

The Feminist Supernatural: Genreflexive Fiction

by Transnational Women Writers

By

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To other otherworldly women.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Specular Specters: An Introduction to Genreflexivity

In the United States, “rape kits” have experienced little innovation since they were first developed by a Chicago police sergeant in the late 1970s. Though the “Vitulo Evidence Collection Kit” was officially named after Louis Vitullo, the male officer who contributed to their creation, Kaelyn Forde explains the colloquially known “rape kit” was “largely the work of grassroots feminists” (2). Women activists Marty Goddard and Dr. Cynthia Porter worked with Vitullo to compile the kits and, as Vitullo told *The New York Times* in 1978, the intention was “to standardize and protect evidence so that guilt can be established beyond a reasonable doubt—we want to avoid the loss, contamination, or alteration of evidence” (qtd. in Freudenheim). This process of bodily documentation constitutes an extremely invasive procedure. Often lasting for several hours, the rape kit entails collecting physical materials such as fingernails, combing pubic hair and scraping skin for debris, observing exterior lacerations, and – for women survivors – examining potential vaginal injuries, typically by using a speculum.

This gynecological instrument, which also remains essentially identical to the original patent unveiled in the 1840s, was invented by Dr. James Marion Sims – the “father of gynecology.” In his backyard in Alabama, he conducted a series of medical experiments upon un-consenting slave women, examining their bodies with bent gravy spoons and other prototypes before developing the modern speculum. In forensic exams, the speculum often continues to incite fear and discomfort: the experience of insertion can “re-traumatize” survivors who must then endure prodding, poking, and swabbing (Forde 2). The design of the tool itself – a cold

metallic duckbill which is accompanied by a ratcheting noise as it expands – often furthers this anxiety. Yet, women frequently undergo the procedure with little benefit. Throughout the United States, thousands of rape kits remain untested, particularly for non-heterosexual survivors, and thousands more are simply thrown away. And despite the upsurge of visibility promoted through #MeToo and other activist movements, women’s narratives of gendered violence are often disbelieved, regardless of the “evidence” or testimonies collected from women who must substantiate their own versions of reality.

Though my title suggests that this project centers upon the supernatural, I begin with this detour to gynecology because this practice contributes to enduring definitions of femininity that translate to other socio-cultural spheres in which women are subordinated. As Terri Kapsalis argues in *Public Privates*, “For each gynecological circumstance, a model patient is implied” (6). This patient is typically “compliant, passive, and accepting rather than active and questioning, a composite of womanly performance” (6). When women’s performances deviate from the “composite” of gendered behaviors into which they have been initiated, they are often discredited, partly because they become unintelligible within hegemonic systems which may not possess the proper vocabulary for women’s experiences. But deviant women’s subjectivities are also omitted because they pose a threat – they represent chasms, voids, unknowns. The speculum was designed to penetrate this uncategorizable “lack”: as a physical extension of the probing patriarchal gaze, the speculum forcibly opens women’s bodies to scrutiny. It plunges into the depths of women’s “lack,” an apparently negative space which operates in contrast to the phallus, or the “primary organizer” of both language and subjectivity (Cixous 46). Though feminist thinkers such as Hélène Cixous have argued there is “no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative,” I suggest we re-appropriate the objectifying, penetrative device of the

speculum to preserve women's space in the negative. From this vantage point, we can reverse the speculum's gaze, redirecting it outward to expose and amplify the alternative experiences and realities contained within the lack.

Preserving this feminine "lack" may seem counterintuitive within a feminist framework. But if this negative space constitutes the origin of feminine subjectivities in relation to both language and embodiment, then the lack is both women's particularized domain and the point from which they can expand.<sup>1</sup> Fantastic figures often occupy absence and, insofar as they enter into representation, they become liminal. Supernatural fiction itself remains a similarly marginal literary realm, particularly when linked to gendered understandings of "realistic" representation. When women experience supernatural encounters or possess otherworldly abilities, they frequently face erasures: they are disbelieved, labelled mad, or condemned as charlatans through the tacit reinforcement of sexist and racist stereotypes that recognize only dominant realities. In my re-appropriation of the speculum, then, I wish to take the liberty of renaming "speculative fiction." Traditionally used to refer to supernatural, futuristic, or related non-realistic stories, I convert speculative fiction into "specular fiction" in order to account for the feminist force or power of fantastic genres that provide insight into otherworldly, or other(ed)-worldly, realities.

I borrow the term "specular" from Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* in which she examines moments when phallogentric representation fails: "The reality that [the] phallus is not omnipotent leads the man to specularize the woman," hoping to "conjure the

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as Cixous, Alice Jardine, and Jacques Lacan posit "feminine jouissance" as a corrective or alternative to womanly "lack," or absence. In this context, jouissance signifies a state of diffusion or pleasurable excess that resists alienation. However, I wish to distance my reading of genreflexivity from jouissance – the latter category prioritizes social connection in positive, but somewhat idealistic ways. We need to also retain our connection to the lack, to a state of feminine absence, and work from within this subversive space.

illusion that the object is inert” and susceptible to invasion (134).<sup>2</sup> Wielding this “specular vision,” he peers into the woman’s apparently negative spaces with the intention of reaffirming his own substance. But the woman, despite having been denied a stable subjectivity for so long, is neither passive nor merely referential to the phallogentric. She operates as a “concave speculum,” distorting rather than absorbing the attempted reproduction of hegemonic realities. Indeed, the concave speculum cannot produce a faithful reproduction – man attempts to project onto the inert object, or onto the woman, but “what presents itself is not the void of nothingness but...a scintillating and incandescent concavity” (Irigaray 178). Supernatural figures operate as “concave speculums” – as un-quantifiable and indefinable entities that penetrate the realm of the real and destabilize the gendered and racialized fiction(s) tethered to reality. However, while Irigaray argues that this distortion occurs because the woman’s “twisted character is her inability to say what she represents,” and language thus fails both woman *and* man, I argue supernatural women are also agents of distortion rather than only reflections of it. Rather than specularizing the woman-as-lack, or woman-as-other, and thus falling into phallogentric paradigms, the supernatural woman instead reveals the boundaries of both realism and the real to *identify lack in these structures*.

The traditional process of linguistic reproduction is male-oriented; but, when seeking to attain the next stage of power which he believes to be virtually guaranteed to him, man unwittingly enacts his own cycle of failure. As Irigaray explains, if “the whole universe is already [presumed to be] under the Father’s monopoly,” then “it is at best the inscription of his eternal truths that he revives by repeating them... [H]e is now and always nothing but the more

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<sup>2</sup> Irigaray uses the image of the speculum to refer both to the instrument and to the space it penetrates, as well as the metaphoric extensions having to do with the specular.

or less effective doubling of an omnipotent Phallus” (353). In other words, this figure’s desire to perpetuate his subjectivity is fatal – through this cyclical process, he reveals only his own limits as it results in stagnation. In contrast, the genreflexive exposes the almost imperceptible amount of slippage between iterations, disallowing the exact reproduction of phallogentric language. Women writers covertly generate a “manipulative language” – one which distorts discourse while leaving it intact. Such manipulations are dangerous within phallogentric discourses and, as a result, this feminine language prompts action: masculine realms “would...attempt to thwart any manipulation of discourse that would also leave discourse intact. [The] function [of manipulative language] would be to cast phallogentrism, phallogentratism, loose from its moorings in order to return the masculine to its own language, leaving open the possibility of a different language. Which means that the masculine would no longer be ‘everything’” (Irigaray 80). Genreflexivity achieves this unmooring, specularizing realist language to expose alternatives.

## **Gendered Genres**

In this project, I chart how global women writers adapted the genre of supernatural fiction, specifically ghost and haunting narratives, to imagine alternative configurations of power and femininity within realist discourses. Specific features of twentieth-century supernaturalism, such as its emphasis on liminal subjectivities and foregrounding of the conventionality of both gender and genre, prime it for feminist innovation because these features function as affordances that permit certain kinds of feminist cultural work. I borrow the term “affordances” from Caroline Levine who explores the elasticity of literary forms as they often expand beyond their expected uses: “Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent – though not always obvious – in aesthetic and social arrangements”

(6-7, emphasis original).<sup>3</sup> The figure of the ghost or spirit is an “affordance” of the supernatural genre that women writers can imaginatively deploy against formal tenets of the nineteenth-century realist tradition, such as its emphasis on evidence and documentation, which are characterized by a masculine or patriarchal quality. As Edith Wharton argues in the preface to her collection of ghost stories, the concept of “realism” appears differently within fantastic genres: “Sources, as a matter of fact, are not what one needs in judging a ghost story. The good ones bring with them the internal proof of their ghostliness; and no other evidence is needed” (1). Occupying a threshold between the real and the seemingly unreal, the figure of the ghost complicates understandings of a unified reality by existing in excess of the assumptions or expectations of the rational world.

Joining performance theory and feminist criticism with genre studies, especially in relation to metafictional forms, enables us to gauge how and why British and American authors, such as Muriel Spark and Shirley Jackson, revised literary conventions that were also deemed impoverished by authors as wide-ranging as Maryse Condé in Guadeloupe and Jean Rhys in Dominica. I advance the supernatural-as-metafiction model, or what I term *genreflexivity*, to argue that women writers utilize otherworldly genre elements to self-reflexively respond to the legacy of nineteenth-century realist conventions in modernist and postcolonial texts. In this way, they participate in the emergence of an expanded realist mode. Recognizing feminist supernaturalists’ use of metafictional forms across the globe shows us that these women engage with mimetic realism in order to challenge the representational politics that accompany this

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<sup>3</sup> Levine herself borrows the category of “affordances” from design theory, a realm of thinking which joins both the aesthetic and social uses of objects. For instance, glass “affords transparency and brittleness” while steel “affords strength, smoothness, hardness, and durability” (Levine 1). Applying design theory to form, Levine explores how seemingly contradictory formal qualities might operate or co-exist within texts.

genre. Whose experiences are overlooked or ignored in traditional realist fiction? Which alternative configurations of reality are exposed when the gendered and racialized categories of real and unreal are inverted, subverted, or distorted?

The feminist supernatural self-consciously foregrounds the literary apparatus, thus participating in metafictional discourses but ultimately generating a genre-reflexive fictional mode. This genre enables supernatural women writers to respond to both the limits of masculine realist narratives and to a masculine quality of realism that also characterizes traditional haunting narratives by writers such as Henry James and Sheridan Le Fanu. In tales like *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and “The Familiar” (1872), James and Le Fanu respectively allow room for “natural” explanations for their characters’ otherworldly encounters. This recourse to realism is one of the major affordances of the ghost story genre – the element of suspense is critical, and it can be more easily maintained if there are multiple explanations for ghostly apparitions. As a result, James expressed his desire to experiment with “the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy,” as he explained in the preface to his final ghost story, “The Jolly Corner” (2). However, this tension has led to pathologizing readings of the governess character in *The Turn of the Screw*, as scholars often challenge her sanity and question the “reality” of potential apparitions.<sup>4</sup> The women writers I examine instead embrace the seeming paradox of the supernatural as itself a mode of realism and, in this way, they preserve space for the supernatural to *become* the natural. By the end of novels such as Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957) or Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the authors have continually reasserted that

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<sup>4</sup> Though scholars such as Paula Cohen and Albaraq Mahbobah have produced feminist re-readings of the governess’s role in *The Turn of the Screw*, they often reinforce negative gendered stereotypes. For instance, Cohen argues that the governess, “the presumed source of domestic order,” exhibits a form of productive hysteria which “wreaks havoc on the domestic space” as she neglects Miles and Flora, the children of Bly house (65).

their supernatural elements are “real” or legitimate. They thus craft narratives that subvert “natural” or expected interpretations of their female characters’ powers, such as Caroline Rose’s ghostly voices being viewed as mental illness in *The Comforters* or Christophine’s conjuring abilities falling under the category of charlatanism in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In recent gender and genre studies, the relationship between gender, modernism and postcolonialism remains a contentious one, but this project tends to align with those scholars who characterize these genres as masculine-dominated enterprises in need of intervention. Critics such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Alice Jardine support the “subversive linguistic *jouissance*...which they associate with modernist experimentation” (Gilbert and Gubar xiv) while Rita Felski, Bonnie Kime Scott, Alison Lee, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the ways in which modernism has been “unconsciously gendered masculine” due to certain formal tenets of the tradition, such as its emphasis on objectivity, documentation, impersonality and detachment (Scott 3). For instance, in *Realism and Power*, Lee argues that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the realist novel often aspired to objectivity, even into the postcolonial canon. But the “illusion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the novel and history” is intrinsically flawed because it is based in “the notion that there is a common, shared sense of both ‘reality’ and ‘truth’” (Lee 12). The assumption of shared experience leads to the continued naturalization of male perspectives which historically dominated the genre. In contrast, supernatural texts capitalize on the “linguistic *jouissance*” supplied by emerging experimentalist modes while consciously participating in a particular generic category, thereby calling attention to form and fictionality.

I examine transnational modernist and postcolonial texts by women to demonstrate how these writers’ genreflexive fictions made use of realist conventions in culturally and



geographically specific ways to render this genre more amenable to representing women's and minorities' experiences, especially those that diverge from normative visions of reality. In the feminist supernatural fictions I examine, such experiences are highlighted in multiple ways: through the subversion of stereotypical marriage plots; the reversal of racialized and gendered power dynamics supplied through fantastic abilities such as zombification; the refutation of a hierarchy of scientific/spiritual discourses that privileges male-dominated categories of knowing; and the appropriation of narratives of "suspicion" applied to black women by white, male colonizers. Importantly, by fusing realism and supernaturalism, these experiences are naturalized rather than relegated to a realm of mere fantasy. Feminist supernaturalists genreflexively engage with the masculinist forms, tropes, and politics of realism, producing a kind of feminist formalism designed to perform cultural work. By calling attention to their narratives *as* narratives, supernatural women writers offer a critique of their texts' own construction, thereby rendering both "realism" and assumed versions of "reality" highly suspect.

In this way, genreflexivity operates as a tool for recalibrating our attitudes toward women's experiences – it advances a new mode of belief, one which takes women at their word and thus legitimizes their claims to their own experiences. Masculine realism is a form of gaslighting, or "the systematic denial of women's testimony about harms done to them by men" (Stark 1). And, within the realist texts I examine, seeing is often believing. Genreflexivity works in contrast to such modes of "knowing," particularly as gaslighting denies victims on the basis of their social identities. Whether a woman has witnessed an apparently "unbelievable" supernatural event or endured an encounter which only seems implausible because it deviates from social norms or makes the listener uncomfortable, the genreflexive calls attention to the conditions under which the incident occurred and thereby examines both the formal and cultural

expectations which accompanied it. Though such encounters are often painful, unstable, or unclear, the genreflexive enables us to glimpse the alternative accounts or realities which co-exist with accepted realities. Feminist supernaturalists deploy genre conventions self-reflexively, thereby challenging and expanding the historically gendered expectations to which they correspond.

### **The Case for Genreflexivity: or, The Limits of Metafiction**

Genre fiction, in its ready obedience to generic formulas, might be considered the antithesis of the metafictional. Most genre fictions inhabit conventions seamlessly so as not to draw attention to their fictiveness (i.e., to keep the reader focused on plot rather than form). For example, detective fiction often follows a primary subject and proceeds via a series of clues that drive the plot towards a logical conclusion. In contrast, genreflexive texts draw attention to themselves *as* texts by explicitly referencing or commenting upon their own status as works of genre fiction. Often termed “metafiction,” this narrative style is recognizable for its hyper-awareness of literary form and convention. Metafictional texts consciously reflect upon the act of writing and the construction of literary works to link fictional worlds to broader social questions. Metafiction is thus characterized by doubled narratives – one composing the world of the novel itself, the other maintaining ties to that world while also gesturing toward the external factors that conditioned its creation. I contend that in genreflexive texts, this exposure of the potential artificiality of the “real” or naturalized world exposes gender and race as social constructs that can thus be rewritten or rethought. Feminist supernatural fictions defamiliarize gendered constructs as metaphysical deviations from the known world inevitably challenge norms of realistic representation. By troubling definitions of the natural and the human, feminist

supernatural texts raise fundamental questions about conventionality and gendered constructs: Which subjectivities are considered natural within patriarchal hierarchies and fictions? Do women who exhibit otherworldly abilities automatically cede their positions *within* the real or themselves *as* real?

Recent discussions of self-conscious fiction, such as Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narratives* (2013), Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn's *Metafiction and Metahistory* (2007), and Joan Douglas Peters' *Feminist Metafiction* (2002), trace metafictional texts from the eighteenth century to the present. I locate genreflexivity specifically within the twentieth century because feminist supernaturalists' revisions of realist conventions dovetail with the development of self-conscious fiction often associated with modernism and postmodernism but offer a different emphasis. In the texts I examine, women authors critique both masculine, Jamesian realism and the neglected status of women in modern and postcolonial literatures. After World War I, once dominant forms of realism, challenged by a wide range of modernist movements (Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, etc.), were joined in the literary marketplace by competing forms of fiction writing. Self-consciously "modern" novelists began to turn from a mimetic model of fiction toward an understanding of fiction as a medium for the "*mediation* or interpretation of reality" (Matz 34, emphasis original). Writers increasingly shared an interest in form itself – a trending toward the metafictional which thematized narration and replaced tendencies to "efface [the] narrators...and ge[t] rid of any intrusive omniscience" (Matz 13). Moreover, experimental modernist texts often drew on occult discourses "dominant during the period...because in them it saw the possibilities for a reconceptualization of the mimetic" (Wilson 1). Despite the well-documented shift from authorial effacement to self-conscious authorial play in twentieth-century fiction, little work has been done to examine the supernatural as a metafictional form that

directly responds to this central tension.<sup>5</sup> Women's supernatural texts participate in this mediational fictional turn while providing new insights by explicitly linking genre conventions to social constructions such as gender.

I build first upon the category of metafiction as defined by Patricia Waugh in her 1984 book *Metafiction*: "Metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion" (6). She conceptualizes this genre, then, through its formal self-exploration, which allows us not only to "examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction," but to "also explore *the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text*" (2, emphasis mine). Linking this potential artificiality of the "real" world to the social expectations reinforced through genre enables a mode of re-evaluation. The seemingly "real," or culturally legitimated, conditions of gender (and conventions of genre) can instead be viewed, as Judith Butler argues, as "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal

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<sup>5</sup> Few scholars have linked self-reflexivity to the genre of supernaturalism. Katherine Weese makes this connection to argue that women writers often use the supernatural as a "middle ground between experimentation and realism" (632) and Mimi Winick draws the comparison in her examination of "realist fantasy." However, Weese examines contemporary women writers' engagement with the Female Gothic novel and Winick focuses on the role of scholarship in "transforming fantasy into realism" (575). Monika Fludernik similarly argues the uncanny, the fabulous, the irrational and the otherworldly have "come to replace the position of control, objectivity and order" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (94). As a result, "if history is no longer experienced as a rational process, then...competing genres...in ever more fabulous shape...seep in to replace, restructure and rewrite historical consciousness" (Fludernik 94). Fludernik is most invested, then, in mythic storytelling that does not retain realist qualities consistent with the Jamesian tradition. Finally, Wilson investigates aesthetic experimentation in the early twentieth century to argue that occult forms offered a "productive magic...that fundamentally understood that the mimetic is able to produce, not just an inert copy, but an animated copy powerful enough to enact change in the original" (1). Though I am indebted to Wilson's recognition of the relationship between modernism and the occult, I place less emphasis on a distinction between reproductions and originals. Rather, genre reflexivity emphasizes that realities are already co-existing, rather than emerging as extensions of an original.

over time and produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (519). Mary Daly confirms that “to participate in ‘reality’ is to repeat mythical models, to *reactualize* them continuously,” and the only means of escape is through “vain and illusory” (that is, performative) activities that centralize the putatively true self (45). For Jose Esteban Muñoz, minority bodies – including those which are black and/or queer – are similarly “formed,” but in response to “the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny” – cultural logics which “work to undergird state power” (5). Genreflexive texts capitalize on such performative work to reveal the instability of genre conventions, particularly those which correspond to the social constructions they purport to represent. These gendered and racialized categories then invite subversion as their permeability is exposed.

Though I adapt Waugh’s definition of metafiction, I expand it through the genreflexive category to explore not only explicitly metafictional texts, but to bring into the fold supernatural narratives which are implicitly self-reflexive owing to their use of alternative formal distancing techniques, such as allegories of writing. Examining implicitly metafictional texts enables us to trace global manifestations of the feminist supernatural as we are prompted to understand how methods of formal self-reflexivity appear differently across cultural spheres. The narrow definition of metafiction supplied by Waugh and taken up by thinkers such as Heilmann and Llewellyn excludes texts that, though not recognizably metafictional under a traditional conceptualization this term, participate in the same processes of critiquing genre. In this way, critics have neglected the relationship between genre fiction, such as supernaturalism, and self-reflexivity. Moreover, not accounting for texts that are implicitly or alternatively meta converts metafiction itself into a category that, though seemingly subversive, actually reinstates a narrowly Anglo-American model operating under a restricted set of assumptions about what

constitutes formal intervention. These genreflexive texts illuminate a mid-century feminist moment in which a revolution occurred: a need to overwrite accepted histories and modalities. Must women writers participate in evidently Anglo-American forms of writing in order to produce metafictional or genreflexive texts? Or might supernatural elements – such as magical powers, haunting, conjuring, or zombification – be considered alternative modes of inscription that can be interpreted as self-reflexive? Theorizing the category of genreflexivity brings such tensions to the surface: while these texts may appear to follow similar sets of assumptions, by calling attention to their use of generic conventions, they do so in order to underscore the small discontinuities between iterations, rather than to distill genres down to an essence. These small moments of discord, in which gender expectations and genre conventions are evacuated of their formerly self-evident coherence, constitute the potential for change. The presence of specters and the privileging of alternate methods of genre critique are some of the ways in which feminist supernaturalists destabilize cultural sites of knowledge or intelligibility in the “living” realm – such as gendered hierarchies of existence – and thus serve as examples of how we might understand such hierarchies to be hegemonic “fictions” in need of revision in our own world.

### **Postmodernism and the Fantastic: Challenging Non-realist Aesthetics**

Readings of twentieth-century supernatural fiction tend to fall into two categories when considered in relation to the self-reflexive turn outlined in the previous section. Some scholars read such fiction as evidently otherworldly, particularly through the lens of Tzvetan Todorov’s popular theory of the “pure fantastic,” while others, such as Marleen Barr and Marguerite Alexander, examine these texts within the dominant non-realist genre of the century, experimental postmodernism. It is important instead to reinstate the mutually antagonistic

relationship between supernaturalism and the tradition of realism, understood as an aesthetic for representing the real.

