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2. Contemporary Queer Literatures of the Caribbean: From Martyrs to Mercenaries[1]

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Abstract

Queer writers from the Caribbean in recent years have reconceptualized queer theory as a potent form of anticolonial critique. This paper examines how Jamaican writer Marlon James, in his 2016 novel *The Brief History of Seven Killings*, deconstructs cultural artefacts such as sayings and folk songs to (1) unearth their forgotten or overlooked anticolonial registers and (2) reconstitute them as vehicles for postcolonial utopian thinking. James, I argue, moves away from tropes that emphasize queer stigmatization as a discrete social problem and more broadly attends to the contemporary transnational maneuvers on trade, the environment and foreign policy that continue to undermine the sovereign agency of postcolonial nations like Jamaica. James does, however, offer glimpses of hope through the enlightening potential of music, film, and language, as well as through fleeting moments of same-sex intimacy scattered throughout the novel. These moments, I argue, collude to ask the reader to consider the transgressive alliances necessary for imagining the future destabilization of Euro-American colonial logics still operating within the framework of neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords

Jamaica, Marlon James, queer theory, utopia, postcolonialism

The Evolution of Queer Representation

Like many Caribbean novels, H. Nigel Thomas's *Spirits in the Dark* (1993) explores the traumatic legacies of colonialism on citizens of the region. The coming-of-age tale charts Jerome Quashee's journey from a naïve colonial schoolboy through to a troubled but eventually self-conscious adult.[2] Jerome is intellectually gifted but, as a member of the rural Black underclass, confronts the racism that continues to mold systems of education and government. Unable to reconcile his native identity within institutions that uphold colonial values, Jerome falls into cycles of aimlessness and insanity. This examination of unbelonging places Thomas within a lineage of Caribbean writers who explore themes of displacement, isolation, and rootlessness as organizing conditions of the Caribbean identity. In the novel, Jerome undergoes

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[2] The story's fictional setting (on the Edenic Isabella island) lends it the aura of a parable for the Caribbean's own journey from a region of dependent subjects to a set of mostly fully self-determined and liberated nation-states.

initiation into an Afrocentric religious order to undo engrained ideologies related to white European superiority. For well over a century, this return to an 'authentic' self through reconnection to a 'forgotten' heritage has been a reliable trope in Caribbean literature.

Notably, in the novel, Jerome's reconstituted wholeness also hinges on his self-acceptance as gay. The explicit treatment of homosexuality in *Spirits*, according to Timothy S. Chin (1997), was a potent counter to the production of Caribbean literature which had "traditionally maintained a conspicuous silence around issues of gay and lesbian identity" (Chin 128-29). In fact, the 1980s and 1990s ushered in a wave of queer and women writers who, diverging from the ethic of nation-building parables built on the foundation of heterosexual couplings, centered concerns of female and queer sexuality in the formation of the Caribbean citizen subject.[3] Writers such as Trinidad and Tobago's Dionne Brand and Jamaica's Patricia Powell wrote of queer lives as organic to their respective Caribbean landscape. To be sure, the depiction of queer existence was not absent from literatures of the Caribbean. Literary scholar Rosamond King (2002) notes queerness was historically there but that its presence, specifically in Anglophone Caribbean novels, was often coded, peripheral, or made sordid.[4] Beginning in the 1980s, pioneering writers such as Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff challenged these fixed notions by "refusing the silence and shame usually associated with woman's sexual maturation and homosexuality" (35). In the end, King continues, "the thread that runs through this genealogy is of writers who remake representations of Caribbean sexuality, only to have their images revised and remade by the next generation of writers" (35). Indeed, using *Spirits* as an example, Thomas repositions queerness as a productive aspect of the self-actualization process of the novel's protagonist to whom the redemption of the nation is symbolically tied. The recuperation of an idealized African heritage happens alongside the acceptance of a non-heteronormative identity in the course of achieving a reconstituted liberated self. Thomas thus, alongside other select women and queer authors, opens an anti-colonial critique that positions the trauma of white domination as also constitutive of patriarchal and heterosexist prescriptions. Michelle Cliff elaborated on the transformative power of this "decolonized indigenous queer subject" (Chin 1997) in her novels *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1996). The protagonist

[3] One such novel is V.S. Reid's *A New Day* (1949). The aged narrator recalls Jamaica's various uprisings and setbacks as it marches toward the creation of a New Constitution (which takes place in 1942 in the novel). The novel exemplifies a long-held trend whereby the struggle for self-determination is embodied in the male protagonists.

