be black and gay is to reject your identity and to become assimilated or to have the desire to become absorbed into the white world. Dunton says it simply: “Homosexuality is conceived as part of the arena of African/Western relations” (428). However, while homosexuality is generally abhorrent across the diaspora, the reasons for this belief differs based on one’s place in the diaspora. In African literature, homosexuality marks the taint brought by colonists and slavers, and in contemporary literature, simply a new method of exploitation of the colonized. Wazha Lopang’s article in *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, titled “No Place for Gays: Colonialism and the African Homosexual in African Literature,” he offers:

The conclusion one gets is that homosexuality could not have existed . . . prior to the colonial diffusion. Thus African writers take a very extreme Afrocentric view of homosexuality seeing it not as an individual choice with which to explore one’s sexuality but a western aberration that is part of the psychological baggage of colonialism. (79)

Those that are African and engage in homosexuality activities do so under duress; they have run out of options for survival (either financially or due to isolation) so they accept it without identifying as homosexual. In Caribbean literature, homosexuality--still seen as a Western import--is as detestable as race mixing; in order to be a true islander, yaadie, one must stick to one's own. Being homosexual is the same as miscegenation. Like African literature, it is still a white thing which dilutes the lineage and harms the movement towards racial equality. The struggle of racial equality is built on oppressing and excluding queer blacks.

Notions of black authenticity that once served as an indispensable tool at one historical moment in struggle have now become unwitting traps. Gay and lesbian African Americans have borne the heavy costs that the rigid adherence to outmoded notions of black identity has inflicted. (Thomas 67)

In African American literature, homosexuality is an affront to the revolution against white supremacy because it does not further the black race (by not producing heirs) and undercuts the black nationalist ideology of true manhood. However all of them tend to express homosexuality as a descent into sin and immorality fueled by the systems of oppression rather than a sexual preference. In other words, blacks are naturally straight and homosexuality is an aberration caused by the oppressive presence of whites, thus leading to widespread homophobia in black communities.

I must mention that there are scholars that are dismantling the narrative that black people across the diaspora are more homophobic than other people and, furthermore, that this is a marker of their communities as being "backwards." While I do understand that just as I am claiming that black people see queerness as a white thing, there are numerous organizations pushing against this ideology across the diaspora. The website *AfroPunk* often discusses issues of

homophobia in the black community. A recent article, “My Gender is Black” by Hari Ziyad, is a think piece on the problematic separation between black identity and queer identity. Ziyad asserts that by moving past sexual constructions as attached to race--the hypersexual black--attaching to the obstructions experienced by race is a wiser decision.

But instead of accepting Black gender as reality, and using it to create a different, freer, understanding of Black being, we are pressured to force our way into categories that weren't just not made for us, but designed specifically for our exclusion. (8)

However, the necessity of these spaces simply prove the way that sexuality is attached to racial identity. I must also note that the members--and founders--of these organizations are RCBs in most, if not all of the criteria that I am addressing. They eschew the monolith of blackness in order to explode the stereotypes, except the stereotypes exist in and out of diasporic culture. Perhaps black people are not any more homophobic than any other racial or ethnic group, yet homophobia in black culture is attached race as it means to not being “truly” black.

We know that the obsessive preoccupation with proof of racial authenticity deflects attention and energy away from the need to come to grips with the real, material problems in whose resolutions black Americans [and those of the diaspora] of both genders and all sexual identifications have an immediate and urgent interest. (Thomas 67)

Negritude may be the answer to these real problems--LGBTQ blacks experience systemic racism just as cis heterosexual blacks do. To fall on a black nationalist script--with bionationalism as one of its main tenets--is antithetical to unifying diasporic peoples as it is divisive by design. These writers, and their RCB characters, are actively discussing the ways that

a stifling black narrative marginalizes LGBTQ blacks. Stuart Hall puts a fine point on the importance of RCBs in the larger black community in his 2009 article, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture.” “It is to the diversity, not to the homogeneity, of black experience to which we must now give our undivided creative attention” (112). While Hall may not be considering negritude in this statement, he is alluding to the heart of the ideology--blackness is not homogenous, though it can be homosexual.

#### 4 TALK THE TALK: THE LANGUAGE CHAPTER

Yeah, they say they want the realness, rap about my real life

Told me I should just quit "first of all, you talk white!

Second off, you talk like you haven't given up yet"

Rap's stepfather, yeah, you hate me but you will respect

(Childish Gambino, “Bonfire”, 2011, *Camp*, 38-41)

Childish Gambino is a contemporary rapper, most commonly known as actor/comedian, Donald Glover. In his breakout debut album, *Camp*, Childish Gambino addresses rap stereotypes and expectations of black rappers. His lyrics are witty, irreverent, and, above all, nerdy. Within black popular culture, Childish Gambino would be termed a blerd: a black nerd. Blerds are more visible than they have been in the past, mostly because of the work of people like Childish Gambino and Lupe Fiasco in making being uncool cool. In the same song, Childish Gambino raps, “shout out to my blerds, they represent the realness” (Childish 46). However, this shift in thinking only applies to blacks who can easily codeswitch into the private language of African American Vernacular English (AAVE, for short), patois, or creole. Even though Childish

Gambino claps back<sup>34</sup> at those who doubt his authenticity because of his language, he still attempts to use some of the vernacular, slang, and braggadocio of the rap's foundations to acquire legitimacy.

Language in black communities is an important marker of inclusion. Using Standard American English (SAE) in place of black languages suggests that the speaker has rejected the black community and may also harbor feelings of superiority to other black people. In the larger society speaking "proper English" is a problematic requirement for upward mobility and creates conflict for RCBs. Standard American English is the marker of a strong formal education which lends opportunities to those who can employ it. The black community does not reject formal education--they, in fact, embrace it. However, the use of SAE at home or in intimate black spaces is discouraged.

Historically, formal education has been important to the social progress of black people throughout the world. Much like preachers were able to make some socioeconomic inroads despite systemic racism, teachers were also able to attain upward mobility. The best and brightest of the family would be given the opportunity to study, to leave home, and become educated in a world that was previously closed to many black people. For this reason, the first Historically Black Colleges and Universities initially began as either seminaries or teaching colleges. Teaching and preaching were sure paths to success during a time when other professions were inaccessible to blacks. But even while this opportunity may have provided opportunities further afield, educated blacks still worked mostly within their own communities--teaching and preaching to those they left behind for higher learning.

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<sup>34</sup> Clap back is an AAVE phrase used to explain a witty or clever retort to misguided criticism.



Upon their return, these educated blacks were thought of as having been “brainwashed” or, worse still, “whitewashed.” The community that they left in order to become a representative, one who “made it,” now looked on them as strangers. No doubt it is because their training slowly diluted their accent, eroded the speech of their elders, and gave them new ideas about what “success” looked like. Franz Fanon in the essay “Racisme and Culture,” published in *Presence Africaine*, addresses the paradox between accepting the charge to succeed in a predominantly white space so as to improve their community and the need to prove their loyalty to their roots. In his assessment of this paradox, Fanon is far less accommodating of RCBs than his predecessors of the Negritude movement. He writes of the educated black, “having judged, condemned and abandoned his cultural forms, his *language*,<sup>35</sup> his diet, his sexual behavior, his way of sitting, reposing, laughing, amusing himself the oppressed one, with the tenacity of a shipwrecked man, he hurls himself into the culture which is imposed upon him” (128). Such individuals, Fanon argues, changed their identities as to not reveal their past. For example, in Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s short story “Wedding at the Cross,” the main character, Wairuki, changes into a parody of a white businessman, rejecting all of his cultural folkways, speech, dress, and even his name in favor of financial success, which prompts his community, including his wife, to reject him. There is no more Wairuki, only Dodge Livingstone Jr--and he now sees his community as inferior just as his white colleagues did. However, this was not true of all that were sent to be formally educated.

In Catherine John’s book, *Clear Word and Third Sight*, John suggests that negritude speaks directly to RCBs who are isolated because of their formal education and that the discussion of negritude must look at the obstacles set for these people.

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<sup>35</sup>My italics.

Since negritude is primarily a response to an alienation particular to Black oppressed peoples generally, and peculiar to the Black educated elite especially, any substantial analysis of the phenomenon requires thorough treatment of repression and alienation. (30)

Many formally educated RCBs, though unable to speak the tongue of their community, return home to be an agent of change, simply because they love their people. Unfortunately, skepticism and suspicion surrounds the child who returns home as an adult and a stranger. Language is more than basic communication, it is a communication of an individual's past and identity. In James Baldwin's essay, "If Black English Is Not a Language, Then Tell me, What Is?," he explains both the benefits and problems of language. "To open your mouth in England is (if I may use black English) to "put your business in the street": You have confessed your parents, your youth, your school, your salary, your self-esteem, and, alas, your future." Therefore, RCBs who can hide their origins are more likely to succeed and help their community, which is the mission of formally educating them in the first place. However, the weight of having to improve the conditions of your people is balanced on *how* you do so, which is a difficult task for RCBs.

The *how*, the performance becomes crucial. In Parker English's book, *What We Say, Who We Are*, language is analyzed through theater and acting methods. His work is limited in that he only concerns himself with language as a vital part of method acting, rather than an amalgamation of past racial and ethnic experiences. His interest in theatrical performances of language does not take into account performance of language in real settings. However, English does outline how Senghor reads language as role-enactment. "By virtue of [the individual's] speech, Senghor thinks a speaker sometimes feels unusually 'authentic'" (26). To take his idea

into a conversation of racial identity, black people use language to prove/perform their role in the black community and thereby be included.

Both Senghor and Hurston emphasize certain features of speech as used by those among everyone is an actor . . . Of course, a person's performances in everyday life typically seem different, less posed and nuanced, than in those in staged, theatrical performances (30).

However, the performance of language in everyday settings have higher stakes than in theatrical settings. In one, the actor loses the audience, a bad review, or is marked as a sham. In the other, the RCB loses the community, greeted with suspicion, or is marked as a sellout. For RCBs who are formally educated and are distanced from their larger communities, speech is crucial to being accepted.

It is not the education of these RCBs that pose a problem for the larger black community; in fact, they welcome it. It is the possibility that the loss of language reflects a lost connection with the community. There is a disconnect between the pressure from black spaces to succeed in a world that automatically stations black people as inferior and a pressure to prove to still be "a man of the people," and language is the key to this disconnect. James Baldwin writes:

It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identify: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity. (If Black English)

The private identity is crucial; an individual unable (or unwilling) to speak one's private language suggests that the individual does not wish to identify with other black people. The 2005 *Slate* article, "Talking White," Jamelle Bouie suggests that black people's disdain for "proper

English” is a myth. Bouie asserts that while many black people experience isolation for sounding “white,” the isolation mostly exists because they employ Standard English in private, informal settings. He also references Wall Street Journalist Jason Riley’s book, *Please Stop Helping Us*, in which Riley asserts “they [black children] had determined that ‘sounding white’ was something to be mocked in other blacks and avoided in their own speech.”

Language is a form of resistance and the expectations of using patois, pidgin, creoles, or AAVE, is based in a pride in black racial identity. They are insider languages, hybrids of the violent influence of white colonists, missionaries, and slaveowners with the holdovers of traditional languages of the diaspora. Much like Black Christianity is starkly different from White Christianity, black speech is starkly different from white speech. Within black spaces, black speech is also believed to be intrinsically better; therefore, a black person unable to speak it fluently is deemed as performing whiteness. However, RCBs often cannot use these languages despite their commitment to their communities for many varied reasons. Perhaps they were raised in a white suburb and their first language immersion is Standard American English (SAE). Perhaps they were sent to a Catholic boarding school. Or abroad. Whatever the reason, they have no access to the intimate language of their family. The dichotomy of language separates them from their community, mostly, against their will.

It can be difficult to separate education from language when discussing the isolation RCBs experience from using Language of Wider Communication (LWC)<sup>36</sup> or Standard American English (SAE) in place of ethnic languages.

The brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in American [sic] never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is

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<sup>36</sup> LWC refers to *lingua franca*--that is, the commonly used language in an area, sometimes a national language. In this case it refers to Western languages like English and French.

not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way. (If Black English)

The fear of losing a black child to an insidious assimilation, while warranted, isolates RCBs who have no desire to live in a limbo of homelessness and only use LWC in order to achieve success *while* resisting white hegemony.

#### **4.1 You Talk White: Pop Culture**

In Tahmina Begum's article, "You Talk Like a White Girl," published on *Gal-dem.com*, a UK magazine run by women and non-binary people of color, Begum addresses the struggles of women of color who are accused by their own people for sounding "white." While Begum is of Bangladeshi descent, her article resonates with RCBs judged for their language. She opens her essay addressing how white people react to her voice, backhandedly complimenting her speech, as though her speech is a happy surprise. "You are in an English Literature lecture that hasn't begun yet, discussing a forgettable debate, when you're interrupted and complimented on how you "speak really well" and you even "say all the words properly" (Begum). However, her focus is not on the racial microaggressions of white people who "innocently" praise people of color for employing Standard American English, British English, and Standard French, often called the

language of the wider community (LWC).<sup>37</sup> Instead, Begum addresses the alienation created by the communities of color to which people like her belong.