By entering feminist supernaturalists into conversation with Todorov's emphasis on uncertainty in the "pure fantastic," I explore one of the ways in which their works revise the gendered expectations of both realism and traditional forms of supernaturalism. Though Todorov's theorization of the fantastic has been critiqued for his failure to adequately consider the gendered dimensions of the genre, his definition remains influential owing to its basic tenet that the reader's "hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations of apparently supernatural events must be sustained to the end" of the narrative (63). But this premise invites readers to uphold the real/unreal binary. I argue that Jean Rhys, Maryse Condé, Shirley Jackson and others instead use this hesitation to feminist ends by collapsing the binary. Though they initially maintain the suspension between reality and unreality, or between natural and supernatural, each author ultimately proves the "reality" of her ghostly figure. They refuse to sustain a balance that risks giving leverage to the rational, masculine world – a realm which privileges expected, naturalized outcomes for marginalized figures. Taking into account the intrinsically meta qualities of ghost fiction is significant because genre-reflexive texts question precisely the "existence of an irreducible opposition between real and unreal" emphasized by Todorov (167). Their ghosts insistently and undeniably exist within the narrative, destabilizing expectations of the real by underscoring its social and historical construction. Applying non-realist visions to supernaturalism is problematic because it risks making the gendered figures of

this genre *necessarily* otherworldly, maintaining their othered status and furthering their exclusion rather than emphasizing their participation in existing discourses.<sup>6</sup>

Conflating supernaturalism with the largely non-realist aesthetic of experimental postmodernism is similarly problematic because such a reading discounts this genre's direct engagement with earlier forms of realism. Supernatural and metafictional writing produced throughout the twentieth century is often considered postmodern as each of these genres break traditional textual boundaries through their experimental forms. There are two dominant reasons for this categorization: the postmodern supernatural first rejects attempts to be "naturalized at the end of the novel," thus deviating from the traditional structure in which human agency is typically revealed as the source of apparitions; and this version of supernaturalism also consciously violates the assumed contract between writer and reader by withholding information and subverting expected resolutions (Alexander 3). But we must also explore the ways in which these authors continually renovated realism, rather than intervening or refashioning the genre retrospectively. In his description of "peripheral realisms," Nicholas Robinette argues that "the best realist novels...changed" throughout the twentieth century by implementing experimental structures that suture traditional realism with imaginative conventions capable of "mutating" to reflect new social configurations and versions of "reality" (2). Such fusions resulted from reactions to and extensions of modernism, and they preserve women authors' engagement with, rather than rejection of, realist conventions. However, while Robinette discusses peripheral realisms that emerge primarily through innovative forms of language, he does not recognize the

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Barr reproduces women's othered status by neglecting to reconcile this tension between estrangement and engagement. Barr examines "fiction written by women which is not committed to realism and, hence, does not represent a patriarchal reality" (xxi), but she does not fully consider the idea that "even the most experimental of writers remain convinced that language...represents something real" (Zimmerman 186).



ways in which the feminist supernatural also engages with realism. This engagement is significant because many of the texts that I refer to as “supernatural” contain otherworldly figures from Afro-Caribbean traditions, including voodoo priestesses, conjure women, and zombies. What is considered “supernatural” within Anglo-American contexts is sometimes religiously or culturally derived in other socio-historical spheres. Stephen Henderson explains how these socio-cultural divergences are expressed through form and genre: “Literature...is the verbal organization of experience into beautiful forms, but what is meant by ‘beautiful’ and ‘forms’ is to a significant degree dependent upon a people’s way of life, their needs, their aspirations, their history – in short, their culture” (12). Understanding supernaturalism as an alternative medium for reality aims to account for such differences.

Moreover, at stake in reading supernaturalism in terms of realism in postcolonial contexts is the consideration that defining narratives as more or less “realistic” according to Anglo-American standards contributes, as Wilson Harris explains, to “the narrow basis of realism...as an art that mirrors common-sense...or pigmented identity” (54). For Harris, such a definition inevitably reinforces otherness by “void[ing] a capacity for the true marriage of like to like within a multi-cultural universe” (55). The feminist supernatural provides a space for the dynamic negotiation between traditional realism and that which is typically unrepresentable within that genre. The sorts of realist fictional narratives I explore demonstrate the inseparability of “historical memory and speculative inquiry” (Webb 6). This type of literature, which scholars such as Harris and Barbara Webb respectively call “mystery of reality” and “myth,” I refer to as the feminist supernatural because I retheorize realism through women’s supernaturalism in order to emphasize their efforts to redefine and multiply modes of representing the real. Harris and Webb are primarily invested in magical realism and, though some of the texts that I consider in

this project have been categorized under this genre, I intervene in recent critical conversations which argue this term is in need of revision. Many scholars, such as Selwyn R. Cudjoe, reject the qualifier “magical” because it implies the experiences within “magical realist” narratives are not historical or are divorced from the real. Cudjoe advances the replacement term “critical realism” to describe, for example, texts which “attempt to discover the ‘essence’ of Caribbean experience” and “contain social analyses of that reality” (265). Genreflexivity aims to instead capture the analytical capacity of meta-texts and to avoid subordinating the real to the magical, or vice versa.

I additionally distinguish genreflexivity from other theories of estrangement associated with speculative fiction, including Kristeva’s definition of abjection and various conceptualizations of the uncanny, because I wish to maintain a closer connection between the real and the unreal. For Kristeva, the abject is a form of defamiliarization which results in a breakdown between the self and the other. Under this definition, the abject causes one to react negatively to something which has been cast out of the symbolic order. For instance, a cadaver often conditions abjection for it signifies both self (an embodied individual) and other (a lifeless or inanimate form). In this way, many of the supernatural figures I examine may themselves be viewed *as* abject. However, viewing conjure-women, ghosts, or spirits as abject figures contributes to understandings of them as outcasts who exist outside of the symbolic order and thereby furthers their marginalization. Similarly, traditional definitions of the uncanny refer to experiences which distort the familiar, rendering it unrecognizable. As Nicholas Royle explains, “The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one’s sense of oneself...seems strangely questionable” (1). But in the texts that I examine, this uncertainty is eliminated. If a reader interprets the

supernatural figures as uncanny, this reveals their own bias – though ghostly images may appear as strange or uncanny, this is only because they do not align with normative standards for the “real” or “familiar.” They expose alternative forms of reality and existence.

I thus understand women writers’ use of the supernatural to map onto configurations of identity-in-difference such as Chela Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness, Norma Alarcón’s emergent identities, and Muñoz’s disidentificatory acts. These concepts account for the various means through which minority identities are constituted both within and against majoritarian discourses, and the genreflexive distance supplied by the supernatural – such as through the figure of the female ghost invading the masculine real – illuminates and participates in such processes. Drawing upon Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, I further contend, then, that feminist supernaturalism operates not through “counter-identificatory” moves – or writers’ anti-assimilationist constructions of new, separate, or un-real worlds – but as “disidentificatory” acts that constantly reveal the fractured, incomplete “real.” The supernatural is not simply an escape from reality, it is a *part* of reality – or of alterative but co-existing realities. Considered transnationally, the feminist supernatural works as a mode of counter-*worldly* disidentification that can be paradoxically imagined as both global and other(ed)-worldly.

In this way, I echo Toni Cade Bambara’s line of questioning in relation to the legitimacy of these figures in Western discourses: “I was trying to figure out...why political folks were so distant from the spiritual community – clairvoyants, mediums, those kinds of folks whom I was always studying with. I wondered what would happen if we could bring them together” (234-35). Bambara further asks, “Why is there that gap? Why don’t we have a bridge language so that clairvoyants can talk to revolutionaries?” (qtd. in Washington 257). Though these supernatural figures – primarily feminized versions of them – have been naturalized in Bambara’s vision of

reality, more work must be done to “bridge the gap” between disparate socio-cultural understandings of the real/unreal divide.

## Chapter 1

### Re-gendering Genre: Self-Conscious Supernaturalism in Muriel Spark's *The Comforters*

“We suspended from a high ceiling a board just large enough to support the forearm, the hand hanging over and holding a pencil. This planchette responded to very slight movements [...]. By lightly resting my hand on the board, I could deceive the subject, who sat with closed eyes, as to whether he or I was making the movement, and I could judge also how readily he yielded to a newly suggested movement, or if he resisted it strongly.”

—Gertrude Stein, “Cultivated Motor Automatism”

“The fact that her feelings and reflections were being recorded seemed to point to some invisible source, the issue being, was it objectively real or was it imaginary? If the sounds came from some real, invisible typewriter, Caroline felt she was in danger, might go mad, but the experience was not itself a sign of madness. She was now utterly convinced that what she had heard was not the product of her own imagination. ‘I am not mad. I’m not mad. See; I can reflect on the situation. I am being haunted. I am not haunting myself.’”

—Muriel Spark, *The Comforters*

As a budding scientist studying at Radcliffe College in 1898, Gertrude Stein conducted a series of experiments in automatic writing to investigate the “second personality” often attributed to hysteric patients. Commonly understood to be a “dual” or “split” portion of one’s identity, this personality was thought to be hidden deep within the psyche. With the aid of the planchette, a tool used by mediums to communicate with the spirit world, Stein sought to disprove the existence of the second personality. Her experiments operated through a process of dissociation: with a pencil held lightly in hand, the subject would “write” while being distracted by Stein as she spoke with them or told stories. In “Cultivated Motor Automatism,” her resulting article published in *The Psychological Review*, Stein rejects the second personality and instead posits two different states of experience: a “real personality” and what she terms the “automatic personality.” The latter identity, which the subject assumes while under Stein’s manipulations, is

characterized by a “sense of doubleness, of otherness” that is produced when one’s thoughts and actions are “cultivated” by an external agent (Stein 298). Juxtaposing divergent meanings of “medium,” Stein’s experiment plays with the link between spiritualism and writing that this chapter explores in Muriel Spark’s *The Comforters* (1957).

In this metafictional novel, Spark takes up the idea of an automatic personality. Her protagonist, Caroline Rose, describes the anguish of being self-reflexively aware of her “automatic” position as a female character operating within the confines of a modern novel. Caroline, a writer compiling an anthology entitled *Form in the Modern Novel*, is struggling to complete the chapter on realism when she inexplicably begins hearing a disembodied “chorus of voices” which are preceded and followed by the characteristic “tap,” “clack,” or “click-tap-click” of typewriter keys. While investigating the origin and purpose of these voices, which she collectively dubs the Typing Ghost, Caroline recognizes her role as a character in a novel being written into existence by a ghostly author. As *The Comforters* progresses, Caroline also learns she can affect the book’s trajectory and thus reject its conventional plot – one which attempts to circumscribe her identity by labeling her a hysteric woman. Metafictional distance thus allows her to understand that she is not “haunting [her]self” through a fit of madness but is rather under the control of a Steinian hand that seeks to “cultivate” her behaviors through this dissociative experience. By the novel’s end, Caroline moves beyond the feminine repertoire supplied to her and instead explores alternative identities, such as independent author rather than anthologist and supernatural medium rather than hysteric madwoman.

As Tatiana Kontou, Jane Marcus, and others have noted, spiritualist practices such as the Victorian séance or automatic writing invite us to consider connections between writing and the

supernatural owing to their shared emphasis on modes of invention and interpretation.<sup>7</sup> But this linkage gains new meaning when considered in relation to literary genres that self-consciously reflect on form itself. Despite its generic boundary-crossing, critics have tended to explore the critical edge of *The Comforters* primarily through religious readings: Caroline is a recent Catholic convert and Spark herself converted while writing the novel. In an interview about this experience, Spark claims “the Catholic belief is a norm from which one can depart” (qtd. in Waugh 121).<sup>8</sup> For her own part, Caroline is described as “an odd sort of Catholic, very little heart for it, all mind,” and she develops a critical type of faith (Spark 212). But these readings often overlook the ways in which the form of the novel itself dramatizes such a departure.

Metafiction, a genre characterized by its self-reflexive investigation of its own medium, produces precisely the sort of doubleness Stein identified in her dissociative experiment. Metafictionalists engage in mimetic representation while simultaneously drawing attention to the author’s hand. As Patricia Waugh argues, this genre foregrounds “its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and [the] real” (2). Through *The Comforters*, Spark crafts a genreflexive narrative that subverts “natural” or expected interpretations of her female character’s powers, thereby preventing Caroline’s typewriter voices from being read as “madness” and underscoring the provisional nature of realist literary conventions. The formal distance supplied through genreflexivity highlights and challenges the

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Kontou’s *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* and Marcus’s “Alibis and Legends: The Ethics of Elsewhereness, Gender and Estrangement” in *Women’s Writing in Exile*.

<sup>8</sup> Drawing upon Spark’s experience, Bryan Cheyette argues that her fiction “illustrates both the authoritarian as well as anarchic potential within the act of conversion” (99) while Gauri Viswanathan figures this act as a model of “dissent” that “crosses fixed boundaries between communities and identities” (21). Martin McQuillan thus finds that “her ‘theology,’ when it appears, is conveniently novelistic rather than rigorously orthodox” (4).

gendered conditions that contribute to the narrative's creation as Caroline ultimately "authors" the novel in which she is contained.

Genreflexivity accounts for the ways in which the interplay between metafiction and genre fictions operates as a feminist critique of form. Drawing upon Hutcheon's claim that metafiction is "a process-oriented mode," Mary Jacobus argues that foregrounding the narrative "exposes [literary] boundaries for what they are – the product of phallogentric discourse" (12). Gayle Greene specifically posits the 1970s as the era in which "feminist metafiction" was developed – or narratives that "enlist[t] realism while also deploying self-conscious devices that interrogate the assumptions of realism, challenging the ideological complicity of the signification process while also basing itself in that signification process" (22). Understood in this context, genreflexive texts fuse metafiction and genre fiction to offer explicit challenges to fictional and social norms. In *The Comforters*, supernatural fiction proves to be simply the first set of genre conventions Spark takes on. As the novel unfolds, Spark explores how gender expectations play out across a spectrum of genres, including romance, detective fiction, autobiography, and what had come to be known as the Catholic novel.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Spark is able to underscore the small discontinuities between generic iterations that may not be visible when they are considered in isolation, or even in the "doubleness" supplied by metafiction. Before turning fully to *The Comforters*, it will be useful to revisit genreflexivity in relation to Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance and José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification in order to explore social and fictional constructs.

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<sup>9</sup> For an expanded definition of this lesser-known genre, see my discussion of various genre fictions on page 40.



## Metafictional Genre Fiction

Genreflexive narratives self-reflexively emphasize their use of genre conventions to expose the fictions of gender that permeate modern realism. Many scholars have historicized the modern, Jamesian literary tradition as one that was patriarchal by virtue of: 1) its highly crafted and inviolable narrative apparatuses; 2) its attention to primarily male figures and experiences; and 3) its emphasis on a singular point of view that normalizes the male subject. For instance, in *Realism and Power*, Alison Lee argues that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the realist novel often aspired to objectivity. But the “illusion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the novel and history” is intrinsically flawed because it is based in “the notion that there is a common, shared sense of both ‘reality’ and ‘truth’” (Lee 12). In contrast to earlier realisms, genreflexive texts borrow from these forms while self-consciously participating in particular generic categories in order to challenge the putative objectivity of shared (male) reality.

Spark self-consciously rehearses the stylized conventions of a Jamesian realism while simultaneously eschewing its patriarchal qualities, allowing her protagonist to understand herself as both a character within a novel and as a performer of highly gender- and genre-determined identities. In this way, what I term “character-performers” – or characters such as Caroline who identify their status *as* novelistic characters enacting gendered behaviors – become vehicles for interpreting the narrative as a potential site for subversion or transformation. Her character-performance can be understood in relation to Muñoz’s “disidentificatory” acts, or subversive performances that enable marginalized subjectivities to transform dominant conventions, even as these structures work to elide or absorb difference. Much like “disidentification,” genreflexivity operates as a means through which women participate in gendered performances while

*recognizing and underscoring them as performances.* In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz outlines the ways in which social actors work to “disidentify” with an inhospitable world in order to perform in a new, adaptable one. He explains that “disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies” implemented by those of minority subject positions “in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously...punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (10). The generic performativity of genreflexive texts allows them to work in similar ways to disidentificatory practice. As Rosemary Jackson notes, fantastic literature “exists...[as] a silenced imaginary other. [...] Fantasy hollows out the ‘real,’ revealing its absence, its ‘great Other,’ its unspoken and unseen” (180). The supernatural is not simply an escape from reality, it is an often-unrecognized *part* of reality – or of alterative but co-existing realities.<sup>10</sup> The performer’s disidentification with damaging stereotypes throughout multiple genres allows them to “recycle” these limitations into “sites of self-creation” while still operating within dominant paradigms (11).

Muñoz’s investment in the performances that constitute minority bodies aligns itself with the realm of feminist theory that is concerned with gender performativity, or gender as a cultural construct. For instance, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity, but is rather constituted “through a stylized repetition of acts” (45). If gender identity is “not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender *transformation* are to be found...in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (192, emphasis original). For Butler, then, the subject can expand the options available to

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<sup>10</sup> Disidentificatory acts are not anti-assimilationist strategies – they do not aim to construct a new, separate or un-real world (a strategy Muñoz refers to as a “counter-identificatory act”, as explained in the introduction). Rather, disidentificatory acts constantly reveal the fractured, incomplete “real” while revising from within it (Muñoz 11).

them, but will always be an effect of a repertoire of culturally acceptable or legible acts. The only mode of resistance to the limitations imposed by performed gender identities is to call attention to the performance itself in order to capitalize on the productive space of slippage between iterations. By self-consciously recognizing their participation in this social accumulation of learned behaviors, the subject can critically distance themselves from harmful iterations of the constructed performance.

Spark's use of the supernatural genre further exposes these iterations by foregrounding the ways in which the very genres that constitute *The Comforters* unwittingly sanction their own forms of conventionality. For instance, when Caroline's domineering former fiancé, Laurence Manders, learns of the Typing Ghost, he rationalizes that they could "take it for granted that it either doesn't exist or it exists in some supernatural order" (65). Here, he upholds limited definitions of both fantasy and metafiction – the voices are either real *or* unreal, either a part of the narrative *or* an imaginative invention. But if we understand the interplay between metafiction and the supernatural as a form of genreflexivity, we can instead think like Caroline: "It does exist. I think it's a natural sound" (65). It is important to recognize the ways in which Spark reinstates the mutually antagonistic relationship between supernaturalism and realism.<sup>11</sup> In his well-known theorization of the "pure fantastic" genre, Tzvetan Todorov argues "the category of the real...has furnished a basis for our definition of the fantastic" (167), but ultimately concludes that such narratives "no longer [have] anything to do with the real" in the twentieth century (174). His definition further specifies that the reader's "hesitation between natural and

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<sup>11</sup> There is already a sort of mini canon developing around what has been termed "realist fantasy" or "fantastic realism," or the reclassification of supernatural texts that explicitly engage with realist traditions. But in my project, I aim to account for texts that critique these very processes of generic categorization.

supernatural explanations of apparently supernatural events must be sustained to the end” of the narrative to be considered fantastic (63). But this premise invites readers to uphold the real/unreal binary because it implies that “supernatural events,” such as the presence of ghosts, must finally be exposed as either real *or* fictitious. Rather than maintaining this suspension, however, Spark ultimately refuses to sustain to the end this oscillation because “hesitat[ing] between natural and supernatural explanations” risks giving leverage to the “natural,” masculine world. She instead holds the two explanations in tandem for the duration of the novel, subverting the implied binary of supernaturalism while also moving beyond the doubled metafictional narrative to expanded “explanations.”

### **Performing Femininity in *The Comforters***

In what follows, I will outline the ways in which I understand Caroline’s initial characterization, before she is aware of her fictionality, to embody detrimental feminine archetypes, such as the hysteric. Caroline later abides by these traditionally gendered behaviors in order to render herself intelligible by normative standards when the appearance of the Typing Ghost threatens her social coherence. She is deemed “mad” or hysterical by her companions who begin to “attend to her...as one who regards another’s words, not as symbols but as symptoms” (Spark 53). Though they seek to relegate her to a feminine imaginary which they consider incompatible with a symbolic or rational world, Caroline gradually appropriates the liminal space that exists between these realms of experience. Aligning the supernatural with the metafictional enables the Typing Ghost to expose the fictiveness of the narrative – as she ruptures the constructed-ness of this “reality,” Caroline understands the ways in which the genre of realism often offers a prescribed meaning that does not account for women’s transformative

potential. In this way, she can ultimately disidentify from a structure that proves incommensurate with her burgeoning feminine subjectivity.

Spark self-consciously inserts her novel into a meta-discussion on modern narrative through Caroline's profession – she is compiling an anthology on the form of the modern novel with an emphasis on realism. In *The Craft of Fiction*, Percy Lubbock champions Henry James as an exemplar of the modern realist aesthetic: “The recording, registering mind of the author is eliminated... [James'] own part in the narration is now unobtrusive to the last degree; he, the author, could not imaginably figure there more discreetly” (112, 165).<sup>12</sup> This “one-sided vision” is the result of a highly crafted narrative apparatus, one which refuses to violate the character's consistent point of view by revealing the overarching fictional form created by the author (Lubbock 166). Critics such as Rita Felski and Bonnie Kime Scott contend such narratives are fundamentally patriarchal as they “arise out of a culture of ‘stability, coherence, discipline and world-mastery’” (Felski, *Gender* 11). In an era of literature that “was unconsciously gendered masculine..., both the authors...and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught, and consecrated as geniuses” (Scott 187). Caroline is engaged in this act of chronicling modern writers through her anthology and is thus implicitly exposed to the patriarchal conventions of this tradition.

In Spark's text, metafiction acts as a rejoinder to the impoverished realist discourse outlined by Felski and Scott; rather than deferring to Jamesian realism, she underscores the fictional aspects of her project by revealing the decisions she is making as a writer. She is

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<sup>12</sup> Though James' work usefully introduces the tenants of this realist tradition, it is also worth considering his own contribution to the supernatural canon. In some ways, *The Comforters* essentially reverses the relationship between femininity and haunting portrayed in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). In James' novel, an apparently “hysterical” woman is undone by supernatural voices while Caroline constructs the voices herself.

uninterested in the same level of craftedness in fiction and works to disrupt unified points of view to reveal the performativity of both gender and genre conventions, thus suggesting their transformative potential. For instance, upon becoming aware of her condition as a character-performer, Caroline critiques *The Comforters* for exploiting the tactics of “‘a cheap mystery piece... I haven’t been studying novels for three years without knowing some of the technical tricks’” (104). While *The Comforters* critiques patriarchal realism, Caroline simultaneously critiques *The Comforters* itself. Her intimate knowledge of the medium of the novel, supplied to her by her work on the anthology, allows her to genreflexively revise the narrative moments in which her subjectivity is being delineated by conventions that are debilitating for her as an author and woman.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps *The Comforters* has resisted critical attention due to Caroline’s seeming conformity, at the outset, with stereotypes of women seeking autonomy through harmful forms of self-control. In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo argues that hysteria and other “female pathologies,” such as agoraphobia and anorexia nervosa, were often interpreted as women’s illusory attempts to enter the male economy of power.<sup>14</sup> Gail Finney similarly notes: “Just as the

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<sup>13</sup> Spark herself became increasingly invested in the novel form despite her earlier success with poetry. Joseph Hynes, Bryan Cheyette and others have noted “Spark’s double conversion to both Roman Catholicism and the art of the novel” just before the publication of *The Comforters* (Cheyette 45).