[4] In her study, "Sex and Sexuality in English Caribbean Novels — A Survey from 1950," King clarifies that homosexuality has appeared in the works of novelists such as Paule Marshall, Austin Clarke, and Rosa Guy. The portrayal of homosexuality, however, "existed in a heteronormative frame that assumes homosexuality is 1) abnormal and immoral, 2) practiced primarily by white and non-Caribbean folk, with Caribbean people only involved out of the desperation of loneliness or poverty, and 3) that when homosexuality does exist it should remain unseen and unacknowledged" (33).

in both works, Clare Savage, battles against cultural, state, and capitalist forms of colonial and neocolonial dominance to come to terms with her indigenized Jamaican identity. In both novels, sexual and gender non-conforming entities – imbued with mythical ties to Afro-spiritualism or the affect of Black rebellion – support Clare on her journey to self-actualization. Far from being a peripheral notion, queer sexuality is inscribed in the foundation myths that play a role in the construction of nation.

It is perhaps this notion of marginality that Caribbean writers refute when they insist on queer presence as a part of the discourse on nationhood. However, in her recent work on Caribbean sexuality, King takes issue with the, at times, conservative rendering of queer sexuality. Her study, *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (2014), champions the celebration of the multiple ways sexual being and performance in the Caribbean defy easy categorization even within the realm of queer theory. Keeping this in mind, she turns her critical lens on tropes in the depiction of queer characters among the generation of female and/or queer authors that emerged since the 1980s. Interestingly, King finds a lack of depth in the portrayal of gay lives. She identifies a tendency to imagine queer characters as, however tormented, fundamentally benevolent and communitarian. To be sure, King was focusing specifically on trans[5] characters who, even when compared to gay and lesbian characters, were "consistently kept on the margins of the texts and deprived of their individuality" (25). This is certainly true, as even in novels such as Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven,* Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) and Mayra Santos-Febres' *Serena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), trans characters in their various capacities are fundamentally in a service role, delivering cis-gendered characters "to safety, to a better understanding of themselves, and to their 'true' destinies, feelings, or histories" (24). But, if we take seriously the re-historicizing imperative that Timothy Chin had attached to queer texts, we can also begin to see the service function that many queer characters – not just trans characters – have provided through the period examined in King's survey on sexuality in Caribbean writing. To *deliver* the reader to an understanding of the Caribbean region as a perennially exploited body within the global modes of production, the queer body is offered up as an overdetermined site where the horrors of class, racial, and sexual exploitation are allegorized. As such, queer characters are often sympathetic characters. Certainly, they can be vindictive, selfish, and even violent during their journeys or in the realm of interpersonal relationships, but often those tensions are sublimated into a larger, more noble goal, sometimes in the interest of another individual, sometimes in the interest of the nation itself. In Dionne Brand's *In Another Place,*

[5] I rely on King's definition of trans identity as she points out the problematic imposition of the term transgender from the US onto the Caribbean. The unassuming appellation of "trans," according to her, can apply to a range of gender bending behaviors that the more specific "transgender" would not cover.

Not Here (1996), Verlia is a member of the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto who returns to an unnamed Caribbean island in the 1980s to help with organizing a resistance among poor sugarcane laborers. There she meets Elizete, a poor worker herself, who through Verlia begins to feel her autonomy as an erotic and political being. However, at times, Verlia can be distant, difficult to understand and uncompromising. Verlia, ardently committed to her political work, dies in a rebellion that harkens to the 1983 US invasion of Grenada. Indeed, rather than being murdered in the approaching US offense, Verlia dies on her own terms, leaping from a cliff amidst a storm of bullets. In their function, therefore, as vehicles for the redemptive hopes of their nation, queer characters, though on complex journeys of discovery or reconciliation, were firmly sympathetic, at times even martyred, in the spirit of aligning them with the postcolonial hopes of their nation.