So raise your hand if you're a person of colour and you've been told you sound better than what was preconceived. Raise your hand if you're a person of colour and because you do not always speak with "such slang," you are seen as less of whatever your background may be and not "one of them." (Begum)

Using social media, Begum reached out to people of color who have experienced such isolation and includes their stories in her work.

Begum's call for stories and interviews is more far-reaching than her own background, perhaps even more far-reaching than I am addressing here. What she realizes is that there is a deep suspicion of any person of color who sounds like "them" (read: white). Begum interviews her friend, Patricia Ekall, a black Cameroonian woman about her experiences.

[Patricia explains] "However, the most astonishing thing about being told that I sound like a white girl was that it often came from other people of colour. They made me feel like a sell out for not sounding 'like I should.' They insinuated that I was trying to be something I am not and that I should be ashamed of myself for it." (Begum)

Believing that racial and ethnic identity is tied to speech, the community and RCBs within these communities attach language to loyalty.

Even while these communities attach racially or ethnically coded language to their private spaces, there is an unspoken understanding that using LWC is "proper" and "normal." Accepting LWC as "appropriate" language does two separate and equally traumatizing things.

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<sup>37</sup> I will use LWC from here on because I am not only referring to Standard American English (SAE), but white speech across the world generally deemed respectable, educated, and appropriate.

First, it codes white speech as the standard and all other languages as an aberration, which sets up a power dynamic of right and wrong in how RCBs communicate. Second, it makes black speech a form of resistance and a test of one's loyalty and connection to oppressed people. For RCBs, not employing vernacular, creole, or AAVE means that they may be cast out of their communities or viewed with suspicion and (as harrowing) fetishized by surprised white people, leaving them with no place to vent or deal with the frustration of racial microaggressions.

During the election race of what would be Former President Barack Obama's first term, many internet think pieces gained traction regarding Obama's blackness, or lack thereof. Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates underlines the issue of authenticity in his piece on the *Time* magazine's website, "Is Obama Black Enough?," where he analyzes the precarious position of Obama as both too black and not black enough after Joe Biden fetishized his public persona. Though Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates concludes that the argument of Obama not being black enough is actually the converse--that Obama is *too* black--he still recognizes that the former president was assessed for authentic blackness during his election campaign.

While some of the suspicion surrounding Obama is linked to his biracial background, within the black community his ability to be "articulate"--code for sounding white--is also a marker of his outlier status. After Joe Biden quipped about Obama--as the surprised white person when faced with a black person who has mastered "their" language--a rift occurred.

As much as his biracial identity has helped Obama build a sizable following in middle America, it's also opened a gap for others to question his authenticity as a black man. In [Joe Biden] calling Obama the "first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy," the implication was that the black people who are regularly seen by whites — or at least those

who aspire to the highest office in the land — are none of these things. (Paul Coates)

What this means is that he is seen as an aberration. Using the loaded term “articulate” suggests that both whites and blacks read using LWC as owned by white people and to use it separates RCBs from “regular” black people. “Writers like TIME [sic] and *New Republic* columnist Peter Beinart have argued that Obama is seen as a "good black," and thus has less of following among black people. Meanwhile, agitators like Al Sharpton are seen as the authentic "bad blacks." Obama's trouble, asserted Beinart, is that he will have to prove his loyalty to The People” (Paul Coates). What is implied is that Obama’s proof of loyalty is in part attached to his speech.

Former President Barack Obama is not the only high profile person to experience the tenuous positioning between attending the cookout and starving. His wife, former first lady, Michelle Obama, too, experienced isolation because of her use of LWC. Michelle Obama shared her experiences of being alienated because of her language, republished and discussed in the article by David Wright on *ABCNews.com*, “First Lady Michelle Obama Reflects on Talking ‘Like a White Girl’.” When recalling a conversation with a student who inquired about her success, Michelle reflected on how language helped and hurt her. “I remember there were kids around my [Chicago] neighborhood who would say, 'Ooh, you talk funny. You talk like a white girl.' I heard that growing up my whole life. I was like, ‘I don't even know what that means’” (Wright). After she explained that she did not let the criticism of other black people discourage her, she kept focused on her primary purpose--to become successful and be involved in her community.



For many folks, Michelle Obama and Barack Obama, to a lesser extent, don't sound like as what they think of stereotypical black," said Mark Anthony Neal, a professor of African-American studies at Duke University in Durham, N.C. "And just like there might be whites invested in those stereotypes, there are obviously African-Americans invested in those also." (Wright)

Dismantling white notions of appropriate speech is of small import. Dismantling how black people in America--and around the globe--understand and affirm black and white speech is vital to aiding RCBs and addressing their isolation.

In John Ogbu's article, "Collective Identity and the Burden of "Acting White," discussed in earlier chapters, Ogbu outlines the ways in which RCBs deal with language and the anxiety attached to the possibility of isolation.

The belief that adopting White attitudes, behaviors and *communication*<sup>38</sup> style as a one-way assimilation or abandonment of Black identity and frames of reference leads to social sanctions against potential assimilation. . . . Other Blacks are opposed to individuals in these categories who are perceived as trying to behave or talk like Whites in certain situations because such individuals are seen not merely as "acting White" but also as trying to betray the cause of Black people or trying to "join the enemy." The sanctions are both psychological and social. (24)

RCBs are desperate to avoid the social sanctions that would exile them. Ogbu's categories of assimilation, accommodation, ambivalence, resistance, and encapsulation play out through several behavioral expectations, but is no clearer than in language.

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<sup>38</sup> Italics mine.

I return to Childish Gambino, but in this moment it is better to refer to him as Donald Glover, simply because it is a seemingly non-black name (who would not think that Donald Glover is white?). He expresses his own concern for not using black Southern speech in “Bonfire.” “I’m from the South, ain’t got no accent, don’t know why / So this rap is child’s play, I do my name like Princess Di” (Childish). His reference to Princess Diana is a play on words; she died and her name sounds like a premonition. He named himself Childish Gambino because working with AAVE is easy to him, child’s play. He is an RCB who has figured how to be in both worlds. The larger issue is that many RCBs experience anxiety and fear because they do not know how to codeswitch and exist in both worlds.

#### **4.2 You’re Weird: African American Literature and Language**

Horace Cross of *Visitation of Spirits* experiences his own brand of fear (related to his speech and his academic success) based on his inability to codeswitch. Inundated with white novels, comics, and science fiction movies, Horace develops a way of speaking that, to his small community, sounds white and isolates him. As a child, long before he comes face to face with his sexuality, Horace attempts to solve his isolation by getting a girlfriend, and he is constantly rejected, until one girl finally confesses to him the problem. He’s “*weird.*” While his peers were studying auto mechanics and bricklaying, Horace studied chemistry and advanced English. “Well...I don’t know. All you do is read books and stuff. You don’t play ball like the other guys . . . I don’t want a boyfriend everybody calls *weird!*” (Kenan 97). What makes Horace weird is that he is not performing black masculinity, and it frightens his peers.

It even frightens his own family. “[Horace was] a little quiet, a mite shy, damned bookish. . . . When he said he wanted to run on the track team, I was so happy he finally wanted to do something other than read in a book” (99). Here we see immediate suspicion of Horace’s

academic passion, coming directly from his grandfather. He is just plain “weird.” In their small black town, speaking in African American Vernacular English mixed with a heavy Southern drawl is not only expected, it is the norm.

Much of this is because the elders of the community rarely left, rarely read, and rarely pursued higher education--presumably because of economic obstacles and the financial stability of farming in the area. While Horace’s grandfather reads every night including the night Horace begins his ritual of transformation which leads to his suicide, it is what he reads that informs the scene. Horace listens to his grandfather one more time. “Then the light came on and [Horace] heard the rustle of paper, the onionskin pages of a book. He knew it was the Bible his grandfather kept on the nightstand, for that was the only book his grandfather ever read” (24). While Ezekiel Cross, Zeke, is literate, he does not employ Standard American English and clings to the flavor of black Christianity which stifles Horace.

Zeke is the most prominent influence on the Cross clan, but the elder women also affect Horace and alienate him. When Horace starts watching television intensely, the women fret over him. His interest in reading is met with suspicion--he is too invested in the world outside of Tim’s Creek, which, by their accounts, is a white world. They try to stop him, but are unable to disengage him from television or from books. However, books are, by far, their biggest concern. “It would be different if Horace didn’t read so much” (89). It is not the books themselves that raise concern; it is the language and distance that is quickly being created between Horace and the Crosses--and by proxy, the entire black community of Tim’s Creek. When they engage, Horace uses predominantly Standard American English while his family uses African American Vernacular English.

The only other character in the novel that rarely employs AAVE other than Horace is his

cousin Jimmy Greene. Jimmy is the only Cross<sup>39</sup> who left Tim's Creek to pursue higher education. It seems easy to connect Horace's alienation with that of Jimmy's, but their experiences in the community are not identical and to suggest this would be to make such parallels reductive at best. Jimmy returns to Tim's Creek to become both the school's first black principal and the town's new preacher and uses his experiences outside of the community to improve the education of those who cannot leave. Like Horace, Jimmy reads--but his focus is on theology, philosophy, and black culture. "I try to read. I still enjoy Augustine and Erasmus. Maybe Freud, or Jung, or Foucault. Black history: Franklin, Quarles, Fanon"<sup>40</sup> (44). Jimmy Greene is a different type of preacher--formally trained with formal language. While we do not see Jimmy preaching, observing his speech in intimate settings reveals a stark difference between his language and that of his predecessor, Reverend Hezekiah Barden who, through the use of AAVE in his sermons connects him to the entire community.

During Horace's mental break and painful final journey through Tim's Creek, he arrives at First Baptist Church of Tim's Creek. He envisions Reverend Barden delivering a passionate sermon to a rapt audience, though it is unclear if Horace is envisioning a new sermon or recalling a past sermon. "Well, this host fellow was talking to about six people, up on that little stage of his (they was all white, you know), two women, four men. And their topic was . . . "Live-in Lovers" (78). As the reverend condemns them, the congregation joins in, but what is notable is his use of casual AAVE and his condemnation starts before he even tells the churchgoers how these people have sinned. His condemnation begins with his conspiratorial "they was all white, you know." Without saying it directly, his announcement of their whiteness is to be reviled and

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<sup>39</sup> Jimmy is only attached to the Crosses through marriage which affords him a bit of difference.

<sup>40</sup> Jimmy Greene's mention of Fanon is interesting as he is not only one of the most notable Negritude scholars, but that he leans towards essentialism more than the others, which speaks to Jimmy's focus on performing appropriately, rather than living as an individual.

by using black speech, distances himself from the sin of whiteness.

Like Horace, Jimmy Greene, too, gets ridiculed for his language, especially in relation to how he talks to his elders. In a scene with his uncle and aunt, Ezekiel and Ruth, Jimmy oversteps his boundaries through his use of SAE in an attempt to mediate their quarrel. They are returning from visiting their cousin Asa Cross and his elders are rankled, arguing, bickering with each other. He chides them and, suddenly, they are chiding him for forgetting his place. His grand-aunt, Ruth, emotional from visiting her dying brother, demands her walking cane. He hesitates and meets her fury as she hits him repeatedly.

“Aunt Ruth, *why are you hitting me?*”

. . . .

“Boy, who do you think you talking to? One of them snot-nosed youngins from your school?” He looks away, embarrassed” (137).

What Ruth is suggesting is two-fold. She is reminding him that he is a child compared to her and Zeke, and also that his speech reflects that he has an imagined superiority to the black folk who encouraged his education. He is not codeswitching as he should.

His misstep is heightened when Ezekiel reminds him, albeit far less aggressively than Ruth, that he is speaking to them from a place of pompously critiquing their behavior.

“Don’t vex me, boy.”

“Let me ask you a question, uncle Zeke. Did you and Grandma raise me to behave the way you’ve behaved today?”

“The way I’ve ‘behaved’ today? And how have I ‘behaved’ today, sir?” (206)

The way that Zeke emphasized “behaved” suggests that Jimmy used SAE and, by doing so, revealed his arrogance and distance from his family. Zeke also uses “sir” as a way of

sarcastically announcing the status Jimmy has acquired. “Not understanding what had just been said, baffled as to how his chastising had suddenly turned into his chastisement, he groped for a sly rejoinder” (207). Jimmy is unable to recover, and their interaction is strained.