<sup>14</sup> Spark arguably incorporates male hysteria into the novel as well through the figure of Baron Willi Stock, whom Caroline deems mad because he obsessively tracks Mervyn Hogarth due his belief that the man can transform into a black dog (157). Laurence also displays mental quirks that the other characters do not fully understand. For instance, commenting on his extreme attention to detail, Helena complains, “It’s the only unhealthy about your mind, the way you notice absurd details, it’s absurd of you” (8). However, rather than sincerely diagnosing Laurence, Helena is speaking out of fear that he may stumble upon some of her secrets. Stock, too, is portrayed sympathetically and his whims are considered the result of his recent divorce from Eleanor. In contrast, Caroline’s apparent hysteria is either fetishized by Laurence or deemed so advanced that it may require medical treatment.

feminist expressed a rebellious, emancipatory, and outer-directed response to the condition of female oppression, so... [did] the hysteric exemplif[y] a rejection of society that was passive, inner-directed, and ultimately self-destructive” (qtd. in Felski 3). In early sections of the novel, Caroline is portrayed as a serial invalid who uses her physical illnesses to gain attention and to emotionally connect with Laurence. In this way, the female body is used as a tableau for the damaging violence not only of patriarchal language, but of women’s self-surveillance and circumscription of their own bodies in response to societal pressures.<sup>15</sup> Upon first learning of Caroline’s occult experience, Laurence wonders

whether it would be possible for him to humor her fantasy indefinitely, so that she could be the same Caroline except for this one difference in their notions of reality; or whether reality would force them apart, and the time arrive when he needs must break with, “Caroline, you are wrong, mistaken, mad. There are no voices; there is no typewriter; it is all a delusion. You must get mental treatment.” (Spark 94-95)

Laurence’s unsuccessful attempt to reconcile different “notions of reality” – his masculine, rational world view in contrast to her apparently feminine, hysterical one – underscores the

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<sup>15</sup> Here, I specifically examine representations of Caroline’s “hysteric” tendencies. But various characters additionally express concern over her unusual eating habits, thereby entering her character into an existing discourse on anorexia nervosa as a similarly “feminine” malady. For instance, Laurence laments that he “knew Caroline’s nervous responses to food and sleep at the best of times” (Spark 66). Though this illness lies slightly outside of the scope of this chapter, Bordo argues it further circumscribed women’s bodies under a patriarchal medical system. If anorexia is an attempt at control, it is sort of a medicalized version of the larger issue of women’s authorship. Some critics have conducted readings of Caroline as an anorectic figure. For instance, Gerard Carruthers attributes Caroline’s voices to “either her extreme dieting or [to] genuinely numinous events” and argues that “the point is certainly that the supernatural can intrude in the human world, but equally that we should not be too quick to identify this” (75-76). I object to this reading because it risks further pathologizing Caroline and because the novel’s ties to realism are meant to validate her supernatural experiences from the outset.

inability of a patriarchal modern realism to accurately portray feminine subjectivities.<sup>16</sup>

Caroline's hysteria initially renders her socially legible to Laurence, seemingly imbuing her with agency over her representation in the world. However, as Bordo notes, illnesses such as hysteria were actually "*utilized* in the maintenance and reproduction of existing power relations" (168, emphasis original). But as Caroline's voices begin to make her increasingly illegible even to herself, she is decontextualized by the metafictional occult in a way that is self-alienating, allowing her to view her performances as anachronous and to revise her behavior. Spark's use of genre reflexivity here reveals that, as Caroline says to herself, "there is always a certain amount of experience to be discarded as soon as one discovers its fruitlessness" (36).

As Caroline gradually recognizes her status as a character-performer within a novel, she discards negative gendered conventions and rejects external attempts to normalize her femininity, either mentally or physically. Though she at first states that she "knew most of Laurence's previous neurotic girls; she herself was the enduring one," the critical agency supplied to her by metafictional distance reveals that "the narrative could never become coherent to her until she was at last outside of it, and at the same time consummately inside it" (80, 190). Caroline mobilizes the performance of identity in ways that are best exemplified through a consideration of her character in contrast to Mrs. Georgina Hogg and Eleanor Hogarth, two women who do not achieve character-performer status and are thus evacuated of inner life. These women remain confined as mere characters within *The Comforters* – a novel which, though

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<sup>16</sup> In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf laments that "no sentence had been shaped, by long labor, to express the experience of women" (x). For Woolf, women writers – including celebrated authors such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot – were still working with the "clumsy weapon" that was the traditional "man's sentence" of the nineteenth century (76). In contrast to these predecessors, Caroline capitalizes on the metafictional possibilities of modernist form itself – affordances that simultaneously offer her an escape from the imprisoning form of the modern novel.



offering a means of transcending patriarchal limits, also demonstrates the dangers of complacently inhabiting a narrative that self-consciously rehearses the masculine realist tradition.

In her essay “Modern Fiction” (1925), Woolf similarly critiques male novelists for being materialist writers: “It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us” (2). Conjuring a nondescript woman traveling by train in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1923), a cipher for the evacuated feminine persona portrayed in masculine realism, Woolf further argues that “Mr. [Arnold] Bennett, alone of the Edwardians, would...observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements, ...the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons... One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description” (14). For Woolf, these authors failed to provide their characters with a rich internal life. Interestingly, she calls upon a feminized supernatural image to intimate the difficulty of characterization: “[Authors spend] the best years of their lives in the pursuit, ...receiving for the most part very little...in exchange. Few catch the phantom; most have to be content with a scrap of her dress or a wisp of her hair” (1).

Through the foil character of Eleanor, Caroline’s friend from her days at Cambridge, Spark explicitly references the performative acts that constitute a legible gendered identity in order to expose them as social artifice from which only the critically aware character-performer can disidentify. Though Caroline notes that she and Eleanor each had “potential talents unrecognized” – Caroline for writing and Eleanor for mimicry – Eleanor’s pursuits do not

contribute to her independence.<sup>17</sup> Caroline interprets Eleanor's regressive, "stagey acts" as increasingly distinct from her own performative abilities as an author and character:

Caroline was fascinated by Eleanor's performance. Indeed, it was only an act; the fascination of Eleanor was her entire submersion in whatever role she had to play. [...] Caroline was fascinated and appalled. In former days, Eleanor's mimicry was recognizable. She would change her personality like dresses according to occasion, and it had been fun to watch, and an acknowledged joke of Eleanor's. But she had lost her small portion of detachment; now, to watch her was like watching doom. As a child Caroline, pulling a face, had been warned, 'If you keep doing that it will stick one day.' She felt, looking at Eleanor, that this was actually happening to the woman. Her assumed personalities were beginning to cling; soon one of them would stick, grotesque and ineradicable. (Spark 87)

In this scene, Caroline amends her initial fascination with Eleanor's behavior to accommodate the disgust that arises from observing her imitations of "grotesque" versions of womanhood. She appropriates the male gaze to scrutinize a female character who has "lost her small portion of detachment," or the ability to distance her actions from the performative accoutrements deemed acceptably feminine. Here, Butler's conceptualization of gender as a social accumulation of learned behaviors is usefully extended into the realm of artistic or "literal" performance through Eleanor's character. She participates in a more conscious, and less socially determined,

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<sup>17</sup> Caroline explains Eleanor had a talent for mimicking the work of others, such as reproducing exact replicas of paintings. The limiting capacities of this talent are evident – Eleanor "could have taken up any trade with ease, because all she had to do was mimic the best that had already been done in any particular line, and that gave the impression of the expert" (Spark 82). Adept only at imitation, Eleanor can never hope to *be* the best – she can only approach this position vicariously.

performativity. In *Performance*, Diana Taylor challenges scholars who figure artistic performances as ephemeral. Taylor posits performance not as “a discrete, singular act,” but “as an ongoing repertoire of gestures and behaviors that get reenacted or reactivated... If we learn and communicate through performed, embodied practice, it’s because the acts repeat themselves” (10). In Eleanor’s case, she has succumbed to the non-ephemerality of performance and appropriated “acceptable” behaviors rather than subverting them. Her multiple personalities seem to imply that she harbors a rich inner life and has command over the “roles” or identities available to her as a woman who is aware of social conventions. However, she is still choosing from a limited set of options – such as the flirtatious woman, the wife (and, eventually, the divorcee), and “the scatty female who’d been drinking too much” (Spark 87) – rather than cultivating a more dynamic consciousness. Eleanor proves incapable of holding multiple personalities in tandem. Without metafictional distance alerting her to the potential for alternative performances, she adopts eternalized conventions that are too entrenched to be eradicated solely from within.

While Caroline’s character-performer position upholds the possibility of revising hegemonic literary conventions and Eleanor illustrates the pitfalls of maintaining consistency with the narrative apparatus, the third counterpart of this trio of feminine reactions to dominant discourses – Mrs. Hogg – is representative of the final, disastrous effect of women’s utter complacency with gendered tradition. Mrs. Hogg, who is often relegated to her status as a wife by the title “Mrs.,” is additionally depicted as wholly exteriorized. She is reduced to her physical feminine qualities, especially her bosom, which is described at various points in the novel as “colossal,” “tremendous and increasing” in size, and “a pair...of infant whales” (138). Attempting to find a garment capable of containing her “was like damming up the sea” (146).

When Mrs. Hogg is depicted as harboring interior emotions, they manifest only in the form of embarrassment or jealousy. Each of these reactions works to reinsert her into negative feminine stereotypes. For instance, Spark writes, “Mrs. Hogg’s tremendous bosom was a great embarrassment to her —not so much in the way of vanity [...]—but in the circumstance that she didn’t know what to do with it” (67). Mrs. Hogg’s embarrassment signifies her inability to reconcile her excessive feminine embodiment within a masculine sphere, and she is also unable to use her sexuality productively, to gain agency within a male economy of power. She thus enjoys only the smallest semblance of an inner life and, in contrast to Caroline’s metafictional voices, the occult elements of Mrs. Hogg’s subjectivity work to further evacuate her character.

Caroline’s interiority is so capacious that it operates in excess of the text itself, but Mrs. Hogg’s character is static to the extent that when she sleeps – entering a state of unconsciousness that is only slightly more unconscious than her waking existence – she vanishes from the text completely. Descriptions of the Typing Ghost itself demonstrate Caroline’s compendious consciousness – the voices are a “concurrent series of echoes,” a “recitative,” both male and female, and collective. She claims, “It was impossible to disconnect the separate voices...; only by the varying timbres could the chorus be distinguished from one voice” (53). In contrast, Helena and Willi, Caroline’s picnic companions, regale her with a terrifying story of Mrs. Hogg “disappearing” after falling “dead asleep” in their car. Upon reaching back to retrieve a cigarette lighter, Helena’s frightened exclamation leads to Mrs. Hogg “suddenly appear[ing] before our eyes...sitting in the same position and blinking, as if she’d just woken up” (185). Though Frank Baldanza cites Mrs. Hogg’s disappearing act as a “demonstration of [her] occult powers” and argues that “she is the central figure who binds together all of the complex plot lines of the work” (196), Mrs. Hogg in fact has no control over her seemingly “occult” powers. She exists

only superficially in the “real” realm and her imagination is so deficient that even dreams cannot sustain her being. In contrast, in the only other moment of *The Comforters* in which sleep is mentioned, Caroline is recovering in a hospital ward she shares with other women. She luxuriates in her “private wakefulness” as they all sleep: “She never did sleep well. [...] Caroline among the sleepers turned her mind to the art of the novel, wondering and cogitating, those long hours, and exerting an undue, unreckoned, influence on the narrative from which she is supposed to be absent for a time” (137). Caroline’s consciousness is too active to enter often into the unconscious space of sleep and she influences the text in its moments of becoming, even without yet being aware of her actions. Though the narrator intervenes here to say, “At this point in the tale she is confined to a hospital bed, and no experience of hers ought to be allowed to intrude,” Caroline begins to usurp even the position of narrator, and condemnations of Mrs. Hogg thus stem from Caroline’s own perspective (137).

Ultimately, Caroline and her antithesis, Mrs. Hogg, have diverged to such an extent that they can no longer occupy the same novel and the narrative itself proves untenable. Thus, not only does Mrs. Hogg periodically flicker out of existence in the narrative, she gets pitted against Caroline in a literal battle to the death. When a storm threatens their picnic, Helena, Willi and Caroline search for Mrs. Hogg and discover that she has wandered to the other side of the large lake which served as the backdrop for their meal. Caroline sails across in order to rescue her from travelling back in the storm, however, during their return journey to shore, Mrs. Hogg falls overboard and pulls Caroline with her into the dark waters:

Mrs. Hogg lashed about her in a screaming panic. [...] Caroline saw the little boat bobbing away downstream. Then her sight became blocked by one of Mrs. Hogg's great hands clawing across her eyes, the other hand tightening on her throat. Mrs. Hogg's body, and even legs, encompassed Caroline so that her arms were restricted. She knew then that if she could not free herself from Mrs. Hogg they would both go under. [...] The woman clung to Caroline's throat until the last. It was not until Mrs. Hogg opened her mouth finally to the inrush of water that her grip slackened and Caroline was free, her lungs aching for the breath of life. Mrs. Hogg subsided away from her. God knows where she went. (Spark 196-197)

“Until the last,” Mrs. Hogg attempts to destroy Caroline in this moment of confrontation between two incompatible figures of womanhood. Mrs. Hogg's immobility is paradoxically frantic, recalling Caroline's earlier hysteria, and temporarily engulfs Caroline as “[Mrs. Hogg's] body, and even legs, encompassed” her. By syntactically isolating Mrs. Hogg's legs from her body proper, Spark further distances her character from any connotation of mobility. Significantly, this battle of conflicting ideologies takes place on the surface of the water, and it is this very liminality which ultimately overwhelms Mrs. Hogg: “It was not until [she] opened her mouth finally to the inrush of water,” to the fluid in-between, that “her grip slackened” and she vanished. Moreover, her body is “never recovered” despite the police force's previous success with retrieving victims from that particular lake (Spark 210).<sup>18</sup> The literal moment of drowning

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<sup>18</sup> A man assures Helena, “It's deep in that spot. I daresay we'll get the body. There was a tragedy five summers back and we got the body two days after” (Spark 208).

thus also serves as an act of fictional expulsion as Mrs. Hogg is banned from returning to the narrative in any form while Caroline continues to solidify her authorial status.

With Mrs. Hogg's textual ejection, Caroline's resolve "not to be involved in any man's story" is strengthened (109). When her friend Edwin requests that her novel conform to a "straight old-fashioned story" without "modern mystifications. End with the death of the villain and the marriage of the heroine," she laughs dismissively and begins to anticipate the ending (213). Sensing its completion, she asks Laurence if he remembers "that passage in Proust where he discusses the ambiguous use of the word 'book,' and he says –?" (171). This invocation of Proust summons his own self-reflexive practice in his overture to *Swann's Way* (1913):

For a long time, I used to go to bed early. I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands...; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book. [...] It did not disturb my mind, but it lay like scales upon my eyes... Then it would begin to seem unintelligible...; the subject of my book would separate itself from me... (1)

Proust experiences self-alienation through this process of unconscious narrative production. The book itself exerts its agency over him, electing to "separate itself" from his passive subjecthood. While Proust's brief authorial positioning apparently does not prompt the sort of critical reflection needed to "disturb [his] mind" and the text's scaly barrier prevents him from full immersion, Caroline feels that "to acquiesce in the requirements of someone's novel would have been ignoble" (103). In contrast to this Proustian form of self-consciousness, Caroline challenges both the notion of an authoritative text and the prioritization of someone else's narrative

construction over her own. Refusing to let the text “separate itself” from her, she instead experiences a suturing of various feminine performances and identities that operate both within and outside the “channels” of her own narrative.

### **Generic Instability: Spark’s Formal Failures**

The subversive nature of Caroline’s character-performer status can be explored not only through her mediation of the modern novel, but by examining the specific genre fictions in which *The Comforters* formally participates. Spark was certainly capable of writing straightforward genre fiction, as evidenced in her short story “The Portobello Road” (1994), which follows the familiar pattern of the ghost of a woman seeking revenge from beyond the grave by haunting the man who murdered her. But *The Comforters* invokes genre fiction conventions in order to deviate from them. Genre fiction “operates on the premise that the reader can know what to expect” and thus “naturalizes...sets of conventions” (English 191). Spark instead holds several sets in suspension, invoking particular ones when it is convenient for her to do so for the purposes of characterization or formal invention. By variously highlighting and subordinating the familiar codes of genre fictions throughout the novel, Spark marshals an expanded repertoire of performances for Caroline.

The generic status of *The Comforters* is odd from the start – before its metafictional and supernatural dimensions are respectively introduced by way of Caroline’s anthology in Chapter 2 and the Typing Ghost in Chapter 3, Spark begins by inserting the reader into an espionage story. The opening pages introduce Laurence’s investigation of his grandmother, Louisa Jepp, whom he comes to believe is the unlikely leader of a gang of Communist spies running a diamond smuggling ring. Though common detective tropes appear throughout the novel, Caroline



eventually subordinates this genre, calling attention to its failure by noting that Laurence is “allowing [him]self to become an amateur sleuth in a cheap mystery piece” (107). Spark also invokes a less established genre, the Catholic novel, which was popularized in the postwar period by the work of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Walker Percy.<sup>19</sup> Initially invoked through Caroline’s conversion and sustained by speculation that her voices stem from her initiation into Church mysteries, the Catholic novel also bleeds into the detective story in parodic form – Louisa is smuggling diamonds through rosary beads and hollowed Catholic figurines after all. Yet the conventions of the Catholic novel never entirely control the narrative because they are often conflated with or displaced by competing religious forms, such as spiritualism and mysticism. Even other subsets of supernaturalism (witchcraft, diabolism, bodily transfiguration) appear in the novel while typically being posited as secondary to the ghost story.

This generic instability enables Spark to self-consciously comment upon her use of familiar generic devices, such as the omniscient narration common in Jamesian realism and the clue-driven format of detective fiction, even as she refuses to make any one set of conventions entirely dominant. Within the novel, the characters’ understandings of events are shaped by their relationship to the narrative conventions of genre fiction. Too normative an understanding and too strict an adherence to these conventions solicit receptivity rather than critical reflection. In

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<sup>19</sup> Though definitions of the Catholic novel vary widely, Marian Crowe offers an encompassing list of its generic characteristics when she writes, “I do not mean simply a novel by a Catholic or one with some Catholic material, but a work of substantial literary merit in which Catholic theology and thought have a significant presence within the narrative, with genuine attention to the inner spiritual life, often drawing on Catholicism’s rich liturgical and sacramental symbolism and enriched by the analogical Catholic imagination” (“Catholic Novel”). For additional considerations of this genre, see Thomas Woodman’s *Faithful Fictions: The Catholic Novel in British Literature* (1991), Theodore Fraser’s *The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe* (1994), and Mary Reichardt’s *Between Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature* (2010).

contrast, Caroline ultimately represents not only feminist authorship, but also a mode of readership or interpretation that is distinct from characters such as Laurence and her friend Baron Willi Stock. While Caroline actively challenges generic assumptions, Laurence and the Baron figure as naïve readers of both realism and genre fiction in their futile search for conventionality. For those who cannot think genreflexively, the generic multiplicity of the novel is disorienting. Laurence and the Baron each recognize modes such as realism, supernaturalism and detection in their own lives, but they fall short of understanding them as social artifice and their inability to reconcile the tensions between these genres furthers their conformity to convention. In this way, Spark demonstrates the ways in which narrative shapes reality as much as reality shapes fiction.

Laurence first upholds the tenets of realism through his search for “objective” proof that Caroline’s voices are a delusion. To obtain this evidence, he turns to forms of technology – such as telegrams, telephones, and tape-recorders – because, as a radio broadcaster for the BBC, he believes they bear a privileged relation to the real, a privilege linked to the concept of mimetic realism. But Caroline’s own link to technological media through the typewriter undercuts this recourse to realism insofar as this exemplary tool of mechanical production is fused with the supernatural. The typewriter image may appear to be limiting in terms of gender because typing was marketed as distinctly feminine throughout the twentieth century. As Judy Wacjman notes, it is often “difficult to separate descriptions of the machine from those of its imagined and embodied users,” making the typewriter “an ideal case study of the process by which technology and a new social order between the sexes are reciprocally shaped” (207).<sup>20</sup> But Spark resists this gendered connotation – Caroline’s status *as* a spiritual medium allows her to revise expected

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<sup>20</sup> In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Friedrich Kittler similarly explores the feminization of the typewriter and argues that “media always already provide the appearances of specters” (12), and Spark thus also draws upon the haunting dimension of media technologies.

associations, thus destabilizing potential generic categorizations. The “meagre dossier” Laurence compiles in his search ultimately turns objectivity itself into mere appearance, a convention like any other: it has “a merciless look of reality” (Spark 120). In contrast, Caroline’s typewriter voices illuminate the process of specularization: they subject a mode of collecting and documenting evidence (the typewriter) to a supernatural concavity which complicates the device’s ability to standardize experience.

Laurence’s emphasis on limited definitions of realism also predisposes him to conform to genre fictional behaviors, such as those consistent with detective fiction. Spark incorporates familiar tropes, like plot-driven action and convenient clues, to critique the passivity generated through formulaic narratives. As Caroline reveals to Laurence, “If you hadn’t been on the look-out for some connection between the Hogarths and Mrs. Hogg, you wouldn’t have lit on that [clue]. And you wouldn’t have been looking for it if you hadn’t been influenced in that direction. I nearly fell for the trick myself” (105). He seeks to “prove” a supernatural plot element (Caroline’s voices) that is unprovable within the isolated realms of either traditional detective fiction or Jamesian realism – genres which often discount the reality of supernatural events. Todorov argues “the murder mystery approaches the fantastic, but it is also the contrary [to it]: in fantastic texts, we tend to prefer the supernatural explanation; the detective story, once it is over, leaves no doubt as to the absence of supernatural events” (49-50). Ronald Knox clarifies that the detective author only “succeeds” by keeping the reader in “complete mystification over the method, right up to the last chapter; and yet can show the reader how he ought to have solved the mystery with the light given him” (x). Each of these definitions of detective fiction implicitly privilege authorial effacement, even as Knox suggests the reader should be able to retroactively

identify the author's moves by piecing together clues.<sup>21</sup> But through her generic multiplicity, Spark challenges such conventions for their tendency to obscure competing narrative structures, even if only temporarily, and the clues she provides constitute a supernatural tale whose mystery cannot be reduced to or dissipated by any particular generic conventions.

To a certain degree, the Baron mirrors Caroline's flexibility as a reader insofar as he combines supernaturalism, realism and detective fiction, and this generic conflation allows him to glimpse intersecting realities. For instance, through his obsessive hunt for his ex-wife's former lover, Mervyn Hogarth, he dabbles in the conventions of both supernaturalism and detection: believing Hogarth possesses shape-shifting abilities, he "employs agents" and "compile[s] a dossier. The psychology of the man is [his] main occupation" (158). However, the Baron assures Caroline that despite his interests in "relig-ion, poetr-ay, psychology-ay, theosoph-ay, the occult, and of course demonolog-ay," he "participates in none of them, practices none" (157). Because he approaches these conventions only vicariously, through theoretical or academic study, the Baron does not actively reflect on his generic participation. Though, as Rita Felski argues, "women are often seen as especially prone to...acts of covert manipulation" and are perceived as being "easily swept up in a world of intoxicating illusions, ... [prone] to a disturbing failure to differentiate between fact and fantasy, reality and wish fulfillment," it is the male figures in Spark's story who exhibit this "feminine absorption" through their inability to distinguish between reality and conventionality (53). Like Laurence, the Baron's narrow search for expected formulations prevents him from recognizing that he is unwittingly abiding by the conventions of

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<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth examination of the relationship between supernaturalism and detective fiction, see chapter three in which I discuss Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*.

another genre entirely – as Caroline notes of his story about Hogarth’s abilities, it is “a lovely tale, it has the makings of a shaggy dog” (165).<sup>22</sup>

But if Caroline’s genreflexive readership is to become the dominant lens for understanding the novel, Spark must guard against the possibility that her own authority as author may eliminate, at a higher level, the very instability she makes fundamental to the narrative. That is, as female metafictionalist, Spark could become a mirror image of the controlling masculine authority she wishes to subvert. One way in which she mitigates this risk is through a subtle yet pervasive technique of narratological stutters that repeatedly undermine narrative hierarchies by collapsing distinctions between levels of utterance. Though Spark is fixated on the power of narration throughout *The Comforters*, her omniscient perspective continually fails as a viable storytelling format. In one moment of narrative stuttering between Caroline and the assumed omniscient narrator, Laurence and his friend Giles privately humor themselves by speculating about the “large stock of bust-bodices” Mrs. Hogg must collect to contain her “bulging frontage” (138). On the next page, Caroline comments, “‘Bad taste’... ‘Revolting taste.’ She had, in fact, ‘picked up’ a good deal of the preceding passage, all about Mrs. Hogg and the breasts” (139). Ceding authorial control, Spark allows other voices to intervene and highlights the structural failures of the narrative itself. Characters often repeat themselves as if to supplement ineffectual dialogue, the Typing Ghost provides plot-level information that the omniscient narrator appears to lack, and Caroline usurps control of the very structure of the novel, replacing Spark as author.

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<sup>22</sup> The “shaggy dog” yarn is a minor subset of humorous fiction that relies upon an anti-climax or red herring structure. A long story is told only to end without a clear resolution, often to direct audiences’ attention toward a meaningless conclusion.