Curiously, however, Marlon James's novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) was released the same year as King's *Island Bodies*, the study from which I have adapted my critique of the seemingly static depiction of queer characters in works from the Caribbean. *A Brief History* investigates familiar themes of Black subjugation and postcolonial malaise and was lauded for its bracing dramatization of Jamaica's post-independence struggles, even receiving the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2015. While *A Brief History* remains James's most popular work, scholarship on the novel overlooks one of its most radical elements – the portrayal of its only queer main character as an abject villain, an ex-convict working *against* the progressive aims of the state by drugging and enlisting poor urban boys as pawns in a cocaine empire. Within a few years of *A Brief History*'s publication, other queer Caribbean authors released novels depicting their gay, lesbian, or trans characters as villainous or morally bankrupt. These works do not account for a majority trend among recently published novels by queer Caribbean authors, but it is noteworthy that this trope has emerged among a range of writers in the past decade – a period marked by sharp economic downturns, spiraling debt obligations, and a series of natural disasters that devastated many Caribbean islands. Some novels of note are *Here Comes the Sun* (2016) by Jamaican author Nicole Dennis-Benn, whose queer female lead prostitutes poor young girls to tourists in her bid to scale the heights of the hotel industry. The trans Dominican protagonist in Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015) opts to safeguard a promise of future wealth by foregoing their mission to save the Caribbean Sea. And in Gary Victor's *Masi* (2018), the queer lead participates in the ongoing impoverishment of the Haitian population to maintain his government post.

Why then do these authors, from islands with distinct cultures and histories, all present negative representations of queer characters at this moment in time? In my larger project – a manuscript titled *Mercenary Queers in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* – I make three core arguments:

(1) that while the move toward representative government was a logical step for the region's colonized, the processes of nationalization were too tied up in a neocolonial paradigm to truly deliver equitable social systems to most of the region's population;

(2) that the politics of postcolonialism, developed in the crucible of mid-twentieth century decolonial efforts, are incompatible with twenty-first century pressures of ecocides, debt burdens, and postcolonial disillusionment;

(3) that queer relations, despite their seemingly negative presentation in these novels, nonetheless offer a way of understanding the overlapping forms of historical violence that continue to constrain the capacity for humane sympathies.

Mercenary Queers in Contemporary Caribbean Literature takes as one of its theoretical frames the increased scholarly interest in the acute sense of suffering experienced by Caribbean nationals in the aftermath of failed revolutions since the mid-twentieth century. Shalini Puri (2014) examines the trauma of failed postcolonial promises through the tragedy of the Grenada Revolution. Sociologist Orlando Patterson (2019) performs his autopsy of the "postcolonial predicament" via the contemporary nation body of Jamaica. And the anthropologist David Scott (1999, 2004, 2014) interrogates the crisis of postcolonialism, where the concerns that animated anti- and postcolonial policies in the twentieth century are not suited to twenty-first century dilemmas. The queer Caribbean authors I examine are staging a similar criticism. They make this critique, however, through the concept of the *mercenary queer* – a marginalized figure who nonetheless uses the exploiting tendencies of a state or capitalist regime to enhance their social positions. In other words, these authors critique how the structure of modern democracy in their native islands allows for the absorption of some queer people as upwardly mobile while maintaining the oppression of a largely poor and mostly non-white citizen body.