The major difference between Jimmy and Horace--though both RCBs--is that Jimmy, perhaps an accommodationist by Ogbu’s standards, can “return to the fold.” Horace, perhaps because of his age or his entrapment in Tim’s Creek, cannot navigate the thin line of making his people proud because of his education and alienating them because of his otherness. This leads Horace to spend more time with the white people in the town, the privileged ones, further distancing himself from his community. The distance begins early, when his only friend starts the messy business of performing black masculinity. Prior to this, they were the blerds who read voraciously and discussed everything from science fiction to astrophysics. His best friend, John Anthony, tries to explain sex to him--mimicking the way he was told by his older brother.

Well, what is it anyway?

What?

Funking.

Fucking!

Okay, fucking. What is it?

You know, silly. When a man and woman do it.

“It”? What’s “it”? Do you mean sexual intercourse?

Jesus! Listen at him: “sexual intercourse.” Using them big fancy words and don’t even know what the hell you’re talking about.

I do too. It’s when a man inserts his penis into a lady’s vagina and ejaculates spermazoa into her utertum and it grows up to be a fletus and then it get to be a

baby. See? (95)

John Anthony and Horace slowly move away from each other, as John Anthony becomes a more “normal” black boy and Horace continues the trajectory towards isolation. In this exchange, the chasm between them grows--Horace is not aware of an entirely different way of speaking and clings to his elementary school knowledge and language which is mocked by his closest friend. When they go through puberty and John Anthony becomes the ideal of a black boy growing into a proper black man by giving up lofty ideas and focusing on a trade, Horace fights his jealousy. He chooses to develop relationships with white classmates who will not tease him for his speech (or read it as “gay”).

As Horace finds himself socializing with his white classmates, his isolation increases. The education, the rumors of his sexuality, and now his social circle, drive Horace right out of his own community.

He ignored the criticisms of his friends, the labels that were being placed on him. Oreogreyboy. He refused to notice how other blacks stopped talking to him, stopped dishing the dirt, and pretended to not pay attention when he walked into their midst at school, and they all huddled and looked away, a few glaring at him with contempt (238).

It may seem, initially, that their derision is based on his new social circle--and in part, it is--but it is based more heavily on their inability to understand him which is revealed, immediately, through his language.

During his fevered night which ends with his suicide, Horace, at his church, comes to one realization that echoes through the novel. He is not one of them. He is not one of the community. Blackness is, at least in Tim’s Creek, a unified space to which he does not belong. As he watches

the service, in his madness, a thought occurs. “Here was community, not a word but a being” (73). A word. A way of communicating and moving as one collective identity. A way that Horace cannot perform. They are one; his town clings to an unquestioned racial identity and, knowing he will not, realizes he will forever be an outsider. “Horace began to hang around those white students known as the “beautiful people” . . . He was criticized sorely by his fellow black people for getting an attitude, for being an Oreo, for joining this snobbish circle” (161). Horace’s choice only reinforces their suspicion. Just as Horace’s bookishness drives away his black friends, the characters in the other texts deal with isolation because of their perceived “weirdness.”

### **4.3 Smaddy Already: Caribbean Literature and Language**

In Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*, the protagonist, Clare, struggles with her own feelings of otherness. Clare Savage comes from money--lives in the city of Kingston and is half-white. During the summer, Clare is shipped off to her grandmother’s house in the countryside of St. Elizabeth and connects with the local children. Her mother, Kitty Freeman, lives in a space in between the people she feels connected to and the people she should be aspiring to emulate. Despite Kitty’s status, she holds a special place for her blackness--even while being light-skinned and married to a white man, Boy Savage. However, she does not share this with her daughters, reserving her connection to her people to herself, and this eventually adds to Clare’s alienation.

As the Savage family travels through Jamaica--presumably in Kingston--Clare sees a funeral procession. She does not understand what they are saying, but her mother, Kitty, does. Kitty recognizes the language of the mourners as distinctly black, even while she does not employ it. She seems nostalgic.

“What are they saying?”



Kitty turned to face her daughter in the back seat. “They are singing in an old language; it is an ancient song, which the slaves carried with them from Africa.”

“Some sort of pocomania song,” Mr. Savage added, a bit smugly, as if to contradict the tone of his wife’s voice, which had a reverence, even a belief, to it.

(50)

Clare’s father, white, does not understand the importance of the language being spoken in this ritual, while Clare realizes that her mother, Kitty, values this language as a tie to her blackness--despite being light skinned and married to a white man--and the chasm she creates by keeping Clare from these people, her people. Much like Horace, her isolation comes from class, sexuality, and language.

For a member of any marginalized community, judgment comes the moment that person opens their mouth. Language reveals exactly how they perceive themselves in relation to their people. English suggests that, furthermore, language is a conscious way of self-identifying. “We are concerned with speech that, when performed consciously, enhances a speaker’s sense of self” (English 32). The way a person talks reveals connections to the community of the birth and to the wider community as well. There is an African proverb that crystallizes how important language can be for the speaker: *the tongue kills man and the tongue saves man*. Perhaps, RCBs are unaware how their language affects how they are perceived, but, more than likely, they do not have the tools to speak in acceptable ways.

Clare, in her push to prove herself as a true black Jamaican, coaxes her friend, Zoe, to help her kill the meanest hog in the area. When Zoe pushes back to remind Clare of her place, she tells her that she is a town girl with privilege who is “tainted” by her whiteness. When Zoe calls her “buckra,” Clare is offended and more insistent on proving that she is as black as Zoe.

“‘Me not town gal. And me not buckra. Me jus’ want to do something do dem will know we is smaddy.’<sup>41</sup>

‘Wunna is town gal, and wunna papa is buckra. Wunna talk buckra. Wunna leave here when wunna people come fe wunna. Smaddy? Wunna no is smaddy already?’” (Cliff 118)

The conversation is Zoe saying that Clare talks white and that she is already far more privileged than Zoe. Clare resists this because she feels more connected to her black roots than her white ones, but her language belies her.

When their confrontation with the cane-cutter becomes a moment of saving their dignity, Clare steps in. They are lying naked on the rocks when the cane-cutter stumbles on them. They attempt to cover up from him, they are young girls and he is a adult man, but their modesty only elicits laughter (and lechery) from him and frightens them more. Clare instinctively uses the last thing at her disposal--her white language.

“Get away, you hear? This is my grandmother’s land.” She dropped her patois--was speaking *buckra*--and relying on the privilege she said she did not have. The man stood stock still--maybe he thought she was crazy. He knew now that she was Miss Mattie’s granddaughter and it was Miss Mattie’s canefields he was coming from. (122)

Her use of “buckra” speech sets her apart from him--and from Zoe. She shows that she is different from them and that difference becomes a permanent separation.

When the cane-cutter hesitates, Clare takes up her rifle and fires a warning shot over his head. Terrified, the peeping Tom flees. Zoe, seeing this, is stricken with fear and guilt. Clare has

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<sup>41</sup> “Smaddy” is a patois term that means “somebody.” Note that Zoe does not call herself “smaddy,” just Clare.

privilege, she does not. She imagines Miss Mattie's casting her mother out, leaving them homeless and unable to find a place to work and live. She curses herself for aligning with a girl who acts white. Their last meeting explains the difference between them. When Zoe says her goodbye after Clare promises to never reveal that Zoe was there, Zoe's goodbye was final. It was not a goodbye that meant "see you soon." It was a goodbye that meant "see you never."

"Okay, man; walk safe." Zoe knew that this was a goodbye--and she hoped Clare would stick to her word and not mention her name. Clare did not know this was a goodbye--this was another piece of difference that came between them. (132)

By being outside of the nuances of patois and having no context, Clare does not recognize this. For Clare, this is a temporary goodbye simply because she does not understand the meanings of the people with whom she claims to belong.

#### **4.4 No Matter for Book: West African Literature and Language**

In Chinua Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, the second installment of his trilogy which included *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, the main character, Obi Okonkwo is both lauded by his community for his educational achievements but also isolated from the people with whom he claims to belong. They no longer see Okonkwo as "a man of the people." There are several reasons why Okonkwo finds himself as an outsider in his own country. Firstly, he was educated abroad. Secondly, he does not follow expected behaviors for his social standing, which in this case would be accepting bribes. Finally, he insists on marrying his girlfriend Clara who is marked as an *osu*, an untouchable lineage whose ancestor dedicated his life to worship a single deity and because of this decision, no descendant can be wed to anyone not from an *osu* family.

Obi is committed to marrying Clara, despite his mother's protestations and threats of committing suicide if he does so. When discussing his desire to break tradition and wed Clara,

Obi's friend Joseph tries to explain that Obi does not understand his people's ways.

“You know book, but this is no matter for book. Do you know what an *osu* is?

But how can you know?” In that short question he said in effect that Obi's mission-house upbringing and European education had made him stranger in his country--the most painful thing one could say to Obi. (Achebe 65)

Obi Okonkwo stands outside of his culture and this isolation breeds intense loneliness. He longs to have access to comfortable, intimate speech like that of his friend, also educated, named Christopher.

Whether Christopher spoke good or 'broken' English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, to whom and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in thus coming to terms with a double heritage. (100)

The expectation of anyone within the black community and formally trained is to be able to communicate in private language--the creole, the patois, the pidgin, the vernacular. To be able to make the instant switch. Inability to do so warrants suspicion, as seen in Achebe's later novel.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem Osodi is a journalist writing in the midst of political upheaval caused, in part, by his childhood friend-turned-President for Life General Sam. Ikem is presented as both part of the community and an outsider--an educated abroad, intellectual elite--and this distance from his people brings him great distress. It's important to note that Ikem is a writer, a man of letters, and it is his use of language that increases his distance from the citizens of Kangan.

[H]e had always had the necessity in a vague but insistent way, had always

felt a yearning without clear definition, to connect his essence with earth and earth's people. The problem for him had never been whether it should be done but how to do it with integrity. (Achebe 130)

His role as the editor of the local newspaper would suggest that Ikem has the ability to connect with his readers as well as to be marked as an "insider." This is far from the case. Even in the simplest interactions with his fellow citizens, Ikem is unable to comfortably switch to either the Igbo or the pidgin as seen with his interactions with his girlfriend as well as the cab driving community. Despite being admired--even more admired than Obi Okonkwo of *No Longer at Ease*--Ikem Osodi is still removed from Kangan society.

Even though he wants to be the voice of the people, Ikem operates as an outsider--just like his friends Chris Oriko and General Sam--and is seen as white, or at the very least, tainted by whiteness. His passion for writing does not translate into the common speech that would connect him to the very people he wants to aid. Ikem Osodi is an unconscious assimilationist which prevents him from employing the language that would mark him as part of the community. Ikem's best friend, Chris, ruminates about Ikem's tenuous relationship to the people of Kangan and realizes that Ikem does not understand that his position as the editor of *The National Gazette* does not mean that he needs to alienate his readership, and, thereby, his community.

He said Professor Okong deserved to be hanged and quartered for phrasemongering and other counterfeit offences. But Ikem is a literary artist, and the *Gazette* was not there to satisfy the likes of him; not even now that he sit in the editorial chair! A fact he is yet to learn. (Achebe 11)

Chris Oriko's realization is interesting in that he realizes that despite Ikem Osodi's

passion for exposing corruption in the region and telling the stories “we would rather forget,”<sup>42</sup> he still uses his liminal space between Nigeria and the Western world without analyzing how his language distances himself from those he wants to empower.

Both Chris and Ikem operate on the fringes of the mainstream Nigerian community. However, while Chris is aware of his outsider status, Ikem grapples throughout the novel with believing he is accepted and being, summarily, faced with rejection. “Chris said I was a romantic; that I had no solid contact with the ordinary people of Kangan” (Achebe 36). Ikem Osodi considers Chris’s claim, but inevitably dismisses it, perhaps because he does not truly interact with the masses and does not get enough derision from the larger Nigerian community to realize that he is met with suspicion. He is unaware of the reality that his friend has long accepted. The social sanctions imposed on RCBs in the case of language is isolation--much like that of other infractions on the collective identity.

After making love to his girlfriend, Elewa, Ikem Osodi suggests she go home so she will not be marked as a “bad” girl who spends the night at the house of a man to whom she is not married. Elewa is justifiably upset and distances herself from him, isolates him, and verbally berates him. Their relationship is well-known and more than a fling, and she feels slighted by being thrown out of his house just after their love-making.

“Look here, Elewa, I don’t like people being difficult for no reason at all. I explained this whole thing to you from the very beginning. Didn’t I?”