Spark also relativizes her own authority as author through her careful refusal of the sort of neat closure expected of genre fiction. To some degree, the multiplicity of genre fictions prevents the tidy conclusion of each disparate plot line. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, the traditional fictional form requires an ending which addresses all loose ends, and which therefore offers a prescribed “meaning” to the reader. In this way, the typical move toward closure reinforces a patriarchal aesthetic, particularly since women’s stories often ended in marriage or other “processes of gendering” that led to “subordination” (10). In contrast, *The Comforters* prompts readers to expect multiple endings, foreclosing the possibility of a unified conclusion. The novel, in fact, does not fully conclude at all – in the final pages, Laurence writes a letter to Caroline in which he critiques the notes for her novel and confusedly asks, “How is it all going to end?” (203). Though he later tears up this letter out of frustration, the narrator reveals: “He saw the bits of paper come to rest, some on the scrubby ground, some among the deep marsh weeds, and one piece on a thorn-bush; and he did not then foresee his later wonder, with a curious rejoicing, how the letter had got into the book” (204). There is physical evidence of the letter’s destruction as it is not only torn by Laurence, but further pierced and muddied in its resting place. Yet *The Comforters* gestures towards futurity – toward an understanding that the story does not end here, but lives through Caroline’s continued textual production.

As Spark notes in the introduction to her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992), she is well-versed in the genre of realism and is “determined to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses” (11). Her self-conscious deference to documentation, to not “straying from reality,” and to “the truth” despite its tendency to be “less flattering, less romantic, but often more interesting than the false story” (11, 14), all seem to suggest that she is abiding by the conventions of traditional forms of realism. Indeed, her

occasional deviance from this genre – which often manifests in her reluctance to provide specific detail – has led critics to interpret her work as “disingenuous, ... a kind of falsification by omission” (Rubin 1). However, I understand Spark’s text to be calling attention to the conventions of realism not to provide a genre-specific program to the reader, but to satirically challenge our preconceived emphasis on factuality and to redefine notions of individualization. Even her opening appeal to “documentary evidence” is undercut by her additional source, the “eyewitness,” who enters the narrative by supplying Spark with memories which, far from being particularized to her own experience, needed to be “confirmed, modified, and elaborated” upon by external sources who are akin to co-collaborators (12). Spark’s refusal to “rel[y] on [her] memory alone” allows fiction to seep, even in the smallest of ways, into *Curriculum Vitae* to complicate the implied unification of truth (11).

Spark exposes the myriad facets of her personality not through a honeycombed individuality, but by describing the painful process of being confronted by her public persona. As her fame led to “so many strange and erroneous accounts of parts of [her] life” (11), Spark uses her fictional autobiography to suture her own perception of herself with those iterations that are presented to her externally by public perception. Embracing the uncertainty of her individuality, Spark hints at the ways in which she is collectively constructed and asks the reader, “Who am I?” (14). With this satirical inquiry, she asserts that a singular perspective is necessarily incomplete and biased, perpetually unstable due to its basis in memory and its reliance upon confirmation. But she also explores a gendered valence of her project – “who am I” to share my story, to posit it as universal, or to purport its legitimacy? Spark mirrors Caroline in her suggestion that it is impossible to truly know and depict oneself, or *one self*.

## Textual Hauntings

The occult leanings of Spark's text lead us to additional questions about the ways in which women authors negotiate the past while working to revise the present: what is the nature of the "ghosts" that haunt women writers, and how do they differ from those that haunt their male counterparts? Spark's *The Comforters*, her debut novel, is not an anomalous text in her oeuvre. The link between supernaturalism and metanarrative remained central to her work and enabled her to address and re-write past realities. Just two years before her death, Spark published a poem entitled "Authors' Ghosts" (2004) in which she refutes the inviolability of the textual object by portraying authors "haunting" writing of the past:

I think that authors' ghosts creep back  
Nightly to haunt the sleeping shelves  
And find the books they wrote. [...]  
Whole pages are added, re-written, revised.  
How otherwise  
Explain the fact that maybe after years  
Have passed, the reader  
Picks up the book – but was it like that?  
I don't remember this... Where  
Did this ending come from?  
I recall quite another.

For Spark, the act of haunting can be appropriated as it occurs through both a literal revision of written works and the act of re-reading, a process that can initiate a transformation of understanding. On the surface, Spark describes dissatisfied authors "haunt[ing] the sleeping



shelves” nightly to supply forgotten words, reinterpret passages, and shock readers who encounter material that feels familiar, yet estranged. Though gender does not figure explicitly in this late poem, *The Comforters* solicits a feminist reading of it. One might understand the “haunting” to represent futile attempts to maintain the marginalization of alternative perspectives. The process of paradoxically haunting texts of the past in order to reveal their gendered limitations in the present generates a form of critical distance that I argue is best exemplified through a genreflexive consideration of form.

Though “Authors’ Ghosts” participates in this self-reflexive mode, it is in *The Comforters* that Spark most expansively works to reinvent a literary era dominated by Jamesian realism. In her seminal essay “When We Dead Awaken” (1972), Adrienne Rich advances her concept of “re-visioning,” or a form of critical reading and writing that aims to enhance and expand the fictional repertoire available to women. She writes, “if we have come to the point...when women can stop being haunted, not only by ‘convention and propriety’ but by internalized fears of being and saying themselves, then it is an extraordinary moment for the woman writer – and reader” (20). Nearly fifteen years earlier, Spark anticipated Rich’s re-visioned moment of women’s writing and reading in *The Comforters*. Offering a feminist metafictional re-reading of the Steinian double, Spark dispels the “automatic” personality – one who is incapable “saying themselves” while under the undue influence of the narrative. She uses Caroline’s compendium of consciousness to disidentify from such performative identities and to repair reality.

## Chapter 2

### “Other things I know”: Obeah and Surrogate Authorship in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*

“There is no landscape that is not obscure, underneath its pleasing  
transparencies, if you speak to it endlessly.”

—Édouard Glissant, “The Thinking of the Opacity of the World”

Mid-way through *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Jean Rhys introduces a fictional historical text, *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*, which defines the West Indian zombi as “a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead” (64). Though the author of *The Glittering Coronet* remains unnamed, he is ostensibly an Englishman who frames his definition with the claim “So I was told,” distancing himself from such a simplistic formulation. Nevertheless, his European colonialist perspective constitutes the only explicit definition Rhys offers of the obeah practice of zombification. Obeah, a West Indian system of religious beliefs and practices, is often associated with witchcraft or sorcery and, in *The Glittering Coronet*, the author’s incomplete, pseudo-ethnographic knowledge leads him to stigmatize the practice as “black magic.” Referring to obeah practitioners specifically, but implicitly gesturing towards “native” peoples at large, the author continues: “I have noticed that negroes as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic in which so many believe. [...] They confuse matters by telling lies if pressed” (WSS 65).

The relative ignorance of the novel’s dual narrators, a white Creole woman named Antoinette Cosway and her husband Rochester, an Englishman and avid consumer of *The*

*Glittering Coronet*, only deepens the mystery surrounding obeah.<sup>1</sup> Throughout their ill-fated marriage, they each develop attitudes toward the practice that range from intrigue to fear. For instance, upon approaching the living quarters of her maid Christophine, a Martinican obeah woman, Antoinette feels “suddenly very much afraid.” She is “certain that hidden in the room...there was a dead man’s dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly, drop by drop the blood was falling into a red basin and I imagined I could hear it. No one had ever spoken to me about obeah—but I knew what I would find if I dared to look” (WSS 15). Though she views Christophine as a mother figure, Antoinette’s emphasis on the hidden-ness of the conjure woman’s obeah materials reveals her internalization of the belief that practitioners are both esoteric and duplicitous. Antoinette derives a form of certainty from these racial stereotypes – she never “dares to look” yet *knows* the result; she distances herself from the room yet hears the drops of pooling blood. And, despite these fears, she continues to exploit Christophine’s abilities for her own gains.

Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, racialized forms of knowledge inform the relationship between the dual narrators, Antoinette Cosway and Rochester.<sup>2</sup> Their union is plagued by manipulation and infidelity that stem partly from the Englishman’s mounting disdain for his Creole wife. Antoinette’s maid, a Martinican conjure woman named Christophine, often intervenes to protect her mistress from his abuse by producing obeah potions and spells. But her “black magic” gradually arouses Rochester’s suspicion, prompting him to abscond to England with his wife after labelling her mentally ill. There, within the “cardboard world” of England which proves irreconcilable with her homeland of Jamaica, Antoinette is confined to the attic of

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<sup>1</sup> Though Rhys never names the husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, many critics borrow from his intertextual counterpart in *Jane Eyre* and thus refer to him as Edward Rochester.

<sup>2</sup> Though Rhys never names the husband in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, many critics borrow from his intertextual counterpart in *Jane Eyre* and thus refer to him as Rochester.

Thornfield Hall and renamed “Bertha” until, receiving Christophine in a vision, she finally learns “what she must do” and sets fire to its walls.

In this way, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is often taken up as intertextual because it operates as a postcolonial prequel to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* – the story of Bertha Mason, or the quintessential “madwoman in the attic.”<sup>3</sup> But attention to the intertextual has obscured the genre-reflexive dimension of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Indeed, Rhys herself expressed anxiety over the intertextuality of her novel, explaining in a letter her desire to avoid creating “just another adaptation of ‘Jane Eyre.’ There have been umpteen thousand and sixty already” (159). There is some self-consciousness involved in the act of revisioning a canonical text, but I want to distinguish intertextuality from genre-reflexivity. Although Rhys’s novel does not explicitly stage the scene of writing (as in traditional self-conscious fiction), its supernatural tropes – including obeah conjuring and zombification – are mobilized genre-reflexively because they are posited as alternative modes of authorship and expression.<sup>4</sup> Gifted to a white colonial family before the Emancipation Act of 1833, Christophine is a servant on the Cosway estate and is technically illiterate. Yet she practices inscription by tracing figures upon the ground to perform obeah rituals, “drawing lines and circles on the earth” (WSS 90). Her spells to control the individuals whom she zombifies, including Antoinette and Rochester, also require intellectual and creative

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<sup>3</sup> Insightful intertextual readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* abound, perhaps because Julia Kristeva coined the term “intertextuality” in 1966, the same year Rhys’s novel was published. Kristeva argues “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (37) and, drawing upon this definition, Romita Choudhury reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* as both a revision and “completion” of *Jane Eyre*. See also Caroline Rody’s “The Revisionary Paradigm of Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*” (1993), Deborah Kimmey’s “Metatextuality and the Politics of Reading” (2006), Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann’s *Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (2007), and Sylvie Maurel’s “Rhys’s Revision of Brontë’s Eurocentric Gothic” (2008).

<sup>4</sup> My conceptualization of alternative forms of expression builds upon Chandra Mohanty’s call to “read against the grain,” or against hegemonic history, “to assert knowledge that is outside the parameters of the dominant” (83).

invention. Rhys's allegories of authorship impute supernatural agency to Christophine, drawing her out of the critical shadows and endowing her with the power to interpret and manipulate the world.

The metafictional mode that unfolds through *Wide Sargasso Sea* deviates from dominant conceptualizations of self-conscious fiction. Obeah manifests as a generic form within the novel: this practice involves acts of imagination and interpretation, and these metaliterary dimensions introduce modes of writing that are not linked to standard forms of literacy. Moreover, the narrative potential of Christophine's obeah abilities translates to a type of agency akin to authorship. By zombifying Antoinette and Rochester, Christophine gains control of the white narrators' bodies and minds, thereby assuming control of the narrative itself. In this way, she is able to either showcase or shield her abilities from others, depending upon which maneuver is most advantageous for her own self-preservation. Zombification operates as a privileged mode of literary creation which enables Rhys to theorize a subaltern narration that works as a postcolonial critique of form.<sup>5</sup>

Although the recognition of metafiction as a transgressive mode is not entirely new, I wish to expand this category to account for subaltern voices which refuse to participate in traditional modes of writing. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published in 1966, just before the era that witnessed the emergence of "feminist metafiction," or narratives that feature women writing about women writing. For Gayle Greene and Mary Jacobus, such texts critique the limitations of earlier metafiction by suggesting that they have prioritized phallogentric perspectives. Feminist

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<sup>5</sup> By the end of *Jane Eyre*, the seemingly supernatural mysteries are all resolved: Bertha is revealed to be the source of the strange occurrences which plague Jane and Mr. Rochester. In contrast, Rhys resists supplying a "real" or "natural" explanation for Christophine's abilities. Rather, she reaffirms the validity of obeah throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

metafiction foregrounds the narrative to “expose literary boundaries for what they are – the product of [dominant] discourse” (Jacobus 12). But this feminist approach, though a necessary correction for the genre, risks overlooking questions of race and colonialism. We must explore not only explicit metafiction, or what often amounts to intertextuality, but also narratives that are implicitly self-reflexive. There is an elitism to traditional metafiction – it is a genre which often precludes non-written modes of narrative production. As a postcolonial critique, *Wide Sargasso Sea* imagines forms of creativity that emanate from subaltern voices.

My approach affords new comparative perspectives on metafiction across diverse social and cultural locations. The existing models of writing-about-writing or “the act of reading” privilege a particular kind of writerliness or literacy that is not accessible to all subjects. As Christophine states, “Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know” (WSS 97). Her conjuring abilities ultimately represent forms of invention, interpretation and inscription that operate metafictionally within *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In questioning the narrative boundaries of both traditional metafiction and supernaturalism, Rhys counters the impulse towards realism that began to characterize “anticolonial resistance” narratives in the 1950s. As Susan Andrade points out, a logic of resistance needed to be “transparently visible,” which inevitably led to the privileging of theme over form (182). “Mimeticism was the order of the day,” she notes, “and because it was then bound up with rationality and freedom struggles, the form mimeticism took was realism, the narrative mode for telling stories of the subjugation of rational people” (183).<sup>6</sup> Though Andrade goes on to describe a shift toward “anti-mimeticism,” or the recognition that “realism is not monolithic,” she locates the origins of this turn in the 1990s (183). Rhys

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<sup>6</sup> Though Andrade examines African novelists in particular, other critics have linked this nationalism to Afro-Caribbean texts more broadly.

anticipates the emergence of anti-mimetic postcolonialism by foregrounding form through her participation in generic conventionality while also reimagining how such forms are produced and expanding the subjects capable of generating them.

### **Resisting Transparency through Obeah Undercurrents**

Much of the existing discussion on *Wide Sargasso Sea* challenges Rhys's ability to adequately represent the experiences of native West Indians through the white Creole and English narrators. For instance, Kamau Brathwaite argues the black characters are historically separated from the white narrators by "the ideological barriers" embedded in colonialist discourse (36). While Gayatri Spivak acknowledges that Christophine is a "powerfully suggestive figure," she similarly finds her narrative arc "tangential" since the novel is "written in the interest of the white Creole protagonist" (252). Though such readings recognize the danger of re-inscribing colonialist perspectives, I argue Rhys self-consciously foregrounds the limitations of her own knowledge. Rather than offering an historically accurate account of obeah, she acknowledges her lack of unmediated access to such experiences by highlighting competing social and historical realities. For instance, she introduces conflicting conceptions of "Voodoo as it is called in Haiti—obeah in some of the islands, another name in South America" (WSS 64). By obscuring explicit definitions of obeah, Rhys reveals the gaps in her own understanding while also exposing these same limitations in her narrators. As these traditional sources of authority – author and narrator – are discredited, a new voice emerges to take their place. The narration defaults to Christophine, a "tangential" character who seizes control of the narrative to represent an otherwise un-representable history.

Christophine's authorship paradoxically manifests through her strategic "opacity", or the active shielding of her abilities from colonizers' purviews. In this way, she reproduces the logic of resistance to "transparency" that operates in multiple theoretical and cultural registers within colonial texts. The colonial impulse to render subaltern voices transparent operates under the guise of equality, a condition that is apparently achievable through social ordering. But the "pleasing transparencies" that result from such categorization actually operate as forms of control (Glissant 5). Colonial emphasis on the containment of bodies and identities generates a hierarchy between colonized populations and "civilization," fixing the former in an inferior position. But Carine Mardorossian and Édouard Glissant offer an alternative configuration of power – they argue "it is important for members of ex-slave societies to claim the right to 'opacity'" (61). That is, these subjects must maintain their ability to "resist scrutiny" for reasons of self-preservation (Mardorossian 62). Situating opacity as a subversive mode of racial representation throws into relief the metafictional dimension of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. That which is obscure or opaque, such as Christophine's obeah abilities, becomes an "incalculable alterity" which challenges the existence of an imperative and self-evident ideal of clarity (Blas 2).

Though I borrow from Mardorossian's examination of opacity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I position Christophine – rather than Rochester or Antoinette – as the central source of narration.<sup>7</sup> The novel in fact develops a *triple* narrative structure – it is filtered not only through the white narrators, but also through the conjure woman who covertly manipulates their perspectives. The

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<sup>7</sup> Mardorossian reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the lens of opacity but argues that the ambiguity surrounding obeah showcases the white narrators' "inability to grasp a Caribbean experience whose opaqueness cannot be reconciled with their interpretive frameworks" (77). She thus critiques readings of obeah as an "authentic sourc[e] of subversion" and instead argues that Rhys evokes "black magic" as "a discursive construct deployed by the colonizer as much as by the colonized" (77).



misrepresentations of obeah that appear throughout the novel are derived not solely from the colonizers' limited interpretive frameworks, then, but also from Christophine's decision to hide various details that might illuminate the practice. Christophine operates as surrogate author of the text, controlling how obeah is represented by selectively dictating information through the zombified vessels of Antoinette and Rochester.<sup>8</sup> She ultimately works to confirm "negroes'" refusal "to discuss the black magic in which so many believe," as outlined in *The Glittering Coronet* (65).

To accomplish this task, Rhys specifically links Christophine's inventive capacities to her use of obeah. Two years before the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys penned a letter to editor Diana Athill in which she notes: "From the start it must be made clear that Christophine is 'an obeah woman'" (*Letters* 262). However, in a second letter to Athill dated February 1966, just months before the novel's release, Rhys laments: "The most seriously wrong thing with Part II is that I've made the obeah woman, the nurse, too articulate. I thought of cutting it a bit, if you will like, but after all no one will notice. Besides there is no reason why one particular negro woman shouldn't be articulate enough, especially as she's spent most of her life in a white household" (*Letters* 297). Rhys's contention that Christophine's articulateness stems from her intimacy with whiteness has been critiqued by scholars such as Veronica Gregg, particularly as Christophine's peripheral status remains widely contested (42). Citing Bruce Robbins, though, Gregg concedes that Rhys's textual self-critique demonstrates "an awareness that, despite her intention to make

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<sup>8</sup> In "Writing as Voodoo," Regina Barreca broaches this subject as she argues that within *Wide Sargasso Sea*, voodoo operates as "an alternative text created by the islanders" (176). However, though she convincingly reads voodoo as a medium in itself, she problematically conflates this practice with obeah. In ultimately attributing the source of this alternative text to Antoinette, she also enables the white Creole narrator to appropriate Afro-Caribbean cultural practices which I argue are clearly delimited to Christophine within the text.

[Christophine] merely instrumental, [she] ‘produces effects incongruous with [her] social position and moments of vision incongruous with literary functionality’” (42). But it is also important to consider Rhys’s motivations for deploying the term “articulate.” As the supernatural genre itself works to confound presence and absence, clarity and ambiguity, it inevitably works against the kind of “articulate” language Rhys associates with white audiences in her letter. Moreover, though articulation does denote a measure of intelligence or fluency consistent with Gregg’s reading, it can also indicate fixity and coherency. The obscurity granted by obeh risks being undermined through such definitions of articulateness. Indeed, Rhys’s belief that “no one will notice” Christophine’s sophisticated language is based in a critique of the attention of a primarily white audience. Rhys’s desire to limit Christophine’s articulateness signifies not a failure of characterization, but her continued wariness of reproducing a colonial mentality – one which abides by accepted frameworks of expression and intelligibility.

Christophine’s desire to render her abilities un-representable through this formal distancing is historically motivated: obeh, deemed “superstitious” and dangerous by colonizers, served as a site of intense division between Western and Afro-Caribbean perspectives. It proved fundamentally incompatible with the institutionalized religious discourses (that is, Judeo-Christian) through which colonizers sought to signify foreign practices. Anti-obeah legislation, which originated in Jamaica in 1760 but peaked post-slavery in the nineteenth century, resulted from efforts to regulate Afro-Caribbean belief systems, particularly since obeh practitioners were often leaders of their communities and organizers of slave rebellions. Significantly, they were “almost entirely independent of white control” for a time, and thus received increased scrutiny from white legislators (Brathwaite 162). Tracing the history of obeh in the Anglophone Caribbean, Jerome Handler explains: “One way of exercising more effective control over those

African-derived...practices was to reduce them to a finite set of properties that could be more clearly grasped (partly through analogies to European cultural conceptions)” (1-2). This legislation sought to stereotype Afro-Caribbean cultural practices into nebulous, stereotypical categories legible to colonizers.

The often-overlooked legal dimensions of *Wide Sargasso Sea* attend to these socio-cultural discrepancies, particularly by challenging traditional legal theories which value “transparency” as means of creating and regulating a “coherent social order” (Kutz 203). Such standards convert the legal arena into a “theatre,” or a highly regulated and conspicuously public space which guarantees morality within democratic systems (Bentham 5). Despite this drive towards clarity which characterized the colonial project, new legal terms actually made it possible for obeah practitioners to be condemned simultaneously as threatening conjurers *and* deceitful charlatans, depending upon which legal maneuver was most advantageous. This legal paradox underpins a logical inconsistency that remained central to the institution of slavery – the incommensurability of slaves as both persons and things. Such a paradox was, as Bryan Wagner argues, “a precondition for the system’s normal operation.” The indignity of slavery “is not about being turned from a person into a thing but rather about being in a position where it does not matter if you are a person or a thing” (Wagner 74).<sup>9</sup> In *The Spirits and the Law*, Kate Ramsey

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<sup>9</sup> Just four years before the Slavery Emancipation Act of 1833, the U.S. Supreme Court convened to hear *Boyce v. Anderson* (1829). This case considered whether slaves transported aboard a ship should be considered passengers or cargo (particularly to determine the party responsible for the lost financial value of four slaves who died when a ship caught fire). At stake was the possibility of creating a legal precedent for applying the law of common carriers to living beings. Ultimately, the court determined that this law “does *not* apply to the case of carrying intelligent beings such as negroes.” However, curtailing the law’s applicability had less to do with the protection of human life than with the preservation of a legal measure that regulated the transportation of goods. Additionally, their claim that the slaves “*resemble* passengers...and not packages of goods” retains language that continued to distance slaves from full personhood (8,

draws upon a Haitian proverb to further articulate the ways in which juridical law often “provided more grief than protection” for Caribbean individuals: *lwa toujou genyen yon zatrap ladan* (law always has a trap inside of it). The “trap” of law functions exploitatively – ill-defined legal systems were manipulated to dispossess lower class Haitians and to disavow socio-religious practices such as vodou. In part, then, the perniciousness of this legal trickery stems also from the slipperiness of language – Yanick Guiteau Dandin explains “there is always a little nuance that you must interpret carefully if you don’t want to fall into the trap” (qtd. in Ramsey 91). However, this trap has a dual function: just as Antoinette and Rochester’s attempts to reject obeah paradoxically legitimize the practice, “as much as [the law] negates, it also affirms” (Ramsey 90).