In the section that follows, I return to *A Brief History* to show how author Marlon James dramatizes the failings of Jamaica's immediate post-independence endeavors. Postcolonial state apparatuses (and the social and private sectors they support and regulate) were too anchored in governing frameworks conceived by former colonial powers in the service of their preserving their material and ideological interests. The logic of subjugation that propelled European (and later American) control of Caribbean islands recurs in the neoliberal schemas that presuppose the constrained capacity of the Caribbean region's politics and its peoples. In the wreckage of this postcolonial malaise, *A Brief History* does offer a moment of liberatory imagining via the rapture induced by a moment of queer intimacy. The characters ultimately fail to channel this imagining into political action. But it is this very failure that outlines the terms of a more equitable future not yet imaginable under the exploiting regime of neoliberal capitalism.

Colonial Recursiveness in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

> One, two, three, four
> Colon man[6] a come
> with him watch chain a knock him belly
> Bam Bam Bam
> Ask him what's the time
> and he look upon the sun
> with him watch chain a knock him belly
> Bam Bam Bam
> — Olive Senior, "The Colon People"

A Brief History's main narrative spans two decades and starts in the fateful 1976 election year when the promise of Jamaica's independence had lifted to reveal a colonial infrastructure still rooted in place. Michael Manley is prime minister and is attempting to reaffirm a socialist platform meant to disrupt this entrenched inequality. The first two thirds of the novel, set in the capital city Kingston, center on the orchestrated assassination attempt on Bob Marley (known as "the Singer" in the novel), with covert help from the CIA. The Singer's message of self-determination and pan-African consciousness is ideologically allied to Manley's socialist movement and represents a threat to US political hegemony throughout the Americas. *A Brief History* thus uses the real-life assassination attempt on Bob Marley as the dramatic thrust for a conglomerate of narratives that show the growth of political tribalism and criminal empires in Kingston, the politicians who nurture them to maintain their positions of power and the coercive methods of the United States to support local players sympathetic to their capitalist regime of world order.

Where the novel picks up in 1976, Papa-Lo, who is the powerful don of the Kingston garrison, Copenhagen City, is having a crisis of consciousness; the anti-establishment fervor that led to the creation of these autonomous garrisons has stoked greater divisions among the urban poor. Violence has reached horrific levels, and the political establishment has maneuvered to exploit intercommunity tensions to uphold their positions of power. Papa-Lo recalls the Colon Man song at a moment of realizing that he and his fellow residents are operating within a colonial structure like that of their forebears. In fact, he mistakenly attributes learning the song from his grandfather until he remembers that he has no grandfather. The exceptional violence that engulfs Black urban living creates a Kingston landscape where "no

[6] Colon Man refers to the wave of Caribbean laborers, the majority of them Jamaican men, who travelled to Panama in the early twentieth century to work on constructing the Panama Canal (and later on banana plantations run by US companies). Poor economic conditions drove this labor migration to Panama and its dangerous working conditions in the Canal Zone. Some men returned to the Caribbean sporting signs of newfound wealth. "The Colon Man" therefore became a symbol of upward mobility. But he was also a figure of ambivalence – sometimes flaunting wealth that was not as deep as it seemed.

man in the ghetto have grandfather" (James 338).[7] The mistaken patriarchal figure, Papa-Lo realizes, "was just an old man unlucky to be the only man who live to old age, singing the Colon man song" (338). The moment reads like a glib reference, one quietly nudged in the chapter's brutal retelling of political violence in 1970s Kingston. But the moment is not arbitrary. It is plausible that this man was a Colon Man himself and a testament to the struggles that attended the labor migrants' return to Jamaica two generations before Papa-Lo's present. James's implementation of the song thus uncovers a more informing B-side, one that unpacks the imperialism of Big Stick diplomacy and the rise of US economic and military power in the Americas. It also pays closer attention to what Olive Senior (2014) points out as the brutal reality of racism, death, and disease that haunted the experiences of West Indian labor migrants returning from the Panama Canal (Senior 69). In the early twentieth century, many of these laborers returned to confront the seemingly unmovable class and racial barriers that informed the violence and poor sanitary conditions of working-class Jamaicans, conditions that continue in the lack of working toilets and contaminated drinking water that Papa-Lo alludes to later in the scene. Through this sonic maneuver via the Colon Man song, the colonial past folds itself into the postcolonial present. However, by the terms of the novel, the young men languishing in the same miserable conditions as their grandparents flock instead to the avenues of organized crime opened up by Cold War intrigue and neoliberal economic schemas.