“You explain what? I beg you, no make me vex . . . Imagine! Hmm! But woman done chop sand for dis world-o . . . Imagine! But na we de causam; na we own fault. If I no kuku bring my stupid nyarsh come dump for your bedroom you for

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<sup>42</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie mentions this in her TedTalk, “The Danger of a Single Story.”

de kick me about like I be football? I no blame you. At all!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“How you go know? You not fit know.” (Achebe 31)

The language Ikem uses shows a clear difference between him and Elewa. He is educated abroad and even in intimate spaces, it is difficult for him to employ the pidgin that comes so easily to Elewa. Elewa knows this and uses this as leverage to complain about his cavalier behavior. She tells him “you not fit know” which is similar to the implied outsider status placed on Clare and Obi Okonkwo (“but how can you know?”). The speaker is aware that these RCBs do not know “real” black life and, therefore, cannot hear the meaning underneath the words.

Ikem pushes for Elewa to leave, but she insists that it is unsafe for women to travel alone at night.

“You know very well, Elewa, that there are no more armed robbers in Bassa.”

“The woman dem massacre for Motor Park last week na you killiam.”

“Nobody will kill you, Elewa.”

“*Nobody will kill you Elewa. Why you no drive me home yourself if you say arm robbers done finish for Bassa. Make you go sidon.*”

“I can’t take you home because my battery is down. I have told you that twenty times already.”

“Your battery is down. Why your battery no down for afternoon when you come pick me.”

“Because you can have a weak battery in the daytime but not at night, Elewa.”

“Take your mouth comot my name,<sup>43</sup> ojare. Tomorrow make you take your

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<sup>43</sup> Often in AAVE, people will say “keep my name out your mouth” which means the same thing. Do not refer directly to me when you are treating me poorly.

nonsense battery come pick me up again. Nonsense!” (Achebe 33)

Elewa mocks his formal language and uses words and phrases that are distinctly pidgin. She wants to clarify that he sees himself as elevated, not quite one of them. This pains Ikem as he wants, terribly, to be part of the community.

Moments later, a taxi driver arrives to collect Elewa. Still feeling both rebuffed and frightened, Elewa is reluctant. Ikem must make a show of his concern for her well-being, especially as the chasm of status has grown larger in their earlier conversation. He walks her to the taxi, and, much like Clare attempting to protect Zoe, uses the white voice to frighten the taxi driver into behaving appropriately. If the education and language of the Western world does not afford him--or the others--affirmation from their world, he will use it to assert authority on their behalf.

To reassure Elewa I make a show studying the driver’s face in the light of my torch. The driver protests:

“I beg make you no flash light for my eye. Wayting?”

“I want to be able to recognize your face in the morning.” (33)

After he frightens the cab driver with the threat of reporting him and his damaged car, Elewa leaves and he is alone in his apartment.

In order to resolve his feelings of isolation, Ikem allies himself with Leopold Senghor--also operating in a non-space between the West and home--and asserts that despite his education, Senghor, and thereby himself, is a true black African. “The French taught their little African piccaninnies to recite: *our forefathers, the Gauls* . . . It didn’t stop Senghor from becoming a fine African poet . . . A true descendant of the Madingauls!” (35) In Ikem’s claim, he connects the Mandingo people of West Africa (which partly inhabited Senghor’s homeland of



Senegal) and that of the French Gaul people of Europe and claims Senghor is influenced by both, but is African at his core. Ikem asserts here that Senghor is a hybrid, like him, but still African! He later criticizes the white British doctor, Mad Medico, for trying to understand Kangan through a British lens. “That’s a true Britisher for you, Chris. He’s looking for connections. There aren’t any, young man. This is negritude country, not Devonshire” (Achebe 52). His second reference to Senghor reveals that Ikem is vested in Senghor and his RCB status. For Ikem, if Senghor can be a prodigal son, than so can he.

Their similar hybridity is marked by the way other members of the community relate to them. Senghor, despite founding negritude and becoming the first president of Senegal, was distrusted and disliked by the masses of Senegalese because of his connection, and affinity to, the West. He was accommodating in regards to white notions of politics, philosophy, and language. Achebe, perhaps instinctively, forms Ikem Osodi in Senghor’s likeness. Interestingly, the main characters of *Anthills of the Savannah* follow the tropes created by John Ogbu in his article on how black people navigate “acting white.” In relation to language, General Sam is the assimilation character, Ikem Osodi is the accommodation character, Chris Oriko the ambivalent character, while Beatrice is the resistant character, and Elewa the encapsulated character.

As a point of departure, Beatrice, as the resistant character, especially in terms of language, calls out Sam, Chris, and Ikem for their vanity, their belief in being somehow elevated from the people they claim to serve. Despite her own RCB status, she sees that these men both relish and reject their distance from the Kangan community. She speaks pidgin as easily as she speaks standard English, and she implicates these men as being both vain and, perhaps, traitorous to their people. Chris Oriko explains the link between Sam, Ikem, and himself, and Beatrice challenges his narrative.

“OK, Ikem was the intellectual, Sam the socialite, what about you?”

“I have always been in the middle. Neither as bright as Ikem and not such a social success as Sam. I have always been the lucky one, in a way. There was a song we sang as children, do you know it? *The one in the front spots evil spirits, the one at the rear has twisted hands, the one in the middle is the child of luck.* Did you sing it? I was the child of luck.”

“Can I tell you something? You promise not to be angry? Promise? Well, you fellows, all three of you, are incredibly conceited. The story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you” (60).

Beatrice calls them out for ignoring their country for the desire of public esteem. She is the only character who can see the influence of their formal education on their behaviors and their relationship to their collective identity.

As stated above, the characters in Achebe’s novel follow Ogbu’s methods of navigating collective identity specifically in their speech patterns. Since Ikem Osodi is the accommodation character--the one who struggles with the tension between “proper English” and the language of his community--in this discussion of language, he is the RCB. While he understands the pidgin spoken all around him, even the people who speak it, he does not employ it. He is the accommodation character precisely because he is committed to serving his community, but believes that he must use the standards of the West to do so which sets him apart from his people and leaves him desperately isolated.

Later in the novel, Ikem Osodi meets the taxi driver he intimidated, only to find him at his home, friendly and apologetic. The taxi driver, now realizing Ikem’s status as editor of Kangan’s newspaper, fawns over him, but Ikem feels guilty for his unwarranted privilege.

This man was not only the driver who drove Elewa home from here that evening over a week ago. He was by the strangest of coincidences the driver Ikem got into a bizarre contest with for a tiny space of road in a dreadful traffic jam. And now he had come, and brought a friend along, to make an apology!

Oh my God. You don't owe me any apology. None whatsoever. I should apologize to you, my friend."

Ikem walked up to his to shake his hand but he offered not one but both his hands as a mark of respect. (125)

In this instance, Ikem should feel elated, but instead he feels guilty. He realizes that the taxi drivers' deference to him, while affirming, also heavily scores the line between him and Kangan society.

Moving in a tenuous sense of elation, Ikem tries to make sense of his interaction with the taxi men. Despite his criticism of the government, he acknowledges a sense of unity among the people as they struggle under it. Ikem understands that the corrupt government under which they live also creates a community that allows individuals to speak freely to each other in a language he cannot employ.

But despite [the government's] many flaws this can be said for it in that it does possess an artless integrity, a stubborn sense of community which can enable Elewa to establish so spontaneously with the driver a teasing affectionateness beyond the powers of Ikem. (131).

Ikem is aware that Elewa is more connected to their community than he could ever be. He wants to have the connection that Elewa has, but because he does not employ pidgin--and seemingly cannot--Ikem tries to find a solution.

What about renouncing my own experience, needs and knowledge? But could I? And should I? . . . What I know, I know for good or ill. So for good or ill I shall remain myself; but with this deliberate readiness now to help, and be helped.

(131)

He is committed to change for Kangan, but because of his distance created by his education, it is hard for him to make any substantial communal connections except to the other RCBs of the novel. John Ogbu dissects the anxiety felt by RCBs in his article, “Collective Identity and the Burden of ‘Acting White’,” in which he calls a collective identity a “we-feeling.” “Some are afraid that mastering proper English will cause them to lose their Black dialect identity . . . their collective identity requires them to talk like Black people, not like White people” (23). The way Ikem tries to reconcile his education with his collective identity is through civic work and activism.

Activism comes in the way that Ikem chooses to live, meagerly, even to the shame of his girlfriend Elewa. He drives his own car, and does not put on airs. However, his “airs” come in the form of his speech. He uses class as the connector between the masses and himself--they live poorly, like he does--to diminish his own elite status as formally educated and the editor of *The National Gazette*. Activism comes in his articles that criticize the very system that allows him to stand above his community.

Ogbu outlines his behavior when he references how students who might be perceived as “acting white” choose activities that will counteract suspicion--Ikem’s activism is a conscious decision to offset his isolation due to his language and education with behaviors that will reflect his commitment to his people. Ogbu terms this camouflaging.

[RCBs] have to demonstrate their concern for and loyalty to the “race” through

“the struggle” to be accepted as good role models for Black youth. Some black professionals I interviewed reported that they were accused on many occasions of not being for the race because they were “not involved.” (Ogbu 25)

Ogbu’s take on this behavior is problematic, because he is suggesting that the formally educated black masses (those that might fall into the RCB category) feel forced to be active in their communities out of a need to avoid being ridiculed, rather than a desire to be a part of the collective identity.

Ikem’s desire to expose the corruption of his country and inspire a better country with opportunities not bought makes him persona *non-grata*. Ikem’s classmate, now President-for-Life, sends his military goons to silence him. Stripped from his position and fleeing possible death, Ikem takes his words to the students of Kangan.

However, his formal speech does not initially resonate with the students. Luckily, with a few well-placed phrases, Ikem is able to draw them into his vision for a better Kangan. Again, he uses class divisions to ally him with his community, perhaps with the hope that they will overlook his privilege evidenced by his stilted language to see his vision to uplift his people. He realizes that he is ill-equipped to speak for the ordinary masses, even as he cares for and fights for them. Ikem tells his audience that he will not speak for the peasants because he realizes that he is not one of them and incapable of communicating in their language.

This is not a joke now. I am really serious. My prospective mother-in-law sells tie-die cloth in the Gelegele market. She is not a cash madam as I have said she can carry all her worldly wares in one head-load. So she qualifies along with the peasants for a seat among the proletariat. But she has not given me, her future son-in-law, any authority to be her proxy at this shareholders’ meeting . . . So let’s

move on and deal with those we are competent to speak for. (Achebe 144)

As Ikem finds his rhythm with the students, he uses formal language but maintains a social rhetoric that allies him with the community. He struggles to employ concepts that are distinctly black, that distinctly speak to their struggles, and that distinctly outline his vision for his people, all while also employing the language of the oppressive regime, the holdovers of colonialism, and perceived whiteness.

RCBs ridiculed and isolated for their employment of the language of the oppressor face a difficult experience. As Ogbu stresses, “blacks, therefore, now had to master two sets of cultural and dialect frames of reference: (1) Black ways of behaving and talking about themselves; and (2) White ways of behaving and talking in White-controlled situations” (Ogbu 14). Since language and education are tied together in complex ways, RCBs find themselves both respected and regarded with suspicion. Patricia Ekall, the blogger interviewed by Tahmina Begum, speaks to the anxiety of RCBs. “So am I fortunate for sounding the way I do? Of course. Do I feel guilty? Yes, as it makes me question who has been denied an opportunity due to the type of sound coming out of their mouth. Am I grateful?” (Begum). The RCBs who can effectively codeswitch, like Donald Glover, operate as the accommodationists referenced by Ogbu, but what of the RCBs who do not have the skills to do so? Language is most assuredly a marker of insider and outsider, but the ways in which RCBs contribute to destroying negative stereotypes of black people of the diaspora should not be dismissed because of “sounding white.”

In the end, Childish Gambino is also Donald Glover, and his intention to bring acceptance to RCBs who “talk white” is more successful in his hit television comedy series, *Atlanta*, than it was in his musical career. Perhaps the show’s location is Atlanta, a black Mecca of sorts, aids in its success and the success of RCBs within the black Atlanta community. In the

local Atlanta newspaper, *Creative Loafing*, the cover of the November issue featured Donald Glover with his hands crossed, with the caption “Donald Glover for Mayor.” The article discusses the destruction of black communities in Atlanta and the need for someone to save the last Black Mecca. Choosing Donald Glover for that task speaks to the value, now being realized in bits and pieces, that RCBs can, do, and want to contribute to the larger black community.

But there’s a fight for Atlanta’s soul now, and everybody’s losing. If it’s a lost cause, then why not vote for the creator of some kind of fictionalized representation of who we are? There was more honesty in season one of “Atlanta” than I’ve seen over the course of this entire [mayoral] campaign. All things considered, Donald Glover may be the closest thing to the truth that we’ve got left. (A Concerned ATLIEN)

The claim that Glover, a RCB who acknowledges his status as on the fringe of mainstream black society, should be the mayor of Atlanta--the last black city--reveals how despite ostracization, RCBs are vital to the textured nature of the black community. The most important question is how do these outliers achieve this success while occupying a precarious position of being inside and outside of their communities?