In this way, the content of the Haitian proverb exceeds its context. Though this legal tension operates with specificity in relation to vodou, it also illuminates a broader diasporic practice of subversion and redeployment. The number of substitutes to state authority – including obeah, vodou, myalism and others – undermined the state’s ability to “naturalize its own judicial and penal systems as the common-sense answer to wrongdoing” (Paton 7). Obeah itself functioned as an “alternative legal resource for enslaved and poor Jamaicans,” paralleling the long history of “‘nighttime’ legal system[s] organized through networks of *sosyete sekrè* (secret societies)” which evolved from slave resistance, or *marronage* (Ramsey 17). Afro-Caribbean belief systems proved more difficult to characterize than the colonizers anticipated. In effect, “by failing to define obeah in a precise or consistent manner, the anti-obeah laws helped to construct a nebulous yet heavily value-laden symbolic representation of African religiosity as a whole”

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emphasis mine). The tension between labeling slaves as either persons or things lingers into the post-emancipation legal rhetoric Christophine condemns throughout the novel.

(Handler 2).<sup>10</sup> Christophine, sometimes contributing to the colonizers' porous definitions and often contradicting them, exploits this vagueness. Indeed, obeah is a significant force in Rhys's novel precisely because it allows Christophine to resist clear categorical containment. Obeah practitioners share an ability to control or channel the supernatural through zombification and other rituals, but insofar as each conjurer interprets and interacts with the supernatural realm differently, obeah inevitably disrupts colonial strategies of control that rely on fictions of linguistic transparency.

Rhys self-consciously inserts her novel into this discussion through Christophine's experience as a newly emancipated woman. Upon learning of her prior arrest for practicing obeah, Rochester threatens renewed legal action against her after she encourages Antoinette's rebelliousness. Though Christophine initially argues, "'No police here.' ... 'No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman,'" she ultimately recognizes an opportunity for self-preservation (131). After warning that he will report her, Rochester notes:

When I looked at her there was a mask on her face and her eyes were undaunted. She was a fighter, I had to admit. Against my will I repeated, 'Do you wish to say good-bye to Antoinette?'

'I give her something to sleep – nothing to hurt her. I don't wake her up to no misery. I leave that for you.'

'You can write to her,' I said stiffly.

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<sup>10</sup> For additional historical examinations of obeah, see Margarite Fernández Olmos' *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, Nathaniel Murrell's *Afro-Caribbean Religions* and Judith L. Raiskin's *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity*.

‘Read and write I don’t know. Other things I know.’

She walked away without looking back. (131)

The tone of finality in this scene has been remarked upon by many scholars, particularly since Christophine does not physically reappear within the novel after this confrontation. Commenting upon Rochester’s setting in motion of “the hegemonic legal systems that will allow him to successfully silence” the two women, Mardorossian argues that this moment marks Christophine’s “disappearance” from the text (81). Spivak similarly laments: “well before the conclusion, she is simply driven out of the story, with neither narrative nor characterological explanation or justice” (272). But does Christophine really exit the novel after this exchange? Or might her disappearance from the text literalize a kind of opacity? Though she does not physically resurface within the narrative, this absence signifies an active shielding of her body and her practice – she begins by donning “a mask on her face” before exerting her narrational influence on Rochester, forcing him to repeat himself “against his will.” She also claims her knowledge of “other things,” referring not only to obeah, but to the ways in which European colonial structures seek to contain her. And though she does physically depart, she continues to mediate the text through Antoinette’s visions in the latter half of the novel. Christophine haunts the text by conjuring the narrator: using zombification, she is able to vicariously enter the text and control the contours of the narrative while protecting herself and her abilities from legal retribution.

### **Conjuring the Narrator**

Christophine generates her narration primarily by zombifying Antoinette and Rochester, and one might argue that her dependence upon the embodiment of two white individuals

diminishes her authority. But in fact, extending the lens of opacity to the figure of the obeah woman enables us to reconsider how Christophine self-consciously participates in colonialist discourses while subverting them. Drawing upon Toril Moi and Luce Irigaray's conceptualization of the "mystic," I understand the obeah woman to be uniquely capable of capitalizing on moments in which symbolic systems are exposed, or when "the relativity" of one's "symbolic existence" becomes most apparent (Moi 35). Mystic women operate through a "fundamentally paradoxical strategy":

Hers is a theatrical staging... [She] intends to *undo* the effects of a phallogentric discourse simply by *overdoing* them... If the mystic's abject surrender becomes the moment of her liberation, [her] undermining of the patriarchy through the overmiming of its discourses may be the one way out of the straitjacket of phallogentrism. (Moi 139, emphasis original)

The mystic's "surrender" to patriarchal conditions actually demonstrates her mastery of these discourses. For bell hooks, this counter-language "may resemble the colonizer's tongue," but it allows us to "imagine alternatives," or to glimpse "new worlds" in which subaltern subjects occupy both center and margin (207). By simulating the operations of phallogentrism, the mystic utilizes this counter-language to gain control over her self-representation. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Christophine masters the master's vocabulary, miming it so successfully that Rochester and Antoinette are forced to internalize her voice.<sup>11</sup> As Brathwaite argues, "it was in language that

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<sup>11</sup> The figure of the obeah woman is especially performative because she shares roots with slaves who were forced to "develop innovative forms of worshipping" upon arriving in the New World (Bellegarde-Smith 33). The emergence of modern colonialism was accompanied by a particular kind of slavery which, itself an invented industry, aided in the redefinition of both gender and race: gender became essentialized just as "race" shifted from a familial or clan-based concept to one apparently rooted in the "biology" of ethnicity. In "What Race is Your Sex?," Laurel Schneider explains that the "naturalization of gender hierarchies parallels the evolution and

the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled” (31). Christophine proves capable of such rebellion – though she is linguistically attentive enough to “speak good English if she wanted to, and French as well as patois,” Antoinette mentions she “took care to talk as they talked” as she moves between her masks (*WSS* 5). She participates in this verbal subterfuge, (mis)using Antoinette and Rochester’s language by (mis)speaking it through their own bodies as she opaquely authors the text. Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the act of zombification actually works to erode the white characters’ interiorities and magnify Christophine’s despite her vicarious entrance into their colonial perspectives.

Definitions of zombification appear differently across Afro-Caribbean contexts but generally oscillate between two dominant characterizations: zombis are dead individuals who are reanimated and controlled by the sorcerer who revived them, or they are living persons who are conjured into a coma-like state which renders them vulnerable to the sorcerer’s command. This sense of dissociation has led critics to read zombification as a representation of slavery in *Wide Sargasso Sea* – emblematic of alienation, the zombi “tells the story of colonization: the reduction of human into thing” (Dayan 33). Many scholars have additionally read Rochester as a zombi, typically by linking this lifeless condition to his moral and spiritual death. In my reading, I resist this purely symbolic understanding of Rochester’s zombification while positing a second zombi figure – Antoinette – to demonstrate that Christophine conjures *both* narrators. Zombification

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naturalization of race hierarchies [...]. Gendering race gave further legitimacy to both hierarchies” (153-54). These gendered structures thus cannot be understood separately from those of race, in which the hegemony of maleness is also a hegemony of whiteness. In Jamaica, slave laws “contributed to the construction of ‘race’ by enacting racism,” or by defining and upholding racial divisions that mirrored the hierarchy maintained between colony and metropolis (*No Bond*, Paton 16).



thus becomes the primary obeah practice through which Rhys comments upon genre and authorship. Appropriating this supernatural trope, Christophine exercises her creative and inventive abilities as she manipulates the narration and reverses the master/slave dynamic.

As an allegory of authorship, zombification enables Christophine to safeguard obeah as she abruptly redirects the narration whenever it risks revealing too many details about the practice. These formal jumps are each instigated by references to obeah and thus signify moments in which Christophine intervenes in the narrative to generate opacity. For instance, Christophine first redirects the contours of the novel when Rochester begins reading the obeah chapter of *The Glittering Coronet*. She interrupts his reading of the text mid-sentence and unceremoniously supplants his narration with Antoinette's:

‘They [the negroes] confuse matters by telling lies if pressed. The white people, sometimes credulous, pretend to dismiss the whole thing [obeah] as nonsense. Cases of sudden or mysterious death are attributed to a poison known to the negroes which cannot be traced. It is further complicated by . . .’

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I did not look up though I saw him at the window but rode on without thinking till I came to the rocks. People here call them Mounes Mors (the Dead Ones). Preston shied at them, they say horses always do. Then he stumbled badly, so I dismounted and walked along with the bridle over my arm. (WSS 81)

Just as Rochester approaches the specifics, or the “further complications,” of obeah, an abrupt textual departure occurs – his narration is collapsed into Antoinette's through a shift that is indicated only by a single asterisk. The content of the passage comments upon this formal dismissal: as the author of *The Glittering Coronet* discusses the “sudden or mysterious death”

supposedly caused by zombification, Christophine suddenly redirects the narrative in order to condemn the inaccuracies of this text. Antoinette appears to experience the disorienting after-effects of this formal rupture – she travels mechanically toward Christophine’s house with less bearing on the space than the inert Mounes Mores, or the Dead Ones.

The shift to Antoinette’s narration in this scene also marks the moment of her zombification, a transformation which is paradoxically signified through subtle textual omissions that mask the details of her conversion. Antoinette visits Christophine’s home in search of a love spell to restore Rochester’s marital devotion. Though Christophine initially denies her request, it is worth quoting from this scene at length in order to observe the multiple instances of textual obscurity:

“Oh Christophine, I am so afraid,” [Antoinette] said, “I do not know why, but so afraid. All the time. Help me.”

She said something I did not hear. Then she took a sharp stick and drew lines and circles on the earth under the tree, then rubbed them out with her foot.

[...] “Now look at me. Look in my eyes,” [Christophine said].

I was giddy when I stood up, and she went into the house muttering and came out with a cup of coffee. “Good shot of white rum in that,” she said. “Your face like dead woman and your eyes red like *soucriant*.”

I followed her into the house... Her bedroom was large and dark... But after I noticed a heap of chicken feathers in one corner, I did not look round any more.

“So already you frightened eh? ...I do this foolishness because you beg me...”

“Is it foolishness?” I said, whispering, and she laughed again, but softly.

“If bèké say it foolishness, then it foolishness. Bèké clever like the devil.

More clever than God. Ain’t so? Now listen and I will tell you what to do.”

When we came out into the sunlight, Jo-jo was holding Preston near a big stone. I stood on it and mounted.

[...] I can remember every moment of that morning, if I shut my eyes I can see...the yellow handkerchief she wore round her head, tied in the Martinique fashion with sharp points in front, but now I see everything still, fixed for ever like the colours in a stained-glass window. (WSS 116-17)

Within this scene, Christophine’s obeah ritual takes place *outside of the narrated events*:

Antoinette is not made privy to her vocal incantation (“she said something I did not hear”), and, though Christophine draws figures upon the earth, she leaves no trace of them (“she rubbed them out with her foot”). Her two imperative commands – “now look at me” and “now listen” – demand Antoinette’s attention and indicate the moments at which she is conjured. The commands are followed by feelings of giddiness and darkness respectively, indicating a reduction of Antoinette’s faculties. Undefined periods of time are lost, and textual details are passed over as she experiences the detachment of a *coucriant* (the patois term for a soucriant, or vampiric figure of Caribbean folklore).<sup>12</sup> Christophine’s repeated use of such commands diminishes Antoinette’s perspective within the scene by bringing it under the conjure woman’s

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<sup>12</sup> In Rhys’s earlier novel *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Anna Morgan fears her own resemblance to these figures which “look like people but their eyes are red and staring and they’re soucriants at night — looking in the glass [I] thought sometimes my eyes look like soucriant’s eyes” (43). Giselle Anatol examines traditional depictions of the Caribbean soucriant, a witchlike figure which takes the form of an old woman by day and sheds her skin at night, transforming into a blood-sucking creature. Due to the soucriant’s ability to fly and transfigure, she often symbolizes society’s fear of women’s mobility.

purview. In the zombie state, Antoinette's memories become "fixed for ever" in the still image of a stained-glass window – a frame which offers not a glimpse of the outside world, but an ornamental and obscured view. Antoinette does leave Christophine's home with something "wrapped in a leaf," a talisman that she can feel "cool and smooth against [her] skin," but her zombification is not only indicated through this physical token, her consumption of Christophine's rum, or her resemblance to a "dead woman" or *couciant* (118). Indeed, these seemingly obvious references to conjuring operate almost as decoys, distracting us from the moments of subtle textual erasure during which the ritual actually takes place. These narrative omissions ultimately capture the impossibility of representing obeah through European literary norms as Christophine, incapable of participating in such discourses, utilizes alternative inventive forms.

Perhaps because of the subtlety of these narrative shifts, critics have tended to read Antoinette's zombification only symbolically. For instance, Sandra Drake and Melody Boyd Carriere recognize "Antoinette's lifelessness is the result of zombification," but understand this state to be induced by her entrance into a "master-slave relationship with Rochester" in which "she becomes the colonized subject and he the colonizer" (Carriere 92). In her examination of Christophine's "failed hex," Mary Lou Emery similarly notes that her spell cannot succeed because of Antoinette's status as "béké," a white person, and Mardorossian claims the power of obeah is consistently downplayed throughout the novel. However, reading Christophine's abilities as either symbolic or ineffective risks mirroring Antoinette's own attempts to dismiss obeah, even as she explicitly asks for Christophine's help. For instance, after seeing the chicken feathers piled in the corner of Christophine's house, she decides "not to look round any more," and her averted gaze contributes to the masking of the ritual. On the one hand, Antoinette's act

of turning away signifies Rhys's own awareness of her lack of unmediated access to the intimacies of obeah. But this aversion also manifests as an attempt to reject the reality of obeah. Her fearful impulse to turn away confirms her belief in the practice, and she is further confronted with physical evidence of the ritual in the form of both the chicken feathers and the rum.<sup>13</sup> Possessing such obeah materials was illegal, and Antoinette's reaction to these artifacts demonstrates her internalization of this tension, one which paradoxically legitimizes obeah through its attempt to mark the practice fraudulent and superstitious.<sup>14</sup>

Antoinette's subsequent characterization, in which she transitions from a submissive, apparently "mad" woman into a medusa-like ghost, bears further signs of Christophine's narrative intervention. Returning home after her visit with Christophine, Antoinette naps as Rochester stands over her. Repulsed by the slight smile she wears as she sleeps, he covers her face with a thin cloth, as if preparing the body of a dead person. In this way, the zombi definition from *The Glittering Coronet* is invoked once more – Antoinette, having consumed Christophine's spell, is now a living person who appears to be dead, or to be in an uncanny state in which they no longer resemble

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<sup>13</sup> These supernaturally tinged artifacts also work to specularize the real, as discussed in the introduction to this project. Antoinette harbors two sets of connotations surrounding objects such as chicken feathers. On the one hand, she simply associates chickens with food, as she serves Rochester cold chicken and bread within the novel. However, she also privately connects chicken feathers to the practice of obeah. In this way, obeah artifacts expose alternate or co-existing realities. They produce specular concavities that distort predictable or commonsense interpretations of objects and events.

<sup>14</sup> The anxiety surrounding such artifacts is grounded in legal responses to slave revolts which threatened the slave system. This activity culminated in Tacky's Rebellion (1760), an event that incorporated spiritual modes of resistance led by Tacky, an obeah-man. His rebellion ultimately prompted Jamaica's House of Assembly to pass the "Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves." This act threatened death or deportation for "any Negro or other Slave who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power, and be detected in making use of any Blood, Feathers, ... Grave Dirt, Rum, Egg-shells or any other Materials relative to the Practice of Obeah or Witchcraft in order to delude and impose on the Minds of others" (qtd. in Newall 29, emphasis mine). This act constituted one of the first major legal measures prohibiting obeah and paved the way for anti-obeah legislation that persisted into the post-emancipation era.

themselves despite maintaining their corporeality. Christophine not only dictates the actions of the newly zombified Antoinette, but also exercises her creative abilities by supplying her with dreams or visions. In her final zombi-induced dream which closes the novel, Antoinette is confronted with her reflection in a mirror and says:

It was then that I saw her – the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of a tablecloth and I saw flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me but it was too hot, it scorched me and I went away from it. (189)

Here, Antoinette's conception of her own actions is distant and defamiliarized – she cannot tell if she ran or “perhaps floated or flew”; she does not recognize her own ghostly reflection in the mirror; and she later asks herself whether she is the source of a woman's screaming. With limited punctuation marks, the words in this passage flow into one another as if spoken, rather than written, giving Antoinette's language the colloquial tenor of Christophine's voice: the conjure woman's voice has become dominant.<sup>15</sup> Antoinette's final call for Christophine also reminds us of the extent to which Christophine's perspective has covertly guided the reader from

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars such as Silvia Panizza and Edna Aizenberg each read this scene as an example of Antoinette's *symbolic* zombification. For Panizza, Rochester's act of covering his wife “depriv[es] her of her will...as sorcerers do to zombies” and “as slave-owners did with their slaves” (10). Aizenberg similarly contextualizes Antoinette's zombification through “a narrative of imperial domination” since she is “enslave[d] by a villain.” To gain “control over her – as masters gained control over slaves – Rochester ‘zombifies’ Antoinette” (464). However, equating Antoinette's condition to that of enslavement risks overlooking her family's complicity in the very enterprise of slavery. Furthermore, attributing Antoinette's zombification to Rochester strips Christophine of agency by rendering the practice purely symbolic.

the very beginning. Her voice bookends the novel: she is the first character given dialogue and, through the vessel of the zombified Antoinette, her voice is the last to be invoked.

By shifting the focus to Christophine and reading her as a central source of imagination within the text, we can rethink the ways in which her voice appears throughout the text. In the opening paragraph, Antoinette apparently narrates: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother ‘because she pretty like pretty self,’ Christophine said” (1). Here, the pronoun “we” refers on one level to Antoinette and her mother, a marginalized pair who cannot connect with either the native Jamaicans or the more financially successful white women on the island. But on another register, the “we” also encompasses Christophine – she is the first and last character given dialogue within the novel and, throughout the narrative, she works to “close ranks” by shielding her abilities from potential usurpers.

The narrative agency Christophine derives from obeah is further showcased in a conversation between Antoinette and Rochester in which the command-laden language from Antoinette’s zombification passage reappears to signal Rochester’s own conversion to this dissociative state. Entering the veranda of his home, Rochester notices “the telescope was pushed to one side of the table making room for a decanter half full of rum,” and he observes a “procession of small moths and beetles fly into the candle flames” before pouring himself a glass (107). Upon swallowing the rum, the night draws away from him and “becomes bearable” as Antoinette confronts him: “‘Will you listen to me for God’s sake,’ Antoinette said. She had said this before and I had not answered, now I told her, ‘Of course’” (108). Like Antoinette, Rochester unknowingly drinks either poison or potion disguised as rum. As it begins to take effect, Christophine’s textual influence can be glimpsed through the narrators’ altered language.

Antoinette adopts a confrontational tone, asking Rochester to “listen to me for God’s sake,” and her voice thus mirrors Christophine’s earlier command to “now listen and I will tell you what to do” (117). Rochester’s submission deviates from his former recalcitrance and is foreshadowed by the multiple references to impaired vision: on the table, the extensive gaze implied by the telescope is replaced by the rum that corrupts his perspective; the funereal procession of insects fly uncontrollably toward the light, signifying its unmitigated power over their minds and bodies. Reading such scenes, there is a scholarly tendency to mark Rochester’s zombification as symbolic of colonialist domination rather than recognizing his condition as the result of Christophine’s design. For instance, David Cowart argues that “morally, at least, all of his class...are zombies” because, like the unwitting insects, they are ignorant to the moral complexities of the West Indian context (51). Jennifer Gilchrist similarly notes that “at stake is a fundamental difference in definitions of what it means to be alive” – for her, Rochester’s lack of spiritual growth prompts his zombification (479). But such readings overlook the ways in which Christophine reshapes the narrative to grant Antoinette the ability to incite change while diminishing Rochester’s control over his faculties. Zombification enables Christophine to overcome the narrational limitations of the traditional novel form that would seek to marginalize her voice.

While Antoinette and Christophine’s zombi/master relationship operates somewhat symbiotically, Rochester does not benefit from such a dynamic. Christophine supplements Antoinette’s narration as the women’s language begins to mirror one another’s, yet their voices remain distinct.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Rochester’s perspective is subordinated both within his own mind

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<sup>16</sup> In reading Antoinette as Christophine’s zombi, I am also reading against feminized interpretations of her character as a “mad” woman. By labelling Antoinette hysteric, Rochester seeks to disenfranchise her as she inevitably falls under the protective care of her husband. This



and throughout the text itself – formal elements impede his narration and he is sometimes forced to repeat Christophine’s words exactly. For instance, after consuming her rum, he tries to reflect upon the memory, “but it was a dull thought, like a child spelling out the letters of a word which he cannot read, and which if he could would have no meaning or context. I was too giddy to stand” (190). Rochester’s rudimentary spelling reveals a disruption of the hegemony of the written. Within the magnetism of Christophine’s effects, written language comes undone and is displaced by her non-literary form of authorship. In turn, Rochester inhabits a position without “meaning or context” reminiscent of those colonialist discourses which ignore the particularities of disparate socio-cultural contexts. Christophine’s power over Rochester becomes more explicit through formal cues:

Now every word she said was echoed, echoed loudly in my head.

“She come to me and ask me for something to make you love her again and I tell her no I don’t meddle in that for béké. I tell her it’s foolishness.”

*(Foolishness foolishness)*

“And even if it’s no foolishness, it’s too strong for béké.”

*(Too strong for béké. Too strong)*

“But she cry and she beg me.”

*(She cry and she beg me)*

“So I give her something for love.”

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gendered illness is applied to her as supernatural forces increasingly disrupt and dismantle her former world view, causing her to exhibit what appears to be abnormal behavior. Insisting upon the reality of Christophine’s abilities enables us to resist viewing Antoinette’s character as merely an instrument for understanding “the elements that drive [women] to madness” (Simpson 112).

*(For love)* (124)<sup>17</sup>

In this call-and-response interaction, Rochester appears to retain his first-person point of view; however, despite his position as the putative narrator, he can only repeat Christophine's voice. He is forced "to internalize her interpretation" as her voice echoes and reverberates through his emptied consciousness (Emery 51). Moreover, the parentheses formally subordinate his point of view and Rhys thus recasts the hierarchy implied by parentheticals: the isolating punctuation marks circumscribe Rochester by barring him from original thought while prioritizing Christophine's historically silenced perspective.

Ultimately, Rochester's inability to locate Christophine within his various symbolic paradigms divests these systems of authority and makes them vulnerable to Christophine's appropriation. When Antoinette awakens from the fiery vision which closes the novel, she states, "Now I know at last why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (154). Benita Parry argues that in this scene, Antoinette liberates herself from Rochester's control, overcoming "her zombified state to take revenge on her

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<sup>17</sup> This conversation has received much scholarly attention, particularly as it constitutes a major "obeah scene" within the novel (Mardorossian 5). However, for some critics, Rochester's dissociative experience resists easy categorization: has he genuinely been zombified, or is he playing into behaviors consistent with the colonialist stereotypes with which he is familiar? Mardorossian argues that he "capitalizes on the love drink he was given," performing the expectations of zombiism "because he needs to rationalize his overwhelming desire for Antoinette and to displace its source on an external agent" (76). Obeah is "thus appropriated by the white colonizer as a way of preserving his sense of superiority within his purist and racist frame of reference" (Mardorossian 77). However, Rochester's oscillation between various sources for his condition, specifically poison or potion, also corresponds to a common feature of supernatural fiction – the impulse to determine a "real" explanation for spiritual or occult events. Christophine exploits this convention of ambiguity to protect herself, but also dismantles it as uncertainty risks limiting the power of obeah by questioning its validity and attempting to render it visible and definable.

oppressor...and to challenge the canonical validity of the text *Jane Eyre*” (248). But this intertextual reading misses the ways in which Christophine orchestrates Antoinette’s escape. Christophine’s intervention is apparent here because this passage is a repetition of Rochester’s earlier “thought [that he] knew what would happen and what [he] must do.” Finding his “room oppressively hot,” he extinguishes the candles and “wait[s] in the half darkness” (87). While Antoinette uses the flame to dispel the darkness, or to glimpse a way out of Rochester’s abuse, he can only sit uncomfortably within it. In rewriting this scene for Antoinette, Christophine offers a version in which concealing the flame only intensifies its effects. This intensification parallels the ways in which Christophine wields her authority – shielding her abilities only deepens their power.