When Papa-Lo tells us he can tell time like a Colon Man, there is an inherent rejection of the utility of linear logic in trying to recount the surreal conditions of the urban poor in post-independent Jamaica. Instead of laughing at the posturing figure that is the Colon Man, the novel asks us to consider the ethics of a regime that allows for his poverty and illiteracy, then derides him for not being able to read a watch. It nudges us into also considering the failings of our postcolonial consciousness when we overlook the resourcefulness and cunning inherent in being able to read the sun as a survival strategy. This type of consciousness, however, is under constant threat. Papa-Lo's more populist beliefs become a danger to the type of political apathy upon which the political establishment depends. Peter Nasser, the novel's corrupt political figure, moves on to work with the more mercenary Josey Wales in maintaining his political party's hold in the region. And while Josey Wales does arrange for Papa-Lo's murder and expresses a distaste for Manley's socialist policies, he is not motivated by loyalty to any party. He is motivated more by a determination to exploit the perversities of broader turf politics that could gain him individual wealth via the

[7] Deborah Thomas, in *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica*, argues for the abstract concept of "exceptional violence" as a tangible repository of the lasting impact of colonialism on the contemporary socio-political landscape. Thomas employs historical research and media analysis to thread a connection between colonial regimes and Jamaica's postcolonial state and cultural formations.

transnational scope of drug trafficking. For this, Josey Wales bypasses local politicians to make overtures to Colombian cartels in Medellín. However, it is important to note that the fashioning of his transnational drug empire could not function without the cooperation of the US government, as represented by the artless CIA station chief, Mr. Clark.

Mr. Clark is willing to turn a blind eye to Josey's "trips to Miami and Costa Rica" (James 414) as long as Josey continues to assist in the US government's efforts to neutralize the threat of communism, which they imagine Manley's socialist government represents. In a critical exchange between himself and Josey, Clark uses a coloring book to explain the benefits of democracy and capitalism in the cartoonishly reduced terms of "twinkies," "ice cream," hot chicks in miniskirts, "tall buildings," "markets," and "freedom" (412). The communal implications of communism, however, subvert a timeless heterosexual ordering that naturally aligns with the precepts of capitalism. "You know why so many [communists] are faggots?" Clark asks Josey, "[B]ecause normal people like me and you, we reproduce. Commies? They're just like homos, they recruit" (413).

With this in mind, I would like to make an argument for the historical connections between European colonialism and postmodern capitalism through the neoimperial figure of Mr. Clark, who is described as embodying a "pirate spirit" when he meets Josey at Port Royal in Kingston (410). Port Royal, as the most important port in the New World in the seventeenth century, was central to the growth and domination of the British economy at that time. "You wonder," Josey says, "if this is the same spirit that leap up in them as soon as they land on any rock. I'm betting it must be so, from as far back as Columbus and slavery. Something about landing from sea that make a white man feel free to say and do as he please" (410-11). On this strategic site, Mr. Clark is figured as a retransmission of a white European tradition that stakes the prospect of financial and political domination on the plundering of resource-rich islands. Where the Caribbean (and, by extension, Latin America) is concerned, the United States' imposing foothold through anti-communist maneuvers or debt mechanisms should not be read as a unique product of a post-World War II global world order. It should also be read as always already informed by a material history that presupposes white Euro-American dominance in geopolitical relations. In making this argument, feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander (2006) asks us to abandon the lineal technologies (such as the watch) in tracing the progress of our present political situations and to think alternatively through the concept of the palimpsest – that parchment meant for repeated inscriptions, the previous content never being perfectly erased, often leaving ghostly traces of itself among the new. In Alexander's words, the figure of Mr. Clark shows that "colonialism's multiple projects, often normalized through hypervisible practices and racialization and

(hetero)sexualization, cannot be seen simply in terms of having been past, and thus no longer constitutive of the (post)modern" (191).