## 5 RETURNING TO THE COOKOUT: THE CONCLUSION CHAPTER

Take me to another place, take me to another land

Make me forget all that hurts me, help me understand your plan

Arrested Development, “Tennessee”, 1992, *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life Of...*

Arrested Development’s breakout song “Tennessee” led the popularization of Southern hip hop in the early 1990s. What Arrested Development and the other innovators of Southern hip

hop managed to do was bring attention to the culture of the black South. Hip hop then turned its head towards the South, and people followed. While people of color have been migrating to the South almost as soon as the Great Migration and Windrush Movement began, it is this contemporary moment that paints the South as a loci for black opportunities. In the 2015 *Forbes*'s best cities list for African Americans, Atlanta tops the list.

The focus of this chapter is about returning to a collective identity. RCBs who have been ostracized from their communities can--and often do--seek ways to reconcile with their community and be welcomed. One way that these RCBs find their way back to the "cookout" is through travel. By physically moving to places that are cultural touchpoints for black communities, black outliers can gain not only social currency, but also a stronger sense of identity. However, it is not just moving to blacker spaces, but moving to Southern black spaces. For this dissertation, Southern black spaces are global. Moving south is larger than moving to the American South--it can represent any journey south including the ancestral home of the RCB. It is a conscious decision to use location as a reboot, a remaking, a new pledge to other black people, regardless if they are of the same cultural community as the migrant.

Before discussing the movement of black migrants to a global south, it is important to outline earlier journeys of blacks to a global north and how these earlier migrations created the new Return/Reverse South Migration. The two major migrations of black people after the end of slavery and colonization are the Great Migration and the Windrush Movement. The Great Migration is often discussed more than the Windrush Movement, but both represent the movement of blacks to northern climes that were more predominantly white areas. The Great Migration is generally believed to begin in the early 1900s and continued until the 1970s. Southern blacks looking for employment moved to northern cities like New York and Chicago



where industrial work was plentiful. The migration of blacks to these locations changed the demographics of urban cities and created insular black communities soon called Black Meccas.

The Windrush Movement was not discussed quite as often. In 1948, nearly 500 black Caribbeans purchased an affordable one-way trip to London, for 28 pounds and ten shillings, on the cruise ship called *Empire Windrush*, post-WWII, looking for work much like those of the Great Migration, and are often termed the Windrush generation. Many of the black Caribbean passengers served during the war as British soldiers and had returned to England either to reenlist or to leverage their new British citizenship enacted by the British Nationality Act.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, much like the disillusionment experienced by black Americans in the American North, black Caribbeans in the United Kingdom found that despite the employment opportunities available, systemic racism affected their everyday lives. The BBC documentary *Windrush*, released fifty years after the Windrush migration, creates a thorough timeline of the experiences of Caribbean immigrants to Great Britain and also, perhaps less clearly, the connections between their experiences and that of African Americans.

As realization dawned that Britain was part of the long-term future, West Indians began to look at their place in British society quite differently. And they could see a dramatic parallel between their experiences as the Civil Rights Movement took its grievances onto America's streets. "We felt as oppressed, we felt as discriminated against, we felt as angry in many ways, but we didn't have clear ideas about what to do about it. (00:35:24 mark)

The tense and unwelcoming experience in England is another factor in the desire to move to spaces that accepted and, in some ways, created black communities. The experiences of these

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<sup>44</sup> The British Nationality Act of 1948 unified British nationality, terming it Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies, allowing citizens of the British Caribbean and African countries under British rule to be deemed true British citizens allowing them the right to work and settle in the United Kingdom.

migrants, frustrated with the false promise of equality and upward mobility, influenced the new movement to the South--either back to their home countries or to other Southern spaces.

Hunt, Hunt, and Falk write in their article “‘Call to Home?’” about primary migrants to the South--especially those arriving for ancestral and metaphorical reasons. These migrants do not have immediate ties to the South, but they are drawn there to be closer to a perceived sense of roots. What is notable is that the South--now expanded to encompass a Global South--draws not only African American migrants, but black migrants from the entire African diaspora. The most important part of the movement of blacks to these areas is legacy. Many blacks who move to the South--whether it be within the United States or within other countries--cite a historical draw; they come to the South because they believe in a historical and cultural claim to these places.

This means that the general tendency to speak of the recent migration of blacks to the South as a return migration may be misleading, unless “return” is understood both literally and metaphorically. [ . . . ] Today, many blacks who are moving south have nonsouthern [sic] origins; the concept of “return” applied to this migration stream is meaningful only in a metaphorical sense (i.e., return to a region of *ancestral* rather than personal origins), perhaps spurred by intergeneration motivations. (Hunt 121)

People moving to southern regions seek more than opportunities for economic advancement--they are looking for a sense of home, the “we-feeling” explained by James Obgu that connects black people to their communities either through Return or Reverse South Migration.

Often Return South Migration is used interchangeably with Reverse South Migration, but

there are distinct differences between the two movements. Return South Migration refers to the reunion of black migrants to their origins, while Reverse South Migration refers to primary migrants to places in the South which hold historical value for people of the African diaspora, even if it is not directly their own. “Return” is related directly to descent--a biological connection to a specific location, to their home, to their ancestors--and is marked by blood. “Reverse” is an ethereal connection, one of an idea more than of blood.

Reverse South Migration is, at its core, an act of consent. Blacks who consciously choose to migrate (or immigrate) to Southern areas do so for a myriad of opportunistic reasons, but also with a desire to connect to the diaspora. Reverse South Migration is the action of consent, the very task outlined in Werner Sollors’ *Beyond Ethnicity* as discussed briefly in the introduction chapter. A closer look at descent and consent offers a more thorough understanding of racial identity formation. Since descent gets murkier with every generation, (because of the difficulty of tracing bloodlines) Sollors’ posits that consent provides many individuals with the agency to claim their position as heirs of their culture. Consent allows outliers to choose how to express their collective identity to their ethnic group, in this case, the African diaspora.

While Werner Sollors predominantly focuses on white people--Swedish, Italian, Polish, and Jewish ethnicities--he does give mild asides to African American ethnicity. However, the claims he makes regarding the search for the collective identity (later reimagined by Ogbu) are easily mapped onto black people of the African diaspora especially through the lens of negritude. Sollors uses the binary of descent and consent to explain how individuals find different methods of affirming their membership to their respective communities. “Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of “substance” (by blood or nature); consent relations describe those of “law” or “marriage”” (Sollors 6). In other words, descent comes through a

direct bloodline, while consent comes through marrying into a culture and people or embracing one's bloodline through action. Sollors' theory works quite well, but he does not spend any substantial time using his theory in relation to black Americans which makes adapting his theory for black identity all the more fascinating.

The RCBs discussed in this dissertation may have direct blood ties to their cultures, but because of their faith, sexual identity, or speech find themselves disconnected from a collective consciousness. It is in this way that Sollors discussion of *consent* can be of use to black outliers. It is choice--to consent--that resolves the conflict of black authenticity and allows RCBs to find the "we-feeling" by physically connecting to an ancestral community through migration. Sollors terms this as revolutionary genealogy.

"Revolutionary genealogy" is, in our terms, not really a descent relationship but more of an act of consent. Adopted ancestors are elective affinities who may help revolutionaries overcome their physical parents; instead of continuously acting merely as rebellious children, they may play the part of pious heirs. (Sollors 227)

The "revolutionaries" Sollors references are the white versions of the RCBs outlined in this work. Both his "revolutionaries" and RCBs behave in opposition to their parents and peers and seek solace in consciously attaching themselves to ancestral lineage and, as a by-product, discover the collective identity previously lost to them; specifically, RCBs use Reverse South Migration to connect to a communal space.

But what is gained by in physical movement? Simply, RCBs gain perspective about their role in black culture and find meaning. Since many of these outliers more likely to be formally educated and be entrenched in less homogenous spaces, they have a fresh understanding of the tension between the black world and the outside. "It is historically and currently black

states that have been drawing a distinctive black migrant population--what Frey has called the “best and the brightest”--to parts of the Census South” (Hunt 136). These “best and brightest” are part of the larger group of RCBs (Hunt is only referring here to the highly educated), but many other RCBs from variegated backgrounds still flock to southern regions to regain access to their roots.

### **5.1 Return/Reverse South Migration and Pop Culture**

Even black comic book characters search for their roots and migrate south to find them. In the 2018 Marvel comic book movie, *Black Panther*, the villain--Erik Killmonger--is a lost child of the fictitious African nation, Wakanda. Wakanda is purposely isolated in order to keep their resources, technology, and spiritual rituals out of the hands of the Western world. Erik, the nephew of the previous king, is left in Oakland, California after his father breaks Wakandan law by selling their technologically advanced weapons to foreigners and is subsequently killed by his brother, King T’Chaka. Now an adult, Erik finds his way back to Wakanda--his own Reverse South Migration--and claims the throne. His desperation to be welcomed home is only offset by his bitterness that they did not bring him home as a child.

Despite his fervent need to be accepted into the community, he is still generally seen as an outsider. He has not walked the land of Wakanda. Erik is as isolated from his American roots as he is from his Wakandan roots and desperately tries to reconnect. However, returning home (after his problematic mercenary backstory), he is not given the homecoming he expects. It is only W’Kabi who gives him the acceptance he needs, allowing him to stage a coup against the reigning king, Erik’s cousin, T’Challa. Erik Killmonger is both awed by his origins and also ready to enact change by bringing Wakanda onto the world stage as a burgeoning empire. Frantz Fanon--another contributor to Negritude--understands the experience of outliers like Erik and

other RCBs as they discover their history and their belonging.

Nevertheless, the oppressed one goes into ecstasies at each rediscovery. The wonder is perpetual. Having previously emigrated from his culture, the autochthone now explores it with gusto. All is now is a constant honeymoon. The former inferiorised one is in a state of grace. (129)

The state of grace Fanon is characterizing is the “we-feeling” of being home.

Unfortunately, Erik’s inability to perform the expectations of the Wakanda nation causes societal upheaval. He destroys the heart-shaped herb (which equalized the battle by stripping the superhuman power from the ruler) to ensure he could effectively become king for life despite the succession ritual that existed for generations.

His RSM is not successful. He fails to kill T’Challa who returns to reclaim his throne. Their battle ends with Erik explaining how he spent his life dreaming of coming to the nation of his father. “He told me that Wakanda was the most beautiful place on earth. He was gonna show it to me one day. Can you believe that? A little black kid from Oakland running around believing in fairy tales” (Black Panther). After defeating Killmonger, T’Challa takes him to the uppermost point of the country, so Erik can see the beauty he heard from his father--but never before witnessed--before he dies. Erik’s death does not give him the reconciliation he was seeking. Or does it?

Even though Erik Killmonger was the villain of the movie, he simply desired to return to his people. T’Challa recognizes this and embraces him both as kin and as a Wakandan, crossing the dead Erik’s arms in the traditional Wakanda greeting, and then, motivated by Erik’s ideology, decides to change how Wakanda deals with all of the black people oppressed throughout the world. Erik Killmonger’s presence changes the monolithic and insular identity of

the nation--as an RCB, he changes the staid identity of this nation and the lost child is finally home. T'Challa acknowledges Erik as one of them.

The desire to be welcomed home is common among RCBs and just like Erik Killmonger, other popular culture icons seek reconciliation with their communities. Shifting from movie blockbusters to music videos, the idea of homecoming, RSM, is embodied in Busta Rhymes's 2018 video, "Girlfriend." Busta Rhymes's new video is a formulaic dancehall hip hop hybrid that while not particularly profound, features Vybz Kartel, a dancehall artist who has become not only a contemporary Jamaican musical icon, but also a unifying figure in contemporary Jamaican culture, causing protests against government corruption. However, it is not the song itself that is remarkable, but instead the accompanying video.

The video revolves around Busta Rhymes's trip to Kingston. Of Jamaican heritage, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Busta is welcomed in Jamaica like a long-lost son. "Black Caribbean immigration to the United States is rooted in strong historical, cultural, and economic linkages between the two regions" (Migration Policy Institute 18). He opens the song with the joyous shout, "this feels like welcome music when you land in Kingston, Jamaica" (Busta Rhymes, "Girlfriend"). Waiting for him at the Kingston airport, Norman Manley International, is Beenie Man, one of the most respected and iconic Jamaican dancehall artists. Like an ambassador, Beenie greets Busta and assures him that all of Jamaica is his, he is an heir. Beenie insists, "this is our ground!" The value of this opening scene, I believe is not lost on the children of Jamaican descent. There is always a fear that we, Jamaican hyphens (Jamaican-Americans, Jamaican-Canadians, British Jamaicans, among others), are too far divorced from our roots and will surely be othered when we arrive to the nation of our elders.