#### **“After the obeah nights”**

In her unfinished autobiography *Smile Please*, Rhys periodically demonstrates knowledge of obeah garnered through both research and her own childhood memories. Remembering her family’s cook, an obeah woman named Ann Tewitt, Rhys admits, “in my time nobody was supposed to take it [obeah] very seriously,” yet she was “told about [Ann] in a respectful, almost awed tone” by those with whom the woman interacted (*SP* 16). Her nurse, Meta, additionally shared stories of zombis that, “for a long time,” made it so that Rhys “never slept except right at the bottom of the bed with the sheet well over [her] head,” listening closely in case the figures crept into her room (*SP* 23). Such tales led Rhys to “associate storytelling itself” with the rituals of obeah (Raiskin 130). Indeed, to remedy the “sadness” she sometimes experienced while drafting *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys took brief respites from the novel to compose poems, including one entitled “Obeah Night” which she credits with reinvigorating her creativity. Enclosing this piece

within a letter to Francis Wyndham in 1964, Rhys notes: “Only when I wrote this poem – then it clicked – and all was there and always had been” (*Letters* 262).

I want to suggest that what clicked into place was precisely this sense that obeah is inextricably linked to inventive capacities, igniting Rhys’s own inspiration and facilitating Christophine’s subaltern narration. In “Obeah Night,” Rhys does turn to intertextuality; however, she does not perform the familiar recourse to *Jane Eyre*. She instead draws upon scenes from her own novel, reimagining them to offer new glimpses into Christophine’s character. The poem recasts the marriage between Rochester and Antoinette and, though it is narrated by Rochester, Antoinette participates in an affair of her own (countering Rochester’s infidelity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*). Angered by her unfaithfulness, Rochester wishes to separate himself from her and narrates: “Over my dead love / Over a sleeping girl / I drew a sheet” (265). In this way, the language of zombification seeps into the poem: Rochester’s attempt to erase Antoinette from his memory mirrors his act of drawing a “sheet over her gently as if I covered a dead girl,” an act carried out in the novel proper (WSS 110). This moment signifies Antoinette’s entrance into the zombi state within the poem and, suitably, her conversion is preceded by an evocation of Christophine:

“It’s too strong for Béké”

The black woman said [...]

Lost, lovely Antoinette [...]

Where did you hide yourself

After the obeah nights?

(*What* did you send instead?

Hating and hated?)

Where did you go?

I'll never see you now

I'll never know (265-66, emphasis original)

Here, a line from the novel is reproduced to centralize Christophine's perspective within the scene: "It's too strong for Béké." After warning Rochester that he cannot prevent her ritual, a line break occurs – it is a characteristic textual omission, a now familiar shielding maneuver as Christophine self-reflexively protects her abilities from the colonizer's purview. Though we do not witness her spell, Rochester fearfully asks, "(*What* did you send instead?)," indicating Antoinette has been zombified once more. As Rhys notes in her own interpretation of the poem, "the creature who comes back is not the one who ran away – that too is part of obeah" (*Letters* 263). She is no longer a person, but a "what" that resists being seen or known, a "what" that develops the capacity to "hide" or preserve herself once Christophine's voice has penetrated the text.

## Chapter 3

### Decolonizing Detection in Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*

“L’acte d’écrire est ‘surnaturel’ en lui-même.  
[The very act of writing is ‘supernatural’ in itself.]”

— Maryse Condé

While travelling throughout the United States in 1923, Arthur Conan Doyle set aside work on his Sherlock Holmes detective mysteries to instead plot out an itinerary of supernatural sites which he would chronicle in his travel memoir, *Our Second American Adventure* (1924). His destinations included locations such as Hydesville, NY, often considered the birthplace of modern spiritualism, and Los Angeles, CA, home to the Society of Advanced Psychical Research. Along the way, he also participated in séances hosted by a number of “remarkable” mediums before visiting Fairbanks Studio in Hollywood. There, he was further delighted by his experience with Mary Pickford, a woman whom he considered “intensely psychic” and in possession of “many gifts of the spirit” (Conan Doyle 142). But despite his well-documented belief in spiritualism, Conan Doyle’s encounter with another studio-goer exposes his limited definition of this practice:

[Sam] was an enormous negro...who seemed to me, when stripped, to be the most powerful man I had ever seen.... Fairbanks beckoned him to come with me into a room that we might examine his proportions. I saw him shrink away and look at me with fear in his eyes.... “This is the spook-man,” said he... “I wouldn’t like one in my room at night.” His fear was very real, and I felt that if I had slowly

approached this Hercules with my eyes fixed upon him he would have bolted with a howl. It gave me an insight into the power of those Voodoo priests and magicians who have sway over just such formidable babies as poor Sam. He had the brain of a child of ten, but his body was terrific. (*Our Second*, 142-43)

Throughout his journey, it becomes clear that Conan Doyle's spiritualist convictions do not extend to non-Western traditions such as voodoo. He understands Sam's "very real" fear, but only because the man's frightened reaction maps onto infantilizing racial stereotypes that view black individuals as gullible or childlike.<sup>1</sup> And, though he spent weeks visiting mediums, Conan Doyle ironically rejects the reality of the *source* of Sam's anxiety – the "spook-man" – due to its apparently supernatural status. But Sam's fear is likely twofold: though he does dread the spook-man of various Caribbean religious traditions, he is also frightened by the historical realities that emerge when a white man wishes to "examine" a black man's proportions. Sam identifies Conan Doyle as the "spook man," accusing him embodying the terrifying subjectivity he is attempting to dismiss. Throughout this interaction, Conan Doyle reinforces imperialist discourses in multiple ways: he discredits non-Western belief systems by labelling them superstitious or supernatural and, in so doing, participates in a history of valuing physicality over intellect in black individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* (1927), published only a few years after his tour of spiritual locations, Conan Doyle crafts what might be viewed as a fictionalized account of his encounter with Sam. In "The Adventure of the Three Gables," a black prize fighter named Steve Dixie arrives at Baker Street to warn Holmes against a potentially dangerous client. Rather than taking him seriously, Holmes immediately notes that the "huge negro [who] had burst into the room" would have been "a comic figure if he had not been terrific" in size and had "sullen dark eyes, with a smouldering gleam of malice in them" (518-519). Holmes' companion, John Watson, responds to Dixie's appearance by grabbing a fireplace poker and, when the man departs, Holmes claims: "I am glad you were not forced to break his wooly head... But he is really a rather harmless fellow, a great muscular, foolish, blustering baby, and easily cowed, as you have seen" (520).

In opening my chapter with this discussion of Conan Doyle's spiritualist leanings, I draw on an established, if counterintuitive, connection between supernatural fiction and detective fiction. On many levels, the two genres seem incompatible – the “ratiocination,” or extreme rationalizing impulse, of traditional detective fiction risks being undermined by the supernatural genre's resistance to logical explanation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, critics such as Michael Cook, R. A. Gilbert and Michael Cox recognize an “underlying affinity” between detective and supernatural fictions, each noting that Conan Doyle, “the most celebrated of all detective story writers,” embraced the otherworldly (Cook 9).<sup>3</sup> But scholars' consistent recourse to Conan Doyle as a major piece of generic connective tissue risks reinforcing an imperial standard. Such an understanding elides how Conan Doyle's Eurocentric conservatism negates or denigrates certain belief systems, even as he purportedly identifies as a spiritualist. For instance, in his writings on the “psychic sciences,” such as in his essay “A New Light on Old Crimes” (1920), Conan Doyle continually links “the Obi men and Voodoo cult of Africa” to individuals of “unsavoury character” (2). For Laura Otis, his Sherlock Holmes stories similarly reflected English readers' anxieties “about infiltration, about punishment for their colonial theft, and about the legitimacy of their own identity” as the various contradictions of imperialism emerged throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (2). Holmes' ratiocination is often politically motivated, then: as a detective,

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<sup>2</sup> Ratiocination is a detective fiction convention that stems from some of the genre's earliest contributors, including Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe. Ratiocination refers to an extreme level of rationality or logic-based deduction which transcends ordinary patterns of thinking. The term also implies a level of conventionality or tradition, as detectives are often trained to practice ratiocination through their experience as police officers, scientists, and other logic-oriented professions.

<sup>3</sup> In their effort to define “psychic detection,” Gilbert and Cox similarly argue “the close relationship between the ghost story and tales of mystery and detection is emphasized by the satisfying fact that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the most famous detective of them all, also wrote supernatural stories” (4).



he is invested in protecting English citizens from foreign subjects and “exposing interlopers who mimic traditional signs of respectability” (Otis 2). Through his rationalizing, civilizing mission, Holmes reinforces imperial modes of knowing and being which remain central to the detective genre.

Typologies of detective fiction have proliferated since the genre first emerged out of figures such as Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe, with authors working to expand and reimagine the boundaries of the form to account for cultural difference. Traditional detective narratives often view the transgression of national, racial, gendered, and other social boundaries as “the precondition for a crime to take place” (Pearson and Singer 7). For instance, in Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* story “The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez” (1905), the victim’s estranged wife, Anna, is found to have accidentally murdered her husband. Anna is a Russian woman who has recently served a prison sentence in Siberia, and she returns to England to conduct an investigation of her own: she hopes to gather enough evidence to exonerate her companion. However, her transgression of particular social boundaries – that is, interloping in England and encroaching on the investigative mode reserved for rational men – inevitably lead to her English husband’s death. In contrast to such traditional detective narratives, postcolonial approaches to the genre position marginalized subjectivities’ particularized socio-cultural insights as powerful investigative tools that disrupt the supposed universality of Anglo-American modes of rationalism. For example, the “woman detective” often uses her feminine wiles to gather confidential information while the “ethnic sleuth” utilizes their marginality to investigate inconspicuously. Yet, these recuperative variations on the genre continue to rely upon the imperative to “figure it out,” often by simply applying alternative methods of reasoning to a hermeneutical problem (Gulddal 5). But in her novel *Traversée de la Mangrove* [*Crossing the*

*Mangrove*] (1989), Maryse Condé borrows elements from several of these detective categories while ultimately creating something new by transporting what has been called “metafictional detection” into a new context – the supernaturalism of the French Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> In this way, she performs a postcolonial critique of both realism and traditional, Conan Doyle-esque detective fictions by introducing supernatural elements that complicate the logical conclusions expected of each genre.

*Traversée* begins in typical crime fiction fashion: the body of the itinerant author Francis Sancher is discovered, and the narrative unfolds through nineteen chapters, each filtered through the perspective of an individual who knew him. Sancher, we learn, faced immediate backlash upon arriving in Rivière au Sel (a fictional rural village in Guadeloupe) due to his criminal background – throughout the novel, we learn he is a murderer, rapist, and perhaps a former drug trafficker. His career as a novelist further contributes to his marginalization as this profession deviates from the villagers’ traditional understandings of labor: “Was a writer then a do-nothing, sitting in the shade on his veranda, staring at the ridge of the mountains for hours on end...? And that’s a writer? Come now! The most outlandish stories began to circulate [about him]” (Condé 21). As a result, Sancher is remembered as a polarizing figure and the novel’s chapters initially seem to mimic the form of witness testimonies, inviting readers to determine which characters may have had the motive to murder him. However, the text’s polyvocality also subverts many detective conventions: the competing voices ultimately undercut readers’ ability to identify a clear culprit and the figure of the single, rational detective is displaced by the multiplicity of

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<sup>4</sup> Though I am citing from an English translation of Condé’s novel throughout this chapter, I switch between French and English excerpts. When terms or phrases were written in French in the English translation of the novel, I maintain the French spelling and then offer an English translation for the reader.

perspectives.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the generic subversiveness of *Traversée* has been read primarily through its resistance to a centralized, Sherlock Holmesian subject as a “nexus of information,” particularly as this focalization often reinforces a male-oriented framework of logic-based deduction (Leservot 96).

But Condé takes her generic transgressions a step further by introducing another unrecognized impediment to the domineering ratiocination so central to traditional detective fiction: the influence of the supernatural. Fantastic occurrences are commonplace in *Rivière au Sel*: an abandoned estate leaves visitors feeling as if “the eye of an invisible beast or spirit had bored into them” (17); a newlywed woman is described as a zombie; the clairvoyant Mama Sonson is plagued by her ability to see the future; and a Haitian exile named Désignor is thought to be “a boko [sorcerer] hounded by angry loas [spirits]” (166). Supernatural details also surround Sancher’s character. Though doctors conclude he suffered an aneurysmal rupture, Sancher anticipates his own death throughout the novel as he believes he has inherited a patrilineal curse.<sup>6</sup> Taking “the form of a sudden, unexplained death,” the curse originated with his distant relative, “a white Creole planter, cursed by his slaves, who had come back to haunt the scenes of his past crimes” (184-85). Condé’s text thus prompts us to consider: what racial and gendered affordances does the supernatural lend to a genre like detective fiction – a genre

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<sup>5</sup> As A. James Arnold notes, Condé’s fragmented, “formally perspectivist” narration also “disintegrate[s] the impulse toward a dominant discourse that has characterized the realist novel” more broadly (716).

<sup>6</sup> In *Sequel to History*, Elizabeth Ermarth explains “the language of rationalism...reinforces one discursive function at the unnecessary expense to another” (11). She cites the “human sciences,” including the medical establishment, as one example of such an “opportunistic” discourse. Within the realm of human science, “methods and categories from the restricted and disciplined realm of modern physical science” are transported into “a broad range of social, political military, and other nonscientific areas of life” (Ermarth 11). For Heidegger, the resulting categories “always ‘fit’ because at bottom, [they] say nothing” about phenomenal encounters (qtd. in Ermarth 11).

haunted by both imperialist and patriarchal legacies that uphold a distinction between the Western, male thinker and “other” non-rational subjectivities? How might a woman writer selectively re-appropriate the conventions of the genre?

Condé has written more overtly fantastical texts – including *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986) and *Who Slashed Celanire’s Throat?* (2000) – but incorporating the supernatural within the historically rationalizing genre of detective fiction allows her to explicitly challenge conceptions of a single, dominant reality through both racial and gendered critiques. The formal logic of *Traversée* inherently destabilizes inherited models of detective fiction because a seemingly *irrational* source – a supernatural curse – is ultimately converted into the *rational* explanation for Sancher’s death.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, by the end of the novel, the citizens of Rivière au Sel each attend his wake having abandoned any search for another possible cause: it seemed to them “that verily the deceased was no ordinary man” (208). Condé thus legitimizes the supernatural as a set of experiences, expanding definitions of reality to accommodate postcolonial perspectives which do not sit comfortably within detective fiction’s conventional frameworks.

To accomplish this revision, Conde deploys genre reflexivity in two ways: 1) she uses the genre conventions of detective fiction self-reflexively to highlight and critique the imperial leanings of ratiocination and empiricist thought; and 2) she reimagines the sub-genre of “metafictional detection” to dismantle not only the colonizer/colonized relationship, but the

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<sup>7</sup> While several critics have linked *Traversée* to the genre of detective fiction, they tend to overlook or discredit the supernatural elements embedded within the text. For instance, Leah Hewitt argues that by the end of the novel, “the narrative is still too sketchy and contradictory to provide a definitive explanation” of Sancher’s death (85). As a result, “supernatural and rational explanations compete equally for our attention” throughout (86). A. James Arnold similarly contends the mystery is never solved but is “merely retold in overlapping and conflicting versions voiced by multiple” narrators (716). In their search for a murderer or other “explainable” cause for Sancher’s death, such readings focus on the perplexing polyvocality of the text rather than examining the supernatural as a genuine cause.

gendered components of such hierarchies. Just as Spark and Rhys conjure author figures through Caroline and Christophine in *The Comforters* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* respectively, Condé positions Sancher as a potential co-author in *Traversée*: we learn he was writing a novel of the same name before the curse took effect. However, while I argued Spark and Rhys cede narrative control to their women writers, enabling Caroline and Christophine to intervene in the construction of their novels both formally and in relation to plot, Condé does not permit such usurpation. Indeed, Sancher seems self-reflexively aware of his literary impotence: “You see, I am writing,” he says, “don’t ask me what’s the point of it. Besides, I’ll never finish this book” (Condé 158). Because Sancher represents both the colonizer and masculine authorship, Condé intervenes within the narrative to inhibit his ability to either compose his novel or gain a readership, thus preventing him from eclipsing her as author of *Traversée*. Sancher’s two companions – a writer named Lucien Evariste and a historian called Emile Etienne – additionally fail to actualize their literary projects. They each seek to chronicle life on the island of Rivière au Sel, hoping to draw upon the villagers’ experiences to earn an income in Anglo-American literary markets by producing realist narratives. Condé precludes such attempts at commodification and instead advances a feminist, postcolonial revision of metafictional detection by stymieing men’s textual production throughout the novel and repurposing the detective form from within its very own conventions. She uses the supernatural to displace Sancher, eliminating her metafictional counterpart and discrediting other authorial voices that conform too closely to convention.

## The Reflexive Detective Novel

The imperial underpinnings of detective fiction remain largely unconsidered, particularly as the genre appears to operate democratically on many levels. Readers are invited to participate in the process of detection, piecing together clues and exercising critical agency as they attempt to solve the crime. This formula has been crystallized through multiple classifications of the genre, including Tzvetan Todorov's "typology of detective fiction," Ronald Knox's "Ten Commandments," a list of acceptable crime conventions agreed upon by members of the Detection Club (a cohort of British crime writers formed in 1930 which included figures such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers), and Christie's popularization of the "clue-puzzle" format "which invited and empowered the careful reader to solve the problem along with the detective" (Knight 107). For Todorov, then, "the whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them" (67). These institutionalized conventions ostensibly protect readers from being "duped," giving them a "fair chance" to investigate the crime by eliminating clichéd or deceitful narrative tactics such as lucky intuitions, secret rooms, or the sudden revelation that a character has a concealed twin (Knox 1). When not read as democratizing, the genre's formulaic structure has further contributed to a perceived disconnect between detective fiction and political critique; or as Fredric Jameson puts it, "the detective story, as a form without ideological content," privileges style over overt political or social engagement, whether imperial, gendered, or otherwise (2). The affordance of Eurocentric detective fiction is that it "permits stylistic experimentation" because "it takes the nature of the society, of the nation, for granted" (Jameson 5).

Moreover, the formulaic impulses of detective fiction have contributed to a separation between this genre and supernatural fictions which work to deconstruct such givens. As Todorov

has argued, in detective fiction, “everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted” (163). As a result, occult happenings are typically exposed as fraudulent or insincere in a Scooby-Doo-like reveal. For instance, in Agatha Christie’s *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931), a murderer stages a fake séance to deflect attention onto another suspect; the séance trope reappears in *Peril at End House* (1932) as Christie’s famous detective Hercule Poirot secures a confession through this supernatural trick; a woman vandal invents tales of malevolent poltergeists to avoid suspicion in Dorothy Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* (1936); a detective who identifies as a “man of science” is almost convinced by a fraudulent medium in Paul Gallico’s *The Hand of Mary Constable* (1964); and in Conan Doyle’s “The Adventures of the Sussex Vampire” (1924), a man’s “wild” Peruvian wife is suspected of being a bloodsucker before, of course, being absolved of such a fantastic crime. Even when a woman’s supernatural abilities lead to accurate predictions, as in Reginald Hill’s *A Killing Kindness* (1980), they are often met with disbelief – Hill’s medium correctly identifies the murderer within the novel’s opening pages, yet her warnings go unheeded and her abilities are never confirmed as genuine, perhaps due to her Romany background. Fred Botting argues that the technique of the “explained supernatural” gained popularity through Gothic writers such as Ann Radcliffe, and the otherworldly thus began to gain some recognition within the genre. Yet, rational explanations were always subsequently offered to “undercut the supernatural” (64). Readers are returned to the “conventions of realism, reason and morality” as the “excessive credulity” of the supernatural is revealed again and again – “the object is always to moderate [the supernatural] with a sense of propriety,” ultimately reinforcing the fundamental disconnect between the rational and the occult (Botting 65).

Though detective fiction is invested in demystification, the genre's preoccupation with wholeness, order, and rationality thus renders it complicit in what Tobias Döring terms a "programme of narrative restoration" (11). This restorative practice works against decolonization, a process "which sets out to change the order of the world," Frantz Fanon argues, through "a program of complete *disorder*" (35, emphasis mine). The empiricist, logic-orientated formula of traditional detective fiction offers a rationale for the imperial project. The common tropes of discipline and control mirror colonial interests that are affirmed through "the reconstruction of a social stability so typical for the genre" (Matzke and Mühleisen 5). As Franco Moretti explains, this stable order cultivates a sense of coherency, reassuring readers that "society is still a great organism: a unitary and knowable body" (145). Evidence of such imperial reconstructionism is visible within texts from Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), in which an exotic, racialized orangutan is brought to justice after murdering a Parisian mother and daughter, to Agatha Christie's *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924), a novel which familiarly and reassuringly ends with a marriage despite the narrator's fear of being "summarily shot by a bloodthirsty rebel" in interwar-period Johannesburg (Christie 224). Even as modernist and postmodernist detective authors – seeking to unmoor themselves from the resolution-based trappings of earlier detective fictions – began to signal a new sense of powerlessness or futility "in the face of flawed human institutions" more broadly, the detective figure "remained a moral center" of truth (Davis 17).

Throughout the twentieth century, then, postcolonial variations on detective fiction sought to expand to the margins and, as a result, they transitioned from viewing the genre as "reflective or paradigmatic" to understanding it as "locally engaged, formally diverse, and discursively productive" through its attention to particularized contexts and the different forms of



knowledge contained therein (Pearson and Singer 3). Emphasis was placed on the detective's individual identity and, rather than serving as an abstracted cipher for political interests such as order and discipline, the sleuth came to represent alternative, marginalized, and particularized powers of deduction derived from socio-cultural difference. Condé participates in this turn toward localization, contributing on the one hand to the emerging category of French Caribbean detection now exemplified in popular novels such as Raphaël Confiant's *Le Meurte du Samedi-Gloria* [*The Murder on Holy Saturday*] (1997) and Patrick Chamoiseau's *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse* [*The Old Slave and the Watchdog*] (1997).<sup>8</sup> But more importantly, I argue, she also shifts from viewing detective fiction as “*reflective* or paradigmatic” to establishing the genre as *reflexive*. That is, Condé rejects detective fiction's mimetic impulses as they tend to be reflective only of dominant, Eurocentric versions of reality. She instead calls attention to fictionality throughout the novel, drawing upon and ultimately expanding the sub-genre of metafictional detection to genreflexively challenge conventionality in terms of both gender and race.

Variouly termed “metafictional,” “intertextual,” or “metaphysical” detective fiction, these texts feature multilayered narrative structures in which common detective fiction tropes are mobilized subversively to contest the primacy of plot and challenge the investigator's omniscience. For Jonathan C. Brown, a paradoxical kinship exists between the detective and metafictional genres due to this shared interest in conventionality. Self-consciousness highlights

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<sup>8</sup> In their investigations into postcolonial detection fiction, Jason Herbeck and Greg Wright hazard definitions of the sub-genre of French Caribbean detective fiction while recognizing it is identity-driven and thus nebulous in nature. Wright notes these texts typically feature ambiguity surrounding police reports, counter racialized modes of criminalization, allow for multiple interpretations of the crime, resist closure, and incorporate modes of orality in addition to documented witness testimonies. For Herbeck, many French Caribbean texts diverge wildly “from standard detective norms on narrative terms (thus placing them *technically* outside the genre),” though he shares many of the conventions outlined by Wright and practiced by Condé (65, emphasis original).