For James, the white heteropatriarchal considerations that naturalized the white conquest of so-called untamed islands for the sake of profit and resource extraction have evolved into the postcolonial-state maneuvers that align progress with productivity and thus marginalize ideologies and citizens who are seen as a moral threat to its productivity – be it the queer, the prostitute, the pleasure seeker, the socialist, the poor immigrant, the single mother, or the reggae singer making a case for reparations. Through these strategies, James inscribes the echoes of the colonial past in the happening of the story's present to show how democracy in the fledgling country could never bring true self-determination to its majority-Black citizens since the terms of said democracy, to borrow a claim from Deborah Thomas (2004), were built on a house of cards structured in the power-consolidation interests of Western Europe and, later, the United States (Thomas, *Modern* 13).

As the exchange between Mr. Clark and Josey attests, a critical aspect of James's critique also centers on the role of violent heteropatriarchy as a destructive force in a postcolonial context. I alluded to the Colon Man as a failed duplicate of the image of his colonial ruler. I reach for the Colon Man once more, however, as a (queer) tool for decoding James's anti-colonial critique, for the popular imagining of the Colon Man betrays a slippage not only in the broad terms of coloniality but also in more specific terms of masculinity. This slippage taps into Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry as a gesture of disruption, one that picks at the indefinite nature of hegemonic constructs and, in doing so, undermines its self-evident authority. I argue that James's use of cultural signifiers also highlights masculinity's equivocal nature and offers a pathway to breaking down its destructive influence on the Caribbean psyche, the male Caribbean psyche in particular. To this end, I focus specifically on James's use of queer Eros to imagine the dismantling of white heteropatriarchal logics that marginalize not only queer folk but also the multiple subaltern groups – the single mother, the poor immigrant, the pleasure junkie, the mostly Black poor communities – imagined as antithetical to the productive imperatives of capitalist regimes.

The Promise of Queer Failure

A Brief History of Seven Killings is a bleak novel, operating as a transcendent exercise in failure or, one could say, as a clinical vivisection of the Caribbean body for the sole purpose of exposing the fatal cancer that structures its existence. But I lean on Bill Ashcroft's theorization of utopianism as a critical lens that disrupts the self-evidence of hegemony by detailing the terms of said hegemony's violence: "The distinguishing feature of all utopian visions", he says, rests in "the critique of those present conditions that make utopia necessary" (10). *A Brief History* anchors the terms of a possible utopia in the dismantling of – at the individual level – those

colonial logics Caribbean citizens have inherited that posit the non-normative or subaltern as inferior. Crucially, one of the ways in which James dramatizes this psychic battle is through sex between men.

Of the eleven major characters who get to narrate their stories, the character Weeper is the novel's only queer Jamaican. His backstory reveals that, unlike some of the other Copenhagen criminals, Weeper had aspirations of middle-class success, perhaps even "apprenticing for some architect somewhere" (James 66). But in 1967, he was pounced on by the police and arrested. Under the false claim of his being involved in a robbery lies the social politics of Weeper being a downtown Black boy strutting on the border of uptown Kingston. His imprisonment and subsequent turn to crime is a rejection of the untenable ideals of a post-independent Jamaica where education, diligence, and thrift would be an equalizer for all Jamaicans. After prison, Weeper becomes one of Josey Wales's most brutal enforcers, participating in ruthless campaigns of murder, sexual assault, and even the drug-induced zombification of young Black men for the sake of creating a desperate and slavish squad of assassins. The point I am making here is that James, as a queer author, does not feel compelled to position his queer characters as solely victims or noble heroes. Like other contemporary queer authors, mentioned earlier, James's focus on the abject terms of the postcolonial condition reveals how even marginalized characters such as queer folk can participate in economies of exploitation for personal gain.