This is both Return and Reverse South Migration. It could be asserted that it is Return South Migration--the movement of blacks to the physical land of their ancestors--but it could also be Reverse South Migration because the migrant is generations removed from the land as opposed to returning during one generation. While the scholarship surrounding Return South Migration and Reverse South Migration focuses on the influx of black people to the American South, RSM can also mean moving to southern areas internationally. Whether it is Return South Migration or Reverse South Migration is not of much import. The point is that the movement to an ancestral home is vitally important for RCBs, and the welcoming is healing for the outlier.

The all-out celebration of Busta's arrival looks like a parade, a full city shut down. Beenie Man arrives with several all-white luxury cars, like a motorcade, to transport Busta Rhymes throughout Kingston and to the parties. His choice to arrive in Kingston as opposed to Montego Bay also speaks to the desire to connect with his community. Montego Bay is decidedly a tourist destination filled with all-inclusive resorts, souvenir shops, and a myriad of ways to dazzle American and European visitors. On the other side of the island, tourist traps are rarer and the people generally work outside of the tourism industry. Meaning, this is where people *live*. Busta chooses to go home.

Even his delivery is a beautiful blend of dancehall and hip hop--using patois interspersed with African American Vernacular English (AAVE). After his small, but glamorous boat party, the elders of dancehall reggae ruminant about the party, as Busta gets a call from dancehall deejay Foota Hype--who is wearing a Toronto Blue Jays fitted hat, a nod to the heavy Jamaican population in Canada--and his blended identity is made clear. Up until this point, Busta Rhymes uses patois only, but when he gets this phone call, he goes back to AAVE with a New York dialect. His codeswitching--the ability to change language or speech patterns based on the



audience--is fluid and no one seems moved by his choice of language, even as his friend on the phone is speaking patois. He does not lose his cultural currency. Also interestingly, as soon as Busta finishes the call, he switches back to patois.

The day trip ends with a block party that seems to be all of Jamaica. A block party is an event--usually shutting down streets--in which the members of the community all come out to observe an event or simply to celebrate. In this sense, the block party represents intimacy and familiarity of the revelers. Busta's choice of a block party as opposed to the cliched music video trope of an expensive nightclub filled with models, champagne, and VIP sections speaks to his desire to be accepted into the community. The people in the crowd represent Kingston that many people do not see. The reggae icons blend in with the crowd--partying, dancing, deejaying, drinking--as part of a single organism that is Jamaica. And Busta is in the middle of all of the revelry. He is part of the organism. It is the welcome that all Jamaican children fantasize. "This is our ground!"

Pop culture icons can be exiled black characters *and* find their way back into the black community through travel and soul searching--i.e. Reverse South Migration (and in some cases Return South Migration). My chosen texts show that the South in all of these texts act as a loci for identity and authenticity, even when their trip does not end well. Furthermore, it is particularly important for racially critical blacks, who are battling to prove their legitimacy in the black continuum.

By acquiring political power, two of the founders of negritude, Cesaire and Senghor, gained legitimacy by returning to their countries after studying abroad and becoming influential political leaders--Senghor to Senegal, Cesaire to Martinique. Unlike Leon Damas, whose return ended with a failed political run, Cesaire and Senghor's RSM ends with their

eternal imprint on their nations. However, I am only giving Césaire a cursory nod because of Senghor's heavy presence in this dissertation in framing negritude, making it necessary to discuss his Return South Migration in more detail.

According to Janet Villiant in her book review, "Perspectives on Leopold Senghor and the Changing Face of Negritude," Senghor's exile and return to Senegal forever shaped his ideas on Negritude. Villiant also focuses on how Senghor's education initially separated him from his African identity, but eventually influenced his choice to accept it and embrace it.

Leopold Senghor belongs to a particularly self-conscious generation of African leaders, most of whom grew up in villages relatively untouched by European influence. They were educated under colonialism to share colonialist attitudes towards their own culture. Later as young men, they used this education to reject first intellectual and then political domination. (155)

In essence, Senghor's isolation which the larger black community may see as a corrupting influence or worse treasonous, is the very experience abroad that draws him home and encourages the type of consent Werner Sollors describes. Vaillant sees Senghor's time in France as not only influential to him, but to his movement from artist to political leader. "What distinguishes this generation, a Senghor, Nkrumah, or Kenyatta from those that followed [ . . . ] is that its leaders spent a considerable part of their formative years in Europe or America in exile from their own land" (155). Perhaps the isolation of RCBs actually give them greater insight into their communities and less of passive citizenship and more of an active one. One of consent.

## **5.2 Senghor, Negritude, and the Return Home**

After their time isolated and divorced from their people, RCBs have a homecoming which allows them the influence over the insular black communities of their youth. After his

return, Leopold Senghor becomes the first president of the newly independent Senegal. In much of Senghor's interviews and poetry, he references the Childhood Kingdom--a recollection of the perfection of the home he was stripped from as a child--and uses the term to mark black spaces. Mildred Mortimer struggles to grasp his meaning in "Sine and Seine: The Quest for Synthesis in Senghor's Life and Poetry," in which she focuses on the duality of Senghor. Mortimer sees Senghor as a victim of double-consciousness which, given W.E.B. DuBois's influence on his ideology, seems sensible. However, Mortimer does not take into account the notion of choice--consent--that gives Senghor and other RCBs agency. She does not see his RSM to Senegal as the only logical conclusion to make sense of his experience. "Senghor's metaphor of the Childhood Kingdom must be viewed as a structured return to ethnic roots for sustenance and meaning, a process that call upon memory as the key to unlock a usable past" (Mortimer 49). For Mortimer, Senghor can only be in the liminal space between black African and black French. She does not see what he, as a RCB, can do to shatter a homogenous idea of blackness, but only his internal division.

Unlike Mortimer, Abiola Irele sees Senghor's poetry as seeking a psychological Return South Migration in his introduction to *Selected poems of Leopold Sedar Senghor*.

It would be reductive to see the African theme in Senghor's poetry as merely a compensatory device; it carries implication beyond its psychological significance. In the first place, it makes a valid effort at self-affirmation, a deliberate movement of the heart and mind towards a unified experience of the self. The evocation of childhood memories in 'Joal' serve not to merely to create a source of emotional comfort, but also to establish the sense of firm belonging, of a participation in a way of life essential to his own being. (15)

Senghor longs to feel home because much of his life was spent in constant migration. Given his childhood, Senghor has several RSM experiences. Leopold Senghor grew up Senegal, born in Joal. He was sent to his mother's hometown of Djilor--south of Joal--where he experienced what he called the Childhood Kingdom. He was free to roam and hunt with his age peers and for sometime felt immense freedom. Unfortunately when his father saw Leopold as a little dirty wild child, he shipped him back to Joal, then to Dakar, then, eventually, to France to become the educated, wealthy man that would uplift the family.

Senghor's narrative mirrors the isolation narratives of the fictional characters earlier in this dissertation. His time in France influences him, but it is his time in a German internment camp during WWII that hones his understanding of Negritude. Captured with several other French African soldiers, Senghor helped these men create a sense of home. They told stories of their homeland, sung native songs, practiced their faiths. Senghor began to move from an idyllic vision of Negritude to one that expanded beyond decrying French colonialism.

During his time in the internment camp, Senghor spent much of his time with the other African captives, sharing their past and working to make sense of their precarious position. They became griots, not just for the others, but for themselves. "Inward-looking was at least as important as outward-looking in Senghor's formulation of the concept of Negritude" (Valliant 156). Senghor's vision of Negritude comes directly from his isolation as a formally educated RCB, and he sees Negritude firstly as internal just as Keyiona Richey addresses in her article on black identity development in adolescents.

Black identity development involves going through stages simultaneously. Black people begin with less awareness about their Black identity then progress to internalize positive thoughts, not only about themselves as a Black person, but

about other racial groups as well. In addition, not only do people become aware of the historical ramification about what it means to Black, they also put thoughts and ideas into action to help educate and uplift the Black community. (Richey 104)

After the internal work espoused by Richey long after Senghor (but that RCBs are faced with), Senghor must return home to do the outward work for his people. It is the choice that comes through his homecoming that reconnects him to his Senegalese roots.

Since the education abroad of Damas, Césaire, and Senghor seemed to sever them from their respective homelands, the creation of Negritude and their subsequent return home created a new connection, albeit sometimes tenuous, to Obgu's "we-feeling." Even Senghor's limited ideas of Negritude evolves as he ages and returns home to Senegal to take action in the political world. "[Senghor] turned from the narrow 'antiracist racism' of early Negritude to the broader concept of Negritude as the whole ensemble of the values of the black world expressed in its culture and institutions" (Vaillant 156). Senghor's evolution in his expression of Negritude places him in a powerful position to alter the limited vision of blackness and gives him the key to be reconnected to his Senegalese community.

### **5.3 Literary Migrations to the South**

Three of the novels presented in nearly every chapter throughout this dissertation include either an attempted Return or Reverse South Migration (*A Visitation of Spirits*, *Abeng*, and *Purple Hibiscus*), albeit the RSMs are not central to the storyline. They are included here as a closure for these characters. However, in order to more closely look at the actual act of migration and reconciliation, I also include Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. Both Naylor and Marshall frame their stories around migration rather than as an

aside to the isolation experienced by the RCB protagonists.

After giving up the idea of reconciliation, Horace Cross of *A Visitation of Spirits* attempts to escape the suffocating requirements of his community. Instead of running away, he chooses to transmute himself into a red-tailed hawk. “Cats had a physical freedom he loved to watch, the svelte, smooth, sliding motion of the great cats of Africa, but he could not see transforming into anything that would not fit the swampy woodlands of Southeastern North Carolina. He had to stay here” (11). The hawk is native to the area, but is a migratory bird, moving further south and returning. The hawk is a perfect choice for Horace, who wants to be free but still loves his community. Becoming a hawk, in Horace’s mind, makes him closer to his community than he felt in his body. Much like Erik Killmonger, he believes moving south will give him the freedom and power that he does not have in Tim’s Creek. And like Erik, he dies and his migration fails. Unlike the superhero movie, his death is far more gruesome but still has lasting implications. In “Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan’s Re-Inscription of Difference in *A Visitation of Spirits*,” Maisha Wester summed up the effects of the rigidity of Horace’s community. “His suicide effectively indicts the community for its collusion in his death” (1051). The community failed him and they must decide how to rebuild in his absence.

When Horace’s shamanistic ritual does not transform him into the hawk that would both free him and keep him attached to his community--every RCB desires to express themselves freely without isolation or repudiation--he kills himself with a shotgun in front of his cousin Jimmy Greene. Some of Kenan’s chapters address life after Horace, but they are sad, depressing, as though the community is aware of the weight of Horace’s absence. Jimmy struggles to make sense of Horace’s death, of what he was looking for, if he could have helped. “I keep dreaming about him, about that morning. Keep thinking there was something I could have done. Said. If not

that morning then before, long before” (36). Jimmy intimates that if he had intervened, broke through Horace’s isolation, the tragedy of his suicide could have been prevented.

It is a cautionary tale for both RCBs and their communities. In Caribbean literature, characters fail to find home because they looked too hard to the West. In Buju Banton’s song, “Deportees,” the character is forced to come home with nothing and because he abandoned his family, he had to accept his outcast status.

An' when 'I'm dey a foreign 'I'm did important  
 But 'I'm neva did a look back, neva did a glance  
 Neva know 'I'm would a tumble ova like an avalanche (Buju)

Buju’s song refers to the struggles and remorse of people who emigrate, believe in opportunity abroad, and return home disillusioned. His song reflects a remorseful Return South Migration. However, what Buju does not explain is that the return home heals those who have left and reconnects them to their families.

Clare Savagespends far too much time alone--stuck between a father who resents her mixed race and a mother who grieves her lost community. Clare only comes alive when she is sent to her maternal grandmother’s home in Saint Elizabeth just slightly southwest of their home in Kingston. Clare is on her own RSM. She has playmates, free time, and the ability to experience the rituals of her black maternal side. From hog killings, washing at the river, and the ability to run barefoot through the neighborhood, Saint Elizabeth is idyllic for Clare. Clare sees herself anew, no longer attached to buckra (whiteness), and it is evident not only in her freeness, but in her determination.

The steel of her identity, Clare’s determination, first presents itself in how she interacts with the boys of the neighborhood. They are her friends, but the lines of gender has already

started to hamper their relationship. When they roast the hog testicles to become more “mannish,” she is not allowed to join in their game. She is hurt by the exclusion, but her resolve to not show her feelings of isolation reflects a different person than Clare is in Kingston. She knocks over their cooking pot and runs inside before they could see her tears. The boys’ dismissal of her hurts Clare because she does not yet realize that they are separating her because she is a girl, not because she is an outsider. However, it is because of her lack of knowledge about the “rules” that she becomes determined to prove her belonging which leads her to the accidental death of Old Joe as addressed in previous chapters.