“the textual status of what is being presented” and, when paired with the crime novel, it “draws attention to the generic nature” of the form (Brown 195). However, while traditional detective fiction often maintains these generic ties, metafictional detective narratives work to expose the artificiality of textual characteristics. For instance, Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney examine the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Alain Robbe-Grillet to explore the formal inventiveness of the metafictional detective genre, arguing that such texts:

parody or subvert traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing [...]. Rather than definitively solving the crime..., the sleuth finds himself confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity. (2)

Carl Malmgren confirms the “primary target” of metafictional detection has been “the sense of closure created by the solution to the crime, the revelation of the truth,” because such closure ultimately signifies the coherency of generic devices (122). As a result, this genre has been theorized primarily within British and American contexts – metafictional detective stories tend to approach questions of “truth” and “closure” as “abstracted, ostensibly universal critiques of rationalism” rather than as localized issues of identity formation and knowledge production (Pearson and Singer 6).

But the metafictional goals of subversion, exposure, and resistance to the status quo each mirror postcolonial aims. Following the lead of other metafictional detective novelists, Condé uses the genre’s conventions self-reflexively – as previously mentioned, for instance, she invokes and subsequently dismantles the witness testimony and uses polyvocality to displace a centralized detective figure. However, in contrast to other examples of the sub-genre, she does

not take narrative closure as her primary target. Rather, she offers a clear solution to the mystery of Sancher's death by identifying the culprit: a supernatural curse. In the penultimate paragraph of *Traversée*, the attendees of Sancher's wake begin asking themselves:

Who in fact was this man who had chosen to die among them? Could he be an envoy, the messenger of supernatural forces? [...] Perhaps they should watch for him to reappear supreme through the rain-streaked windowpanes of the sky... Just as some of them crossed over to the window to look for the flowering of the dawn, they saw the contours of a rainbow, and it seemed to them that verily the deceased was no ordinary man. Surreptitiously, they crossed themselves. (208)

Here, Condé uses a clichéd funereal image – a rainbow – to represent Sancher's lingering spirit, thus calling attention to conventional endings while refusing to fulfill the conclusion expected of detection fiction. Rather than naming a murderer, the villagers' belief in the veracity of the curse is expounded throughout the passage: the funeral-goers are repeatedly and exclusively referred to with plural pronouns ("they," "them," and "themselves"), indicating a shared or collective understanding "that verily," Sancher was plagued by supernatural agents; they recognize that Sancher "chose" to die in Rivière au Sel, acknowledging the curse was imminent; the repetition of a language of "crossing" and references to windows signifies their acceptance of intersecting worlds or forces; and, though the "surreptitiousness" of their final act of "crossing themselves" could imply a sense of disbelief, it mirrors Sam's "very real" fear of supernatural forces which often necessitate furtive forms of protection. Condé confirms the reality of the supernatural throughout *Traversée*, countering the "much more convenient" belief that "the world is a closed place. Especially in America, where they don't want to see anything related to death. ...In the

Caribbean, there is close communication between the two worlds. Everything is open for us” (Condé, *Bomb Magazine*). By offering a seemingly “irrational” or supernatural rationale for Sancher’s death, she generates such openings between worlds – she self-reflexively expands the subversive potential of metafictional detection to accommodate alternative conceptions of closure and conventionality.

### **Whodunnit?: The Death of the Author in the Metafictional Detective Narrative**

The cultural import of writing may seem so universally self-evident as to be unworthy of enumeration. Many feminist theorists, for instance, have linked the practice to modes of empowerment – as Trinh T. Minh-ha notes, “More and more women see writing as *the* place of change, where the possibility of transforming social and cultural structures is offered” (135, emphasis original). Closely mirroring such language in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), Hélène Cixous confirms: “writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879). Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, writing is a form of social currency that is not accessible to all subjects. And, within Caribbean contexts, writing remains an act of transgression for many women. In her essay “La parole des femmes” (1978), Condé laments that women’s writing

is neither optimistic nor victorious. It is loaded with anguish, frustration, and revolt [...]. Throughout the world, the woman’s voice is rarely triumphant.

The feminine condition is everywhere characterized by exploitation and dependency. Given the particular context of the Antilles, anguish, frustration,

and revolt are expressed differently. It is that difference that needs to be apprehended. (113)

It is this difference which Condé apprehends ten years later, in *Traversée*. If writing is “the” site of change and possibility, as Minh-ha and Cixous assert, the metafictional quality of Condé’s text gains deeper significance. By both reflecting upon and participating in the practice of writing itself, she executes a two-pronged approach: she simultaneously centralizes and enacts this form of change. Moreover, she locates this act of change, potentiality, and revolt within a space of multiplicity – a French Caribbean space in which she argues things are “expressed differently.” In this way, she ultimately rejects the “dependency” of the feminine condition elaborated upon by thinkers such as Roland Barthes: “There is no reality not already classified by men,” he claims, and “to be born is nothing but to find this code ready-made and to be obliged to accommodate oneself to it” (136). Since “intelligibility preexists” us through both language and form, the task of writers is to instead “unexpress the expressible” (Barthes xviii). In *Traversée*, Condé practices such detachment through the metafictional. She decolonizes detective fiction by unexpressing the “ready-made” realities associated with both race and gender which are often upheld through generic conventions.

To execute her critique of stagnant depictions of reality, Condé situates her narrative within the hyper-formulaic genre of detective fiction to call attention to conventionality before condemning three particularly realist forms: metafiction, biography, and historical tracts. Like detective fiction, each of these genres prioritizes realism in different ways: traditional metafiction exposes the textual apparatus but, as we’ve explored in previous chapters, often simply highlights and upholds the same dominant discourses it is attempting to dismantle in the process; biography strives to faithfully chronicle an individual’s life; and historical texts

typically attempt to offer an accurate depiction of events and experiences. Within *Traversée*, Sancher represents a traditional metafictional mode while his authorial counterparts – Lucien Evariste and Emile Etienne – attempt to produce biographical and historical texts, respectively. The fact that each of the three men fails to complete their literary projects or gain significant readerships signifies Condé’s refusal to uphold the assumed connection between masculine perspectives and literary production.

In her challenging of formal stagnation, Condé first incorporates explicitly metafictional conventions within *Traversée*; however, since her primary self-reflexive element – Sancher the author – is doomed from the very beginning, we witness her refusal to fully conform to the genre. In this way, she enters an existing discourse on the limitations of metafiction in relation to both race and gender. In her work on the category of “black self-reflexivity,” Amy Fenstermaker draws upon Henry Louis Gates’ claim that “the black tradition has inscribed within it the very principles by which it can be read” (xxiii). She explains that traditional metafiction, in which “an author draws on a historical figure or event and simultaneously undermines the historical accuracy of that representation,” feature a type of formal investigation that appears often within black authors’ texts (3). However, when black writers participate in such critiques, they are not recognized as such. In self-reflexive texts in which the author figure is killed, either literally or metaphorically, the disconnect between marginalized writers and formal critique becomes even more severe:

The author’s death has several repercussions. First, it removes the act of authorship from the hands of white males and expands the definition of who can be an author, creating room for women and people of color. Second, it loosens the act of interpretation from the intentions of the author.... However, the second

repercussion nearly takes away what the first one gives, in the sense that *women and minorities are being acknowledged for their creative abilities at the same time that the author is deemed unimportant*. (Fenstermaker 2, emphasis mine)

In *Traversée*, Condé partially adheres to this metafictional trend – she kills the author, eliminating Sancher and the masculine perspective he represents in order to allow other voices to emerge. Indeed, though each chapter of *Traversée* illuminates a different character’s relationship to Sancher, only historically marginalized individuals – specifically women and social outcasts such as Joby, a young boy who has an undisclosed cognitive disorder, and Xantippe, a supernatural figure who unwittingly frightens the other villagers – are granted first-person narration within the novel.<sup>9</sup> Condé also circumvents the second, potentially undermining repercussion of the author’s death by maintaining a spectral authorial presence of her own throughout the text. Sancher experiences renewed frustration each time he sits down to write – he often tears up his ineffectual pages and sometimes simply “stares at his typewriter as if it were a rival with a familiar temper” (183). Because they are each working on the same text, Condé situates herself as a rival producer – she maintains the importance of marginalized perspectives by simultaneously killing the masculine author while asserting her own creative abilities. In this way, she specularizes realist texts: she enters her own novel with a haunting presence, mediating

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<sup>9</sup> Xantippe and Joby each represent marginalized perspectives throughout the novel through both their own identities and their sympathy for othered subjectivities. For instance, as Suzanne Crosta reveals, Xantippe is inextricably linked to “the victimization of women” because his wife died at the hands of colonizers and he is one of the few characters who can confirm Sancher’s crimes against women, including rape and perhaps murder (151). He is also one of the few men who is disgusted by such acts. Because Joby experiences an unknown mental disorder, his chapter is also narrated in first-person and, in this way, Condé demonstrates she is “adamant about allowing marginalized voices to emerge” and to represent themselves (Larrier 89).

its content and structure in order to highlight and expose narrative possibilities that Sancher cannot replicate in his text.

Condé asserts her authorial control through a gendered critique of language – she situates Sancher outside of the space of writing and thus distances him from this site of change and potentiality. For instance, when Lucien Evariste learns a fellow writer has arrived in Rivière au Sel, he begins painstaking preparations for their first meeting. However, to his dissatisfaction, Sancher reveals:

You've knocked on the wrong door, my son. May I call you that? The person you see standing in front of you can only tell of men and women whose lust for life has been cut short. Just like that! No glorious struggle. I've never heard the names of those [famous authors] you mention. I'm not what you think I am. I'm more or less a zombie trying to capture with words the life that I'm about to lose.

For me, writing is the opposite of living. I confess to impotence. (183)

The language of zombification explored in the previous chapter seeps into this passage: for Sancher, writing is not an autonomous or self-directed act, but one which seems to operate independently of his own intentions or experiences. The struggle for creative production is not a “glorious” or ultimately cathartic process, but rather ends in a state of impotence. In this way, Condé deconstructs the assumed centrality of the phallus to further her critique of language. As Cixous writes in “Castration or Decapitation?” (1981), women are traditionally positioned “outside of the Symbolic” because they lack “any relation to the phallus” – the “transcendental signifier” which is the “primary organizer” of both language and subjectivity (46). But here, Sancher’s confession of impotence reverses the “exploitation and dependency” of the feminine



condition Condé explored in “La parole des femmes” – Sancher “loses his words” and becomes dependent upon a woman’s language.

In linking impotence to modes of authorship and narration, Condé additionally stages a postcolonial critique by stripping Sancher of his right to self-representation. In *Caribbean Discourse* (1989), Édouard Glissant argues that French Caribbean individuals are “fettered in two ways: because of the impossibility of producing by and for themselves and because of the resulting *impotence in...asserting their true selves*” (9, emphasis mine). On the one hand, their inability to express or produce “by and for themselves” is a result of the dominance of Eurocentric realisms – as George Becker explains, these traditional forms aim “to represent those data with minimal distortion arising either from subjective impulse or from artistic overelaboration, so that they do mirror reality as directly as possible and do, almost literally, speak for themselves” (93). In this way, realism mirrors the narrative processes of detective fictions which “speak” or manifest meaning by conforming to convention, often at the expense of author’s “subjective impulses.” But allowing texts to “speak for themselves” – to remain untethered from the author’s particularized identity – reinforces a Eurocentric vision of artistic production which often excludes postcolonial perspectives. To echo Spivak: how can the subaltern speak if their text speaks for itself? As a stand-in for the French Caribbean author in *Traversée*, Sancher’s impotence results from this lack of self-representation – he can only communicate the stories of others (“can only tell of men and women whose lust for life has been cut short”); he cannot “capture with words” his own experiences at the end of his life; and he thus cannot “assert his true self” despite his status as an author (183).

In this way, Condé condemns the universalizing impulse of traditional realisms while also participating in the “artistic overelaboration” that imperils these forms. As Ian Watt argues,

“since the [realist] novelist’s primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity” to human experience, “the poverty of the novel’s formal conventions would seem to be the price it must pay for its realism” (13). The realist text cannot be *too conspicuously* a text – stylistic innovation risks detracting from the reality of what is being presented. In contrast, within metafiction, overelaboration is par for the course as this genre works to expose the narrative apparatus and foreground the author’s writing process. Condé adopts this form in order to decenter the master plot of colonial history; however, while A. James Arnold argues she adopts “an eminently readerly...self-conscious style that nevertheless does not call attention to its formal inventiveness,” I argue it is precisely this self-conscious play, or narrative overelaboration, which enables Condé to execute her postcolonial critique (716). She does allow her text to “speak for itself” through its self-conscious attention to form and conventionality, but she makes it clear that she is doing the speaking. For instance, while discussing his writing process with one of his lovers, Vilma, Sancher explains:

“You see, I am writing. Don’t ask me what’s the point of it. Besides, I’ll never finish this book because before I’ve even written the first line and known what I’m going to put in the way of blood, laughter, tears, fears and hope, well, everything that makes a book a book and not a boring dissertation by a half-cracked individual, I’ve already found the title: *Traversée de la Mangrove.*”

I [Vilma] shrugged my shoulders.

“You don’t cross a mangrove. You’d spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You’d be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud.”

“Yes, that’s it, that’s precisely it.”

[...] He wrote pages upon pages on the veranda. When he was tired of tearing them up, he went off into the woods...” (158-59)<sup>10</sup>

Condé’s authorial dominance is made apparent once more as Sancher disposes of his pages and experiences the suffocation brought on by “the impossibility of producing by and for” himself (Glissant 9). In the sentence in which he attempts to articulate his project, his language unravels into a jumble of chaotic phases and insecurities. He recognizes his writing process is as tangled and rooted as a mangrove forest, yet he cannot voice his own feelings of entrapment. Vilma must do this interpretive work for him, explaining the symbolism of the mangrove tree while also noting the flaws or limitations of this artistic choice: “You don’t cross a mangrove” (Condé 159). Even the title of the novel itself is situated beyond Sancher’s control – he states that he has “found” the title to *Traversée de la Mangrove*, distancing himself from its design, and the predetermined nature of the text thus binds Sancher to Barthes’ “ready-made code.” The novel is a narrative script composed and arranged by Condé to which he is merely “obliged to accommodate” himself (Barthes 136).

Though Sancher implies his version of *Traversée* was intended to be autobiographical, Condé maintains a haunting presence throughout the text to thwart his recourse toward this realist mode, particularly since she deems many of his memories unworthy of preservation. Traditional autobiographies often reflect the singular author’s lived experiences, but this consolidation of the subject risks reasserting the centrality of the assumed male writer while also

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<sup>10</sup> As Vilma notes, mangroves thrive in brackish environments which have a salinity level somewhere in-between freshwater and seawater. Brackish water is usually created when the two types of water are mixed together through processes such as flooding or heavy rainfall, and Condé thus demonstrates that Sancher is incapable of existing within this postcolonial space characterized by modes of blending. She reinforces this point by killing Sancher within Rivière au Sel – “sel” is French for “salt,” and the island itself has a “brackish” or amalgamated quality due to its colonial history.

suggesting that such perspectives warrant immortalization. However, while referencing his participation in an unnamed war, Sancher disturbingly reminisces: “My finest memory, you know, was the time we recaptured a village. Exhausted, I entered a compound thinking it was deserted. A girl, almost a child, her breasts hardly showing, was huddled up on a mat. On seeing me she uttered a cry of fright. I can still smell her virgin blood in my nostrils” (188). Rather than allowing a rapist to record and disseminate his memories, then, Condé works to deconstruct the masculine bias of the autobiographical tradition by dis-identifying “the autobiographer” from “he” and, in this way, she dismantles “the more or less conscious assumption...that what is ‘important’ is coextensive with what is masculine, ‘human’” (Brée 169-70).<sup>11</sup> Moving beyond gendered critiques alone, Condé additionally inhibits the continuation of colonial violence which would be reproduced through Sancher’s autobiography as he literally raped and pillaged. By converting *Traversée* into a detective story, Condé removes Sancher from the central textual position he would have enjoyed as an autobiographical subject – the novel opens with the discovery of his body, and he is positioned as undeserving of the mourning rites typical of the detective genre.

Condé extends her critique of masculine realisms through the character of Lucien Evariste, a companion of Sancher who is “commonly known as the Writer” throughout Rivière au Sel, “although he had never written a word” (Condé 11). She self-consciously inserts him into a discourse on realism as he endeavors to write Sancher’s biography, hoping to produce a faithful representation of his friend’s life and to counter “the lies” that plagued him while he was alive.

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<sup>11</sup> For additional readings of the relationship between the autobiographer and a masculine identity, see James Stull’s *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction* (1993), Jeanne Perreault’s *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autobiography* (1995), or Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Women’s Autobiographical Selves” (1998).

While Condé refuses the mimetic quality of detective fiction because she is uninterested in replicating the existing power structures often contained therein, Lucien aspires to use the biographical form to advance his singular interpretation of events:

One day, a man is here. Talking, laughing, looking at women with passion uncurling in his crotch. The next, he's stiff as a board. What tribute could he pay to his friend who had disappeared so suddenly? Then an idea germinated in Lucien's bruised mind. Shy and hesitating at first, as if preposterous, it soon came into its own and wouldn't leave him alone. Instead of hunting down Maroons or nineteenth-century peasants, why not, as an urban son of the twentieth century, put together Sancher's memories end to end, as well as snatches of his personal secrets, brush aside the lies and reconstitute the life and personality of the deceased? (188)

Within Lucien's "bruised" or troubled mind, Sancher's life experiences are more interesting (or perhaps simply more salable) than his research on Maroons, peasants, and other marginalized figures whom he believes to have lost significance within "urban" circles. By abandoning his work on these subjects, he perpetuates their forgotten status while adhering to versions of history which tend to value and remember men's stories. Importantly, this narrative inspiration also strikes Lucien immediately after Sancher has shared his "favorite memory" – his rape of a young girl – to which Lucien responds matter-of-factly: "Where was this?' He asked in a very Cartesian fashion. 'When you were in Angola?'" (188). With the latter question, Lucien implies Sancher's crime may have been an act of desperation instigated by colonial struggles or war time circumstances, but his attempt to apply modes of reasoning to this horrific memory exposes the dangers of adhering to realist forms that risk not only perpetuating colonialist legacies, but

selectively modifying them. As Ann Banfield argues, posthumous biographies often take on the form of a classical elegy, wherein the author seeks to “end mourning by ‘apotheosis,’ the ‘well-meant fiction’ of transforming the dead into immortals” by idealizing and cherishing their lives after death (238). Condé rejects such impulses toward veneration while also revealing the generic contradictions involved in this process: biographies are meant to offer accurate accounts of an individual’s life, yet Lucien’s desire to craft a “tribute” to his friend will lead to a warped interpretation of events. In Lucien’s recuperative narrative, Sancher’s sexual appetite will simply appear as a sign of “passion” or vitality, rather than materialize as a form of colonial or gendered domination.

Despite Lucien’s claim that he will string the man’s memories together from “end to end” to counter the villagers’ apparent lies, he is also predisposed to romanticizing Sancher’s life because he wishes to generate a literary culture on the island. By presenting an exciting and sympathetic author figure to the citizens of Rivère au Sel, Lucien hopes to revise their negative view of novelists and thus legitimize his own dream of entering that profession. Lucien has already demonstrated a penchant for embellishment – he previously considered writing “a romanticized saga of the great slave revolt of 1837 in the South” and hosts a local radio program entitled *Moun an tan lontan (People of Yesteryear)* in which he aims to tell “the stories of the heroes, martyrs, patriots, leaders, and major figures who had died naturally, or more often violently, in their struggle to get the wretched of the earth to rise up and march” (180-181). Though Lucien’s impotent subject, Sancher, has already admitted he has not experienced a “glorious struggle” of any kind, Lucien invites him to contribute to the radio broadcast. He willfully ignores the decidedly unheroic stories which had already begun circulating about the man’s criminal background and, when Sancher confirms his history of rape, Lucien continues to

pursue his story. In this way, Lucien further demonstrates his disinterest in marginalized voices and uses his platform to advance his own career – by shedding a spotlight on Sancher as a successful writer, he seeks to generate a new reputation for himself. As a result, Condé again prevents his narrative from reaching audiences. For instance, Lucien’s own mother, who remained “glued to the radio” for each broadcast, “asked for the Good Lord’s forgiveness...for every word he uttered” (180). Additionally, his decision to defend Sancher against renewed rape accusations ultimately leads to the cancellation of *People of Yesteryear* and he is forced to realize “how mistaken [he] was about [Sancher]! [He] took him to be...a builder of worlds, whereas in fact he belonged to that highly dangerous species who has lost all illusions” (178). Clinging to Sancher’s story proves fatal for Lucien’s career – in his attempt to both emulate another writer and to produce the doctored biography he assumes his readers expect, he falls into patterns of ineffectual conventionality.

By hindering Lucien’s interpretation of Sancher’s life, Condé condemns those authors who seek to exploit or commodify marginalized individuals’ experiences in their postcolonial texts while disavowing their own connection to the apparently backward or naïve histories they are attempting to represent. For instance, when Sancher arrives in Rivière au Sel, Lucien fantasizes about the discussions they could share on subjects such “style, narrative technique, and the use of oral tradition in writing” and excitedly lists authors they might interpret together including Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima (182). He further complains that such discussions are usually “impossible, since the few Guadeloupean writers who did exist spent most of their time holding forth on Caribbean culture in Los Angeles or Berkeley” (182). Yet, to write Sancher’s story, Lucien imagines he will have “to leave this narrow island to drink in the smell of other men and other lands” and, with “renewed enthusiasm” after this realization, he

experiences “a conquering mood” (189). He aspires to be one of the very Guadeloupean expatriates he condemns, replicating the violence of colonialism by commodifying and exoticizing the islanders’ experiences in a “local color” story that appeals only to foreign audiences.<sup>12</sup> By referencing Alejo Carpentier in particular, Condé sharpens her critique of Lucien’s literary pretensions and his uncritical allegiance to Eurocentric contexts. While Lucien wishes to move his texts beyond the boundaries of *Rivière au Sel* behind, Carpentier very much rooted his work within the Cuban context. Though Carpentier was born in Switzerland, he was raised in Havana and self-identified as Cuban throughout his life, even when he was temporarily exiled from the country. Moreover, Carpentier’s appearance within *Traversée* represents another of Condé’s self-conscious moves – he is famous for theorizing a genre he termed “lo real maravilloso (marvelous reality),” or a form of magical realism “endorses the ideologeme” that regional contexts are sites of “transculturation, ‘mestizaje,’ miscegenation, ...and radical assimilation where difference does not operate according to...conventional logic” (Moreiras 85).<sup>13</sup> Condé gestures toward the localized nature of such fantastic forms to condemn Lucien’s attempt to universalize – that is, to Anglicize – regional realities through his publication efforts.

In abandoning his ties to *Rivière au Sel*, Lucien plans to forfeit his native language and has no intention of returning to the island to share his potential success. When envisioning his project, Lucien imagines:

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<sup>12</sup> In interviews, Condé has reflected that in France, the reception and reviews of her own work have often felt “exoticizing” (qtd. in Sansavior 27).

<sup>13</sup> Carpentier also contributed to the formation of Latin American political and artistic movements through his local journalism and helped to develop surrealist forms in Cuban literatures. The second author Condé mentions, José Lezama Lima, similarly wrote in surrealist and magical realist modes – he imagined Latin America as an “incorporative protoplasm” in which difference is supported rather than regulated, and he used fantastic tropes to depict this openness.



“He saw his book published by a leading publisher on the Left Bank in Paris, acclaimed by the press, but coming up against local critics.

‘Is this novel really Guadeloupean, Lucien Evariste?’

‘It’s written in French. What kind of French? Did you ever think of writing in Creole, your mother tongue?’

‘Have you deconstructed the French-French language like the gifted Martinican writer Patrick Chamoiseau?’”