Weeper does, however, struggle to come to terms with his attraction to men, despite evidence of a significant same-sex relationship that he once had in prison. It is not until he becomes the Brooklyn-based operator for Josey Wales's expanded drug empire that he confronts the conflicting terms of his desires and his beliefs. Weeper, in short, has fallen for a white American man but chafes at the implications of the pleasure that he experiences, for the first time, from a same-sex encounter. He worries about being made to feel like a woman, "not from a fuck," which to him is merely transactional, "but from a blow on the nipple," which encodes a feeling of intimacy that is unnervingly humanizing (497).Weeper struggles to even scream in pleasure, plagued by illogical ideas such as Josey Wales flying by in an aeroplane to catch him in the act in his fifth-floor apartment. Even during sex, Weeper remains stymied by these thoughts until the moment his lover manages to

> reach something and somewhere that make me jump and no I don't wonder if this is how woman feel when me hit the spot, because fuck women and fuck pussy and fuck trying to fuck the faggot out, at least right here, right now five floors up. And fuck thinking what it going mean the white man on top because I don't think about the white man on top until I think that this is America and if I think like a nigger then it mean something that the white man on top and maybe I should go on top even though he can still ride me. Thank God me not the one who need to have a hard cock. (499)

To "fuck" thinking about what it means to have the white man on top is to both acknowledge how racialized sexual encounters can recall genealogies of violence and

to reject the debilitating terms of that colonial masculinity adopted to combat the traumas of that violence. To reject this shame, according to feminist scholar Juana María Rodríguez (2014), is to reject the psychic constraints that prohibit the power of the erotic (144). The power of the erotic, of course, recalls Audre Lorde's important argument for our erotic embrace being intimately allied with our political agency in the present. Weeper's embrace of being "a faggot" is thus predicated on his battling and understanding the constitutive terms of his homophobia and, for readers, opens up vistas of imagining how to undo these structures of social relations that also marginalize other subaltern communities.

It is important to point out that Weeper ultimately fails in transferring this moment of consciousness into a social ethic that envisions the dismantling of existing power structures that continue to differentiate – that is, mark as abject – certain citizen bodies. He does not imagine abandoning his life in organized crime, and his execution is soon after arranged via a power grab by another drug lord. Curiously, James imbues Weeper's death with one of the novel's most urgent moments regarding human connection. Weeper tricks his assassin into allowing him a shot of pure coke, effectively killing himself in order to go out on his terms of lawless pleasure. Weeper's defiant gesture stirs a heretofore untapped tenderness in his would-be assassin John-John K (who is also queer):

> [Weeper's] still jerking, choking and hissing [...] And me I don't know why, I don't fucking know but I grab him around the chest and clutch him even though he is on top of me. I don't know why but I was hugging and holding him and squeezing him and he was just shaking, man, shaking and shaking some more with the back of his head bumping into my forehead, foam bubbles popping out of his mouth. I grab his neck but don't squeeze. Weeper wheezes three times then quit. (James 597-98)

What is it within the grim scenario of Weeper's dying that spurs this impulse in John-John K? In the grim parade of deaths riddling his novel, why does James choose to imbue this moment with the affect of tenderness? Perhaps James here is channeling José Esteban Muñoz's theorization in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) of the utopian impulse always already present in queer gestures. The utopian, he claims in a nod to Roland Barthes, emerges from the quotidian – that smile, that touch, that embrace. In the context of queer touch (queer love), it is defiant and portentous, always pointing to a potential horizon where the asymmetries of capitalism and the normative imperative of heterosexuality are not present (22). Weeper as a character does not succeed in transferring his consciousness to any form of selfless actualization, but the gesture of his death raises the stakes for the reader in recognizing the importance of this transfer. Frantz Fanon had once argued that a national literature is necessarily a literature of combat because it must work to mold a population's consciousness (173). For the Caribbean subject, James forces us into such a combat, but on the plane of the psychic and emotional. Like Weeper's lover, James performs on us a type of intercourse,

invading and penetrating – flinging us into sobering channels of the past and present to force a recognition of the conscious overhaul necessary to imagine a more egalitarian future.

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