Clare’s time in Saint Elizabeth sows the seeds of determination and rebellion. She wants to be seen. She wants to be a part of this world. By killing Old Joe, Clare’s return south migration is ruined and she is shipped back home. However, the experience within this black community forever changes Clare and builds a stronger sense of self. Her interactions with other outliers--the domestic workers like Miss Mattie whom her parents employ--ties her closer to black Jamaicans despite her father’s belief that her time with the old white woman (who is now her caretaker) would whiten her and make her a “proper lady.” While her migration to Saint Elizabeth is cut short, it is the change that Clare’s time there provides that is important.

The same can be said for Kambili Achike’s short time in Abba, her father’s hometown. Kambili experiences her first taste of independence during her trip south. Kambili’s abusive father, Eugene, takes his family on an exodus to his hometown every year for Christmas more out of duty than desire. Unfortunately, Eugene keeps his wife and children so divorced from his other family members that they seem like strangers. His children love Abba, much like Clare loved Saint Elizabeth, and on this particular trip, they too change.

Their change starts when they overstay their fifteen minutes with Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili



and her older brother, Jaja, usually visit their paternal grandfather during the holiday season, as a point of respect but a mostly hollow gesture. Yet, when faced with their aging grandfather, Jaja and Kambili spend longer than the allotted time--even while knowing they will experience the wrath of their father. Jaja even suggests that he would drink with their grandfather despite the admonishments of Eugene that they are not to partake of food or drink with a heathen.

“Will you confess it?” I asked Jaja, as we ate.

“What?”

“What you said today, that if we were thirsty, we would drink in Papa-Nnukwu’s house. You know we can’t drink in Papa-Nnukwu’s house,” I said.

“I just wanted to say something to make him feel better.” (68)

Kambili is stunned. This is the first moment of defiance from Eugene’s children and sets the stage for their growth.

Shortly after they are reprimanded for their behavior, they are introduced to their aunt Ifeoma and her children. Ifeoma convinces Eugene to let them accompany her on an innocent excursion sightseeing--though later she confesses she is taking them to *mmuo*, an annual Igbo festival. This event is an annual celebration steeped in tradition and plants the seed of community and “we-feeling” which leads Kambili and Jaja to rebel against their forced isolation. By the end of the novel, Kambili has found her voice and has become far more connected to her family and to her community as evidenced by Kambili listening to the iconic Nigerian musician, Fela Kuti.

Horace Cross, Clare Savage, and Kambili Achike appear in nearly every chapter of this dissertation, but they are not the only literary characters that experience isolation because they are racially critical blacks (RCBs). The inclusion of other black characters of the diaspora--from

Beatrice Okoh of *Anthills on the Savannah* to Rufus Scott of *Another Country*--aid a greater understanding that the forced isolation of RCBs is endemic in the black community. The pain and isolation RCBs feel from their own communities has lasting consequences for both the individual and the group. The previous chapters deal with their isolation, but these characters have agency for their inclusion.

Kenan, Cliff, and Abeng are linchpins in my dissertation, but other literary characters like Avey Johnson of *Praisesong of the Widow* and Cocoa of *Mama Day* also find themselves reconnected to their communities by uprooting themselves--consciously or unconsciously--and replanting themselves in the South. Whether they succeed in their attempt to "come home," they change their black communities for the better. It is the influence of RCBs on their communities that is of importance. They raise questions. They challenge. While RSM can bring them peace, as it often does, the more interesting point is how racially critical blacks become necessary when they were previously invisible. RCBs complicate blackness.

Cocoa, in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, is another character that returns home and changes her community. She returns from New York City to her hometown of Willow Springs. Willow Springs exists in seclusion, just like Wakanda, neither a free country nor a part of the United States. They are of the Gullah-Geechee people, the black folk who retained their African identities on the southern coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and, arguably, Florida. An island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, it has been mostly ignored by the state and federal government. They do not pay taxes. They do not have any government facilities or assistance. Much like Wakanda, they are invisible. Cocoa is the last of the powerful Days, and is often feared as too far removed from the rituals and expectations of her town.

It is interesting to note that in these narratives of Reverse/Return South Migration the

characters are all part of powerful, influential lineages. Erik is cousin to the sitting king, while Horace, Clare, and Kambili are the youngest of powerful family lines, just as Cocoa--formally named Ophelia--is the last of the Days. I believe that in order to give cultural currency to these RCBs, to allow the audience and readers to resonate with them, they *had* to be part of the foundation of their respective societies.

In Naylor's *Mama Day*, the story is told by four narrators--Miranda "Mama" Day, Ophelia "Cocoa" Day, George Andrews, and the island of Willow Springs. Cocoa is the last of her lineage and has chosen to move to New York to start a life, but finds herself unable to find employment. Cocoa meets George Andrews, a successful engineer, native New Yorker, and orphan, and they fall in love and elope. After a few years, Cocoa and George travel to her hometown, so that she can introduce him to her family and the citizens of Willow Springs, a quiet island disconnected from the rest of the world. During their visit, Cocoa becomes deathly ill through black magic performed by Ruby, a jealous woman, and it takes the power of the island, George, and Mama Day to save Cocoa from death--at the cost of George's life.

Cocoa, also known as Baby Girl and Ophelia, returns home after a season of battling the New York job market. Highly educated, sharp-tongued, and witty, Cocoa *should* succeed in her new home, but instead she feels longing to be a part of a group instead of the isolation she feels in the big city. However, her initial return is fraught with criticism of her "newness." She is resistant to the spiritual folkways of her island and scoffs at her elders--her grand aunt Mama Day, and her grandmother Abigail Day--for their herbology, divination, and old ways. She is the child James Baldwin referenced--"we've lost too many children this way"--and her community fears losing her entirely.

Luckily, her RSM is a successful one--Cocoa re-establishes her role in the community, is

embraced, and is saved from near death. She does not meet the same fate as Erik, Horace and George. She pays a price, though. Her new husband, George Andrews, is on his own RSM and dies trying to save her. George is even more of an RCB than Ophelia. He experiences not a Return South Migration, but a Reverse South Migration. Despite his death, he is able to find a role in a community he is unfamiliar with and a home he had never experienced. George meets all the markers of exclusion for RCBs--he is atheist, his last girlfriend was white (bionationalism), and speaks so formally that even Cocoa teases him. However, something about Willow Springs allows George to create relationships with people and abandon much of his isolation and rigidity. He imagines Willow Springs as a potential home.

George, who grew up as an orphan, is thrust into a new world, a world mostly untouched by the larger white world and falls immediately in love. He sees the pieces of Ophelia that he had difficulty understanding in New York, crystal clear, when they arrive in Willow Springs; he sees not Ophelia, but Cocoa. More than his understanding of himself, his finding of a home, George's experience is Willow Springs embracing him as their child.

Miss Abigail put her hands up on each side of my face--Well, bless your heart, child--and a lump formed in my throat at their gentle pressure. Up until that moment, no woman had ever called me her child. Did they see it in my eyes? The intense envy for all that you had and the gratitude for their being willing to let me belong? (176)

The matriarch of the island, Ophelia's grand-aunt Miranda "Mama" Day automatically takes him under her wing. She sees that he needs a home and makes one for him. Mama Day holds his hand, gently teases him, and invites him in to their trailer and he realizes the meaning behind Cocoa's words. "As they led me up the porch steps, I thought of something you had

actually said when we pulled into the yard. Relax, we're coming home" (176).

She treats him like a binya, not a comya.<sup>45</sup> So obviously, like any good grandmother, she puts him to work. Mama Day manipulates him into renovating the chicken coop, weeding the gardens, and essentially sprucing up the Day land. He has a weak heart, but he pushes through. It is only when Ruby, another anchor of Willow Springs, hexes Ophelia that George is put to his greatest test. He must save the true heir of Willow Springs and, if he cannot, Ophelia will die. His role, his purpose as an RCB is made clear. However, George, unwilling to fully immerse in Willow Springs, takes the "hard path" leading to his death, but secures the survival of his wife and her unborn.

Cocoa is suffering from an unnamed illness marked by hours of nightmarish sleep, fevered delusions, and an inability to eat. She sees herself distorted in the mirror, her face melting in ghoulish ways, and screams, terrified. Her identity is melting in front of her--she is faced with her disconnected self created by her distance from home.

At first, they dismiss her sickness as a simple virus, perhaps the flu, but over time Mama Day recognizes the cause of her grand niece's breakdown--Ruby's misguided jealousy. When Cocoa visits Ruby to get her hair done, she plaits nightshade into Cocoa's hair and cast a powerful hex on her. Even after Mama Day removes the poison by cutting the plaits out, Cocoa does not seem to recover; in fact, she seems to get worse. Cocoa's return is fraught with peril. Her sickness is not just physical; it's spiritual.

Mama Day tries to warn Cocoa of Ruby's vengeance, but, now acclimated to city life, Cocoa believes less and less of the lore around spiritual power and even less concerned about offending anyone. Mama Day is frightened by Cocoa's change--she realizes that she

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<sup>45</sup> Binya means someone who is from the island, representing Return South Migration, like Cocoa. Comya means someone who has no ties to the island and has recently arrived like George.

cannot convince Cocoa of the dangers of Ruby's jealousy because Cocoa is no longer a child and is changed by her time in New York. "But it was a grown woman's body leaning over the table, and for a brief moment Miranda allows herself to wish that it wasn't so, that she'd never left to go beyond the bridge and still belonged to only them. She had fought for her life when she was theirs and she could fight for it again, give up her own if need be" (265). On one of Cocoa's visits, she plans to go out dancing at a juke joint with Ambush and Junior Lee--Ruby's new husband. Mama Day, sensing the potential wrath of Ruby, tell the men to go on without Cocoa. When Cocoa discovers what Mama Day has done, she is furious, having rejected (or forgotten) Ruby's power and the power of the island. Even though Mama Day does not explicitly say that Ruby has set her eyes on killing Cocoa for spending too much time with Junior Lee, when Cocoa shout that she won't return to the island until Mama Day's funeral, Mama Day simply says, "Better my funeral than yours" (156). It is only when Cocoa returns on another visit, this time with her husband, that Ruby finally acts to kill Cocoa through a cunning ploy. She offers to braid her hair.

In Willow Springs, Ophelia is Cocoa, but her time away from their community separated her from the common sense, folklore, and "we-feeling." Through her near-death experience, Ophelia returns to her true name, Cocoa, and reconnects more, especially with the death of George. When George and Cocoa are stranded on the island, while she is slowly dying from Ruby's hex, Cocoa is treated like a small child. Her grandmother, Miss Abigail, spoon feeds Cocoa, while Mama Day bathes her and draws the poison out using a charcoal poultice. She is their Baby Girl again. However, Cocoa is not improving from their herbal treatments, implying that more must be done to save her. George is her last hope. Mama Day muses that if Cocoa wasn't tied both to Willow Springs through them and New York through George, she would be

able to save her without help. As it stands, she needs George to believe in the unseen and it is a near impossible request for him.

Yet, he is desperate and tries to follow Mama Day's instructions--going into the hen house to bring her back the cure for Cocoa. However, George is cynical and without faith, he finds nothing, and his phobia of chickens puts too much stress on his heart and he dies of a heart attack. His death does save Cocoa, but if he had consented, truly consented, to the island's mysterious ways, what would he have found? His lack of consent leads to his death, but also leads him to a home. They bury George in the Other Place--the home of Mama Day's ancestors--and, much like Erik Killmonger, he rests now with the community he didn't know he needed.

These migrations-even if unsuccessful--influence their communities and the RCBs who wander to a home. They all experience the obstacles of isolation and even in death they push their communities to become more accepting of blacks who eschew monolithic blackness. Some of these RCBs change and find home, some change and lose, and, at the best, they change, the community changes, and they find home.

Paule Marshall is often discussed as an African-American writer, but her father is Bajan (from Barbados). It is obvious that she would write in her novels the difficult tension of being both inside and outside black Caribbean culture. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, a black American woman finds her roots in a small island that she becomes stranded on in an attempt to rush home after a cruise. Marshall is both American and Caribbean and her take on being an outlier speaks to both being an RCB and the homecoming for these people in liminal spaces.

Avatara "Avey" Johnson finds herself inexplicably agitated, unhappy, and out of sorts during her annual cruise with her two girlfriends, Thomasina and Clarice. The novel opens with Avey hastily packing to leave the cruise twelve days early, infuriating Thomasina and saddening

Clarice. Thomasina verbally attacks Avey, demanding a proper excuse for her abrupt departure, accusing her of being out of her mind. “Why she’s no better come to think of it than some bum on a Hundred Twenty-fifth Street, never mind the airs she gives herself. But she never had me fooled” (27). Thomasina is a different woman than Avey, she is powerful, intimidating, and strong in her sense of self. On a previous cruise, Thomasina danced to the drums and scandalized Avey. She thought Thomasina’s behavior was unbecoming. She could not imagine expressing her blackness in that way.