Oh, he’d know how to defend himself and answer them back! (188-89)

Throughout this passage, Condé stages a common language debate within postcolonial studies: as Chinua Achebe asks, “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s?” (62). Within Francophone contexts, writers are often asked to operate in relation to both dominant, “French-French” literature and the local spaces in which their texts are imagined and produced. Annie Armitage contends that working in a “regional language would exclude [Francophone writers]...from a wider global readership,” and this exclusion also risks further marginalizing regional literatures and “native idioms” (38).<sup>14</sup> While Condé herself has been at the center of such debates – particularly since she writes in French and has drawn inspiration

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Rebecca Wolff, Condé further explains that she once attempted to determine “the most important element if you want to write a Caribbean novel.” She notes that her unnamed companion “believed that it was language; that if you could deconstruct French and use a lot of Creole metaphor and images, it would be enough.” But for Condé, this surface deconstruction – attempted by writers like Lucien – does not approach Caribbean-ness: “My feeling was that only by capturing the very structure of the narrative technique could you make a Caribbean novel. You have to find the Caribbean technique of telling a story, a polyphonous technique.” Polyphonic texts feature a mixture of perspectives and, especially, work to give voices to those “who were never given voices before” (*BOMB Magazine*). Condé adopts this essential Caribbean technique throughout *Traversée*, utilizing polyvocality to deconstruct the central detective figure and unleashing historically silenced voices by enabling only women and marginalized figures to speak in first-person.

from English authors such as Emily Brontë – she laments, “You see— it’s as if you should never cross a barrier, when, in fact, to live is to cross barriers” (*BOMB Magazine*). While Condé’s border-crossing is deliberate and multidirectional, Lucien’s plans to depart from Rivière au Sel are described as “feverish” and “impatient,” and his determination to write in “French-French” without deconstructing or examining the political implications of this practice signals his inability to ethically mediate the islanders’ experiences. In contrast to Condé and other postcolonial writers like Patrick Chamoiseau, a major figure within the créolité (creoleness) movement which sought to account for the socio-cultural specificities of Antillean and Francophone texts, Lucien explicitly aspires to participate in the language debate but does so in ways that reinforce narrative hierarchies between Western and “other” literatures.<sup>15</sup>

In her final critique of masculine narration, Condé links Lucien to another writer, Emile Etienne, who succumbs to realist paradigms as he attempts to historicize Rivière au Sel. Condé connects the two men through their respective literary failures – Lucien is “commonly known as the Writer, although he had never written a word” while Emile is “commonly known as the historian, although he had only published one pamphlet that nobody ever read entitled ‘Let’s Talk About Petit-Bourg’” (Condé 11). Emile’s approach to realism is presented somewhat more sympathetically – like Lucien, he sought to collect the islanders’ memories and testimonies, particularly those that are “kept in the hollow of our minds” (198). But rather than focusing on a

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<sup>15</sup> In her reading of Francophone Caribbean crime fiction, Wendy Knepper argues Patrick Chamoiseau practices a form of “illicit blending” in which “the collision, interplay, and circulation of genres enables a more productive and relevant form of investigative fiction to emerge” (1433). In particular, he occupies the position of “narrator detective” in order to mediate the crime-solving process within creole contexts. Condé self-consciously inserts Chamoiseau into her own detective novel to commend his powers of “deconstruction,” or his ability to critique Anglo-American modes of conventionality. However, she dismantles the generic conventions of detective fiction even further by eliminating the detective figure altogether and thereby decentering such rational authorities within the French Caribbean.

controversial subject like Sancher, Emile interviews the elderly residents of Rivière au Sel and thus attempts to chronicle the lives of marginalized individuals, gathering “all those words that have never been listened to” and packaging them for public consumption (198). However, while discussing this project with Sancher, we learn that Emile “spoke mainly about himself, and his one ambition” of writing his historical tract and subsequently leaving the island. He desperately wants to “Leave. Breathe a less rarified air. He suddenly seemed to be suffocating under the tall trees, and he dreamed of...a homeland where the soil would be rich for plowing” (199-200). After growing close with Sancher, Emile begins to mirror Lucien in his desire to improve the island’s reputation in order to prove himself. Determined to “turn his back on them and leave. At last!,” he adopts Lucien’s colonizing, “conquering” mentality as he hopes to “plow” new lands through travel, writing, and scholarship and “dreams of revenge” against those who scorned his earlier work (Condé 199). Indeed, while collecting stories from the older generations, he is only enlivened by those in which the islanders travelled to Madagascar, Paris, Senegal, and other spaces which help Lucien move vicariously beyond the limits of Rivière au Sel. As a result, Condé prevents him from achieving literary success – he sells only fifty copies of his pamphlet, “Let’s Talk About Petit-Bourg,” while the remaining volumes yellow on the shelves of the local library.

Emile’s failure to adequately portray the history of Rivière au Sel also results from his reliance upon rationalizing impulses that preclude the alternative ways of knowing and being, such as supernaturalism, which characterize life on the island. He takes on the role of the logic-oriented detective figure, gathering stories of strange happenings to dispel in his historical writing. For instance, when Sancher first arrives, Emile is interested in his decision to occupy the abandoned Alexis estate because it is generally considered to be haunted. Deaths even occurred

on the property years earlier, leading to the home's current state of disrepair as the islanders unanimously refuse to enter the grounds and risk angering the spirits that reside there. "Yet when he consulted his notes," Emile found "they gave little credibility to the theory," and his investigation is closed (193). While researching another piece of history on the island – regional gardening practices – Emile again privileges traditional forms of evidence. He approaches a man named Xantippe, a resident of Rivière au Sel who is widely believed to possess supernatural abilities, and thinks:

The wretch always stood apart from everything and everyone, wandering silent and mute like a zombie, looming up where you least expected him. Emile Etienne, who had grown up among his father's tomatoes and okras, noticed that Xantippe had planted an authentic Creole garden on the patch of land he squatted, using the old ways now long forgotten. Emile Etienne had consequently tried to approach him with a tape recorder, but all he had got were some undecipherable mumblings. (199)

Emile wishes to learn more about the "authentic Creole" techniques Xantippe deploys in his garden, ostensibly to retrieve "the old ways" from the margins of history. Yet, "new ideas [about publishing] haunt him" as he watches Xantippe, and his attempt to record these local methods thus proves ineffectual as Condé is reluctant to allow islanders' memories to be documented for such purposes (199). Just as Laurence's recourse to realism fails in *The Comforters*, as his attempts to record Caroline's "mad" voices prove futile, Emile's meager evidence is comprised only of Xantippe's "undecipherable mumblings" which he does not have the skills or understanding to interpret (Condé 199).

Though Emile wishes to profit from Xantippe's gardening expertise, he rejects the alternative knowledges Xantippe harbors as a result of his supernatural abilities. Ironically, his gifts provide him with unique insight into the history of Rivière au Sel – the very history Emile wishes to trace in his own work but overlooks as a result of his conventional beliefs. For instance, Xantippe explains his familiarity with local flora and fauna is derived from the many lives he has led throughout history, including those of a slave and a Maroon: "I named all the trees on this island. [...] They have taken care of our bodies and souls since we lived in Africa. Their fragrance is magic, a power recaptured from times long gone by.... When I became a Maroon, their trunks barricaded me in.... Rivière au Sel I named this place. I know its entire history" (204-205). Emile jokingly refers to Xantippe as "The Cursed One" or "The Go-Between," gesturing towards the superstitious beliefs of the other islanders, but his condescension causes him to discount Xantippe's authentic insight into the history of the island, including the origin of Sancher's curse, which occurred in response to a horrific crime which took place "on this very spot, a long, long time ago.... I [Xantippe] discovered their graves under the moss and lichen" (205). Despite the various types of evidence Sancher attempts to present to support the reality of the curse – including his ancestor's written history of the curse, official accounts of each male descents' death at the age of fifty, and Sancher's own death which conforms to the parameters of the curse – Emile continually denies its veracity: "'You're not telling me you believe in all this nonsense, [Sancher]? These are pearls of popular folklore that make it a unique and precious form of expression.' From that time on, whenever they met, the two men avoided such subjects" (197-198). Though he is operating in a detective mode, Emile's tendency to disregard supernatural occurrences hinders him from fully exploring aspects of the island's history through postcolonial investigative techniques such as folkloric insights and oral

traditions. He denigrates the “pearls of popular folklore” which shift and change over time, and which thus complicate his ability to record a stable historical reality.

### **Capturing the Caribbean Imagination**

In 1921, Virginia Woolf penned an essay in which she contrasted Henry James’s ghost stories against the spectral aesthetic of one of Condé’s major literary influences, Emily Brontë. While examining each authors’ relationship to realism in their ghostly texts – *The Great Good Place* (1900) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) – Woolf wrote:

...it seems as if [Brontë] must pass through ugliness or lie down with disorder before she can rise in her own person. The ready-made beauty of the dream world produces only an anemic and conventionalized version of the world we know.

And Henry James was much too fond of the world we know to create one that we don’t know. The visionary imagination was by no means his. (287)

In this gendered reading of narrative production, Woolf identifies Brontë’s task as twofold: she must first overcome the “ugliness” of the masculine-oriented realist tradition while additionally challenging conventionality within the supernatural genre. Woolf’s belief that “ready-made beauty” has impoverished the dream world and eradicated inventiveness mirrors Barthes’s earlier claim that “there is no reality not already classified by men” – writers are working from within a “ready-made code” to which they are “obliged to accommodate” themselves (Barthes 136). But while James remained overly invested in the known, ready-made world, Woolf finds that Brontë was capable of “tear[ing] up all that we know human beings by, and fill[ing] the unrecognizable

transparencies with such a gust of life that they transcend reality” (190).<sup>16</sup> Brontë works against James’s “reproduction of familiar legibility” by revising conceptualizations of “reality as a closed patriarchal set of ‘facts’” (Thurston 130).<sup>17</sup>

In her examination of haunted texts, Woolf essentially argues women writers must divorce their supernatural stories from dominant versions of the “real” – to transcend the patriarchal limits of fiction, they must create previously unknown worlds unburdened by familiar “truths.” Condé similarly recognizes the spectral valence of Brontë’s “unrecognizable transparencies,” even going as far as to rewrite *Wuthering Heights* while transporting it into a Francophone context in her novel *Windward Heights* (1995), an intertextual homage to Brontë which is replete with supernatural images from zombies to Guadeloupean *eguns* (spirits of the dead). However, rather than attempting to “transcend reality” like her literary predecessor, Condé deploys the supernatural to expose alternative, yet co-existing realities – postcolonial realities which have historically been separated from dominant understandings of the real or the human.

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<sup>16</sup> Notably, James’s *The Great Good Place* is metafictional in nature as it features a writer, George Dane, who has been unable to focus on his creative work due to the accumulation of everyday tasks – responding to letters and other mail items, keeping up with the daily news, reading books sent to him by publishers, and more. But when he encounters an unknown guest in his home, George is suddenly transported to a fantastic dream world, a “great good place” which closely mirrors reality while operating as a sort of retreat from the every day. James’s fondness for the real or familiar world thus shines through – even in his otherworldly imaginative space, George maintains ties with the ordinary. He does not need to conjure an alternative world or existence that might better accommodate his already dominant subjectivity.

<sup>17</sup> Considering the supernatural genre more broadly, Thurston further argues “the trouble with the Victorian ghost story...is that it often risks falling back on its own repertoire of generic conventions and stylistic clichés” (129). This tendency toward conventionality is precisely why the authors I examine operate genre reflexively – though they borrow from established generic repertoires, they do so to emphasize and thus critique these same clichés.

In both *Windward Heights* and *Traversée*, Condé's supernatural figures are decidedly worldly and humanlike in both form and folly, and they thus approach the real in ways that Woolf would perhaps have condemned as formally unimaginative. But Woolf's derision of realist specters contributes to the marginalization of Caribbean contexts in which such figures would not be viewed as paradoxical but would rather be accepted as a thread within their socio-cultural fabric. For instance, while reflecting on Heathcliff's desire to glimpse a spectral vision of his late love, Catherine, Condé argues: "When Heathcliff was opening the windows in the captain's room and telling [Catherine's ghost], 'Come, and possess me,' Caribbeans find nothing strange in that. We could easily do that. For example, if a girl loses her husband...she was all the time [visiting] the Kimbwa.<sup>18</sup> [T]here was nothing surprising in the quest. Emily Brontë doesn't know how close she was to the Caribbean imagination" (*Bomb Magazine*). Insofar as gothic fiction "is marked by an anxious encounter with otherness," it is intrinsically attentive to issues of women's non-normative representation (Anolik and Howard 1). But for Condé, Brontë's feminist revision of the ghost story better accounts not only for the diverse range of gendered realities recognized by Woolf, but for subaltern existences as well.

Though Condé admits to "cannibalizing" Brontë's proto-Caribbean aesthetic, she transgresses narrative boundaries further by self-reflexively foregrounding multiple sets of conventions. Though Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues "a postcolonial dialogue with the Gothic plays out its tendencies most completely" in Caribbean writing because this space "learned to 'read' itself in literature through Gothic fiction," Condé advances new understandings of Caribbean reading and authorship (qtd. in Khair 110). She sutures the ghost story with the

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<sup>18</sup> Kimbwa is a Caribbean religion which shares roots with obeah, Santería, and vodou. In the Guadeloupean tradition, Kimbwa practitioners are often associated with supernaturalism or magical abilities.



detective genre to challenge larger patterns of representation and, rather than allowing her author figures to simply “read” themselves within conventional frameworks, she decolonizes these perspectives to prioritize marginalized voices.

## CONCLUSION

### Past and Present Hauntings

“No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality.”

—Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*

Just before Halloween in 2018, showrunner Mike Flanagan released a much-anticipated Netflix mini-series adaptation of Shirley Jackson’s illustrious horror novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). In the title sequence, the camera slowly pans across a series of marble statues, primarily of female subjects, who each wear anguished expressions upon their paralyzed faces as pieces of their bodies shatter into the dark, grayish-green backdrop.<sup>1</sup> The camera then zooms out to reveal an extensive maze, representative of Hill House itself, in which these figures are presumably trapped, eternalized in their suffering. Following the title sequence, the series begins with a man’s finger poised over the “record” button on his smart phone before the camera shifts to reveal the subject of the impending interview. Irene, a black woman who has recently lost her husband, explains her supernatural encounter to Steven Crain, a celebrated author who collects, fictionalizes, and then publishes the stories of individuals who have experienced hauntings. Ever since her husband died in a horrific car crash several weeks earlier, Irene has been visited by his

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, one of the statues features a woman wearing a gown which falls loosely around her exposed breast. Her face, pitched to the side as if she’s just been struck, is crumbling into large pieces. Though her gaping mouth remains intact, her eyes and hair are unrecognizable. The second statue similarly features the woman’s mouth as she cries out in anger, pain, or frustration, and her eyes are obscured because they are tightly shut. Though the statues thus prioritize vocalization or speech by emphasizing the mouth, the women exist only in a state of eternalized screaming.

ghost and is thus forced to repeatedly witness his mangled body. As she relays her story, the camera shifts between close-ups of Irene's face, prolonged shots of Crain's recorder, and scenes in which his hand furiously scribbles notes.<sup>2</sup> Flanagan continually splices Irene's account of the supernatural with Crain's attempts to accumulate evidence.

It is worth lingering over the opening scene of *The Haunting of Hill House* for the ways in which it encapsulates Flanagan's artistic vision for the series as a whole: the juxtaposition of the classical marble statues against Crain's smart phone recorder suggests the program is a modern update of Jackson's novel, a progressive renovation of her gothic-inspired *Hill House*. Flanagan foregrounds this process of narrative revision by incorporating an author figure – a metafictional component which was not explicitly present in Jackson's novel – and his adaptation participates in contemporary social critique, particularly by extending challenges to gendered stereotypes which were only latent within the source text.<sup>3</sup> However, despite these updates, Flanagan's fidelity to traditional horror conventions ultimately leads him to reinforce many of the racial and gendered stereotypes he attempts to dismantle. Indeed, Crain immediately discounts Irene's haunting experience, and his initial skepticism is compounded when he examines her bookshelf and notices a collection of his own works displayed prominently in the center. Recognizing his annoyance, Irene apologizes:

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<sup>2</sup> It may be useful to visualize these scenes with more detail. The very first scene of the series features Crain's hand, with his pointer finger hovering over the round, circular "record" button on his smart phone. It sits upon a table and the only other object in the scene is a wine glass filled with a lightly colored liquid (presumably water). The glass casts a shadow over Flanagan's recorder, perhaps signifying the negative aspects of his journalistic approach.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, Flanagan reimagines the relationship between Eleanor Vance and Theodora. Though their relationship is only implicitly homoerotic within Jackson's novel, Flanagan makes Theodora openly gay in his series. By the end of the show, she is in a healthy, committed relationship with another woman (who does not have a fictional counterpart within the novel).

“I’m sorry, I should have told you I’m a fan... I can’t imagine what it was like living there. The most famous haunted house in America.”

“[...] I’ve never seen a ghost,” [Crain says.]

“But your books?”

“Ah, not in Arlington, Danvers, Alcatraz, on the *Queen Mary*, or in Williamsburg. And not in Hill House.”

“The way you write, I just assumed—”

“Other people’s stories. People like you, Irene. I give them the right voice, that’s all.” (*Hill House*)

Throughout the opening scene, Flanagan foregrounds traditional modes of evidence through Crain’s examination of the house, obsessive notetaking, and witness interviews. By recording Irene’s story, he additionally mirrors Laurence and Emile’s problematic privileging of proof and documentation when faced with women’s fantastic encounters; however, while Spark and Condé thwarted their characters’ efforts to mediate marginalized perspectives, Crain successfully appropriates “other people’s stories,” profiting from their hauntings despite his disbelief in their supernatural experiences. Flanagan thus incorporates both intertextual and metafictional dimensions within his series, but he negates the subversive potential of the latter form by reproducing a familiar version of the author: he reinforces the idea that white, masculine perspectives constitute “the right voice.” Those who wield such voices reproduce in kind, dictating whose experiences are worthy of publication: “I can’t promise I’ll include your story in my book,” Crain says, “But it’s possible” (*Hill House*). More importantly, those with the “right voice” also become of the arbiters of what is real, human, and legitimate.

Flanagan establishes an enduring lens of skepticism around women's supernatural encounters by incorporating gendered horror tropes which de-legitimize women's claim to their own experiences by linking supernatural occurrences to mental decline or deceptiveness. Though Crain is later convinced the supernatural events at Hill House are in fact real, this revelation only occurs when he experiences the hauntings himself. Ironically, though Crain upholds a rationalizing realist mode, he discredits Irene's supernatural account because she trusts in the veracity of his books. Irene's favorite Crain text, *The Haunting of Hill House*, is ostensibly autobiographical; yet, Crain knows the information is falsified as it is constituted from another person's memories. He thus assumes she shares his motives and is seeking her own claim to fame through a fantastic fabrication. He admits: "You've got me beat... If you actually saw your husband hanging upside-down over your bed, you've seen more than I ever have. I've never seen a ghost" (*Hill House*). His use of the word "if" demonstrates his skepticism, and Irene's ability to quote from his book further contributes to his frustration. As she recites the novel's opening line, Crain's mouth is obscured by his own books – by the volumes of "other people's stories" – as Irene re-appropriates the words: "Silence lay steadily against the wood and stone at Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone" (*Hill House*).<sup>4</sup> In this instance, Jackson is directly quoted – this line appears within both the first and last paragraphs of her novel – and having Irene voice such a well-known line risks bringing the text back into a woman's narrative domain.<sup>5</sup> In response to Irene's potential usurpation, then, Crain rolls his eyes and reasserts there

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<sup>4</sup> In this scene, the darkly toned background is eclipsed by the bright white pages of books in the foreground. Every object in the scene is out of focus except for Crain's face, and he is rolling his eyes with disdain for Irene. However, his mouth is obscured by the books themselves. When he turns to face Irene, he wears a sheepish, embarrassed expression and is incapable of interrupting her while she quotes from his novel.

<sup>5</sup> In an interview, Flanagan described his initial hesitation to adapt *The Haunting of Hill House*; however, his reluctance stemmed from the possibility of having to "[step] into Robert Wise's

is “no reason” behind the hauntings at Hill House before the scene shifts away from Irene’s character.

In short: the supernatural genre still has a gender problem. In an interview for his earlier film *Oculus* (2013), Flanagan demonstrates his continued ambivalence toward one of the major critiques surrounding the genre: women are not to be believed when operating alone. *Oculus* features Tim and Kaylie Russell, a brother and sister duo who must work together to destroy an evil mirror, and Flanagan explains the creative team’s initial decision to “go with a really strong female protagonist.”<sup>6</sup> However, they then realized they “needed...a Mulder/Scully thing in there. We needed a counterpoint because somebody who’s espousing this belief in a haunted mirror isn’t necessarily to be taken seriously.... So, we wanted to have that counterpoint” (*That Shelf*).<sup>7</sup> For Flanagan, the counterpoint is Kaylie’s estranged, formerly institutionalized brother – a male figure who, despite his background, grants legitimacy to the supernatural narrative and prevents viewers from simply questioning a woman’s sanity. In this way, Flanagan abides by both gendered and generic conventions which he later resumes in *The Haunting of Hill House* by metafictionally insinuating a male author who provides “the right voice” for his modern update of the novel. Because Flanagan limits himself to traditional metafictional modes, he cannot

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shadow... you’re not [going to] do that material better than he did it” (*Collider*). Here, Flanagan states his major source of inspiration was Wise’s film adaptation rather than Jackson’s original text, further separating his version of *Hill House* from a feminine perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Feminist theorists often read mirrors as symbols of patriarchal reproduction. For example, in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray argues the mirror represents multiplicity, but this expansiveness is male-oriented. Women are viewed only “as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself, to copy himself” (30).

<sup>7</sup> Here, Flanagan references a famous science fiction television program, *The X-Files*, which follows Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, two FBI special agents who investigate paranormal encounters. However, gender roles are often reversed throughout *The X-Files*: while Mulder believes wholeheartedly in the otherworldly, Scully (a woman character) is posited as the skeptic.

approach the genreflexive – his series self-consciously interrogates form through its attention to literariness rather than genre, and he thus overlooks the ways in which generic conventions reinforce social expectations for his female characters.

### **Supernatural Possession vs. Possessing the Supernatural**

To glimpse a final example of genreflexivity, we need only travel back in time to examine the texts that haunt us and allow their authors to speak for themselves. Reading Jackson's novel genreflexively illuminates her dedication to textual critique. As early as 1959, she was already dismantling modes of conventionality that Flanagan unwittingly re-inscribes. The publication date of *The Haunting of Hill House* is significant because, though her text doesn't fully approach the intersectionality of contemporary feminisms, it was published on the cusp of a transition to more capacious understandings of gender as a process of socialization and, oftentimes, a product of patriarchal control. Like other genreflexive texts, *The Haunting of Hill House* does not explicitly feature scenes of authorship, and the novel seemingly conforms to many of the masculine conventions of horror fiction which subordinate women's bodies, such as the haunted domestic space and supernatural possession. But in deploying these formal devices, Jackson simultaneously revises them – she fuses the real with the supernatural to portray a genuine haunting, challenging notions of the “otherworldly” to instead expose co-existing worlds or realities.

To read Jackson's novel as a conventional ghost story is to fundamentally misunderstand the gendered components of her narration. Jackson filters supernatural events through the psyche of her central female character, Eleanor Vance, rather than relying upon a legitimating masculine perspective. As a result, many readers have interpreted Eleanor through a Todorovian lens:

assuming Jackson is holding “rational” and “supernatural” explanations in suspension as is customary in fantastic fiction, they suspect Eleanor may be suffering from a mental decline rather than psychic disturbances. Indeed, even Nelson Gidding, the screenwriter who adapted Jackson’s novel into a film entitled *The Haunting* in 1963, explains that “in the middle of the process” of converting the text into a film,

it dawned on me that this wasn’t a ghost story *at all*. It’s about a woman who’s had a nervous breakdown and has been institutionalized. The haunted