[Thomasina] had abandoned them to dance in a carnival parade they were watching with the other passengers from the *Bianca Pride*. Had gone off amid a throng of strangers swishing her bony hips to the drums. [ . . . ] And with their fellow passengers watching. White faces laughing! White hands applauding! Avey Johnson had never been so mortified. (25)

Avey’s response to Thomasina’s behavior marks her as an RCB. She resists appearing too black, so she fights any memory of her roots and of her people. In fact, it is Thomasina’s accusation that pushes her even further away from her friends and solidifies her desire to return to New York where she will not have to interrogate her distance from them (and her community).

Her behavior is directly connected to her life in New York with her husband, Jerome “Jay” Johnson. Her husband enters her life open, playful, and optimistic. They make do with their financial struggles and cling to each other powerfully. However, as the realities of their life weighs on Jay, he commits himself to improving their situation, taking on several jobs to support their ever-growing family, suppressing the lightness that initially attracted Avey. “While continuing to call him Jay to his face, she gradually found herself referring to him as Jerome



Johnson in her thoughts” (132). Avey seeing Jay as Jerome is notable because naming is important in black communities; Jerome is more formal than Jay and announces his distance from his past and from his community.<sup>46</sup> Avey follows suit--she sheds her true name, Avatara, for a more socially acceptable name, Avey.

African Americans were believed to be socialized into the predominant culture, which resulted in diminished racial identification. A process of exploration and discovery was necessary for the individual to acquire a strong African American identity. (Cross, 1971)

They have become socialized to white culture and thereby lose their connection to their community. Jerome, as he becomes increasingly more successful, starts criticizing and distancing himself from black people, and his disgust for the people he once loved infects Avey as well. Avey forces this realization out of her mind, focusing instead on returning home where she does not have to deal with the fracture between who she was and who she is.

Intending to take a flight to New York immediately, Avey disembarks in Grenada and experiences through Carriacou (a smaller island, loosely attached to Grenada) a spiritual homecoming from people she had never known and a place she had never been. Avey Johnson finds herself in the global south--Grenada and Carriacou--much farther south than her Gullah origins or her current home in New York. The citizens are all preparing for an annual festival and--curiously--keep mistaking her for another woman, one of their own.

He grew sober the moment he saw his mistake. “Pa’don, oui.” Then, abruptly, he

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<sup>46</sup> The importance of names and the repercussions of losing that name is evident in another literary piece, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s short story “Wedding at the Cross,” which appears in the language chapter. Wairuki changes his name to Dodge Livingstone Jr. to impress his in-laws and acquire wealth and power. In the end, his wife refuses to renew their vows because, since the adoption of his new name, he is not the same man.

was smiling again, and saying with an amazed laugh, “But if you didn’t look everything like a woman I know named Ida from the back. Is the same way she stands, oui. The same way she holds her head. You even look a little like her from the front. Is twins if ever I saw it. Don’ ever let anybody tell you, my lady, that you ain’ got a twin in this world!” (72)

This constant mistake foreshadows Avey’s forced connection to the island, even as a distant cousin. Like Cocoa, Avey has Gullah Geechee blood--her family is from a tiny place off the coast of South Carolina called Tatem Island--but despite their similar origins, Avery is ashamed of her past, most obviously through her rejection of her birth name, Avatara. Despite her desire to go home to New York, it seems that every obstacle imaginable has her tied to the island until after the festival. Coerced from the mainland to the tinier island, Avey comes to terms with her own island origins. There is a weight of divine intervention. The festival, called the Carriacou Excursion by the people born on the larger island of Grenada, draws all of the out-islanders back for a few days to their home, Carriacou.

Avey’s taxi driver to the hotel district of Grenada explains the festival briefly, but mostly as an outsider.

Is a serious business, oui! Every year this time every man, woman, and child that’s from the place does pick themselves up and go. They don’ miss a year. No matter how long they been living over this side, even when they’s born here, come time for the excursion they gone. (75)

The people of Carriacou (and their descendants) enact their own annual pilgrimage to reconnect with home, their elders, and their ancestors. While only a short pilgrimage, it is a ritualistic Return South Migration as the festival is more of a reunion than a vacation; it reaffirms

their identity. Truthfully, Avey's Reverse South Migration is an accidental one.

In flashbacks of Avey's life, the audience learns of her Southern origins and the experiences that caused her to reject them. The first flashback happens during her short stint on the cruise in which Avey's great-aunt Cuney takes a young Avey around the island, introduces to the ring shout, and tells her the well-worn story of the people of the island. The Ring Shout, especially in Gullah Geechee culture, is a syncretic ritual blending of African spiritual dance, call-and-response, and black Christianity developed and maintained since the plantation slave system. Aunt Cuney, banned from the Ring Shout as a young woman for crossing her feet (an act forbidden during the powerful dance), still watches from a distance with little Avey. The Ring Shout becomes Avey's anchor to the Excursion. She may not be from Carriacou, but her island spirit awakens as they dance their own version of the Ring Shout. It is easy to understand. The story of the Ibo people enslaved and brought to Tatem is a direct link to the diaspora.

And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause them pure-born Africans was people my gran' said could see in more ways than one. The kind can tell you 'bout things that happened long before they was born and things to come long after they's dead. (38)

Later when faced with the dances in Carriacou, Avey finds her way home.

Entranced, Avey Johnson remembers Tatem and the dances that she watched, but never participated in. Slowly, intentionally, she recreates the dances of her childhood. The fracturing she felt before, her delusions, her anxiety, her irritation disappears. Instead of watching her people from the outside she suddenly feels drawn to them, tied inextricably to her community through the out-islanders. "And for the first time since she was girl, she felt the thread, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads" (249). As she begins to dance, the community

watches, awed. She may not be from the island, but she is most-assuredly one of the them. The reverence and acceptance she feels from these people is only surpassed by her acceptance of them. Consent.

Yet for all the sudden unleashing of her body she was being careful to observe the old rule: Not once did the soles of her feet leave the ground [ . . . ] Avey Johnson could not have said how long she kept her arms raised or how many turns she made in the company of these strangers who had become one and the same with people in Tatem. (250)

The migration to this little island, albeit accidental, gives Avey a sense of community and the power that comes over her through dance is the marker of her choice to find it.

We, as readers, recognize that her Reverse South Migration has been successful even before we reach the final chapters of the novel. Avey's participation in the Excursion exemplifies Senghor's idea of negritude as discussed by Abiola Irele. "Blackness, or Négritude, reside essentially in participation, immediately or at a second remove (as in the case of the Afro-American) in a fundamental African spirit of civilisation" (Irele 22). When the elders bow and bend the knee humbly to her, it is in their genuflection that Avey discards her outlier status. They ask Avey her name and Aunt Cuney's wisdom rings in her head.

A mystified Avey Johnson gave her name, she suddenly remembered her great-aunt Cuney's admonition long ago . . . she was not to say simply "Avey," or even "Avey Williams." But always "Avey, short for Avatara." (251)

Avatara has returned home and, later, when she decides to go home to Tatem to the land of her ancestors, we see a healed woman, no longer on the outside. "She had finally after all these decades made it across" (248). Through her own choices, Avatara no longer feels lost,

distant, and alone.

My study on RCBs throughout the diaspora contributes to an ongoing discussion of black exclusion and the importance of creating agency for RCBs that will affirm heterogeneity in black culture. Vetta Sanders-Thompson's study on racial identification touches on the trauma of isolated blacks and her study--as mentioned in the introduction--aids my interdisciplinary approach to RCBs inside and outside of literature. "[They] reflect the psychological reality of a people bound by a concept in a framework that renders them vulnerable to denigration and fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the group" (163). The framework of blackness crushes RCBs, but I suggest that when excluded blacks have agency to define their identity, they can find their role in the community.

Agency for RCBs come through a conscious movement towards a we-feeling. RCBs conscious movement is simply consent as outlined by Werner Sollors and fed through the lens of negritude. Senghor's flavor of negritude speaks directly to Sollors's descent/consent system. In "The Spirit of Civilisation, or the laws of Negro Culture," Senghor reminds his listeners (and later, his readers) of the power of the individual. "He feels that he feels, he feels his *existence*, he feels himself . . . the act of knowledge is an "agreement of conciliation" with the world, the simultaneous consciousness and creation of the world in its indivisible unity" (Senghor 64). Senghor suggests that blacks can operate as individuals and still be one with the black community.

While there are several factors used to determine whether a black person is accepted or excluded from the larger black community--cultural tastes, as an example--the three most consistent markers are spirituality, sexuality, and speech. The other racial markers change depending on the black community--making jollof rice versus potato salad, or knowing the

words to Frankie Beverly and Maze's "Before I Let Go" versus Fela Kuti's "Water Get No Enemy"--which would become a much larger (and unwieldy) project. By focusing on the clearer, more consistent markers, analyzing the requirements of black people in their respective diasporic communities crystallizes.

Throughout the African diaspora, spirituality is a communal experience. Christianity in black spaces is a form of zealous resistance; black worshippers claim Christianity as distinctly different from the Christianity they were initially converted into and, most importantly, as a path to upward mobility. Christianity is one of the most practiced religions by people of the diaspora, which leads to exclusion of non-practicing blacks from their friends, family, and community. Horace Cross experiences exclusion when he chooses not to become a preacher like the men in his family. Clare watches a funeral procession with music that her father calls "pocomania" and, for the first time, notices the difference between her mother and father. Clare's understanding of the distance between them is only compounded by her interest in the Jewish Holocaust which leaves her isolated when her father forbids her from continuing down this non-Christian study. Kambili experiences this when she builds a relationship with her grandfather who practices the traditional Igbo faith, culminating with her father's violent abuse in an effort to force Kambili back to appropriate Catholic behavior.

While spirituality creates chains for RCBs, sexuality creates chains *and* self-loathing. Authors Kenan, Cliff and Adichie all address the complications of queerness in black heteronormative communities. In general, there is a binary between sexual identity and racial identity within the black community. Homosexuality is seen as aberrant behavior for blacks, a direct rejection of the nuclear family unit and in opposition to bionationalism as a form of social resistance. My anchor novels--*A Visitation of Spirits* and *Abeng*--speak to the crippling fear of

being discovered as gay through their main protagonists, Horace and Claire. However, it is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and not *Purple Hibiscus*, which rounds out my assessment of sexuality throughout the African diaspora. Three of her stories--"Monday of Last Week," "Jumping Monkey Hill," and "The Shivering"--focus on the isolation and self-loathing of queer African RCB characters.

RCBs struggle with being discovered as traitors to their race even through what comes out of their mouths. Language is the final marker of inclusion or exclusion in black communities. Talking "white" is seen as "selling out," and despite the ways in which employing white speech--or Language of the Wider Community--can offer socioeconomic opportunities for marginalized people, it also creates often undue suspicion for black people who use it. The issue is not that RCBs codeswitch between private and public speech, but rather *when* they do so. "Talking white" in black spaces is seen as a willingness to distance yourself from your own. However, the RCBs ostracized for their speech, often do so because of the formal education foisted on them by the very communities that now ostracize them.

These markers are as immutable in real life as they are in fiction. Pop culture reflects the experiences of everyday people and, in this case, shows the general exclusion of RCBs based on rules that are as fixed as they are arbitrary. The presence of pop culture referenced throughout the dissertation only reaffirms the intraracial policing of black behavior. Policing black behavior in private black spaces forces members to conform, but the process of consent through RSM gives RCBs the ability to consciously (and perhaps healthily) reconnect themselves to their black communities.

Contemporary writers who wrestle with belonging, community, and RCBs in their literature all recognize the pressures of conformity and monolithic blackness. Their writings,

while criticizing a narrow view of blackness, also feed into a larger understanding of the diaspora. Influenced by the Negritude Movement, they show both the problems of community and the necessity of it.

The spirit of African Negro civilisation consciously or not, animates the best Negro artists and writers of to-day, whether they come from African or America. So far as they are conscious of African Negro culture and are inspired by it they are elevated in the international scale (Senghor, "The spirit" 64)

From Randall Kenan to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the writers in my dissertation all address the alienation and isolation of RCBs and their attempts to reconcile with their people. Whether their use of Return/Reverse South Migration to find their roots is successful or not, RSM is only one of possible ways that these racially critical blacks can resist the binary of losing their identity or losing their home. There is an African proverb that speaks to RCBs's struggle to balance their uniqueness and their desire for the "we-feeling." "If you cut your chains, you free yourself; if you cut your roots, you die." Cut the chains and feed the roots.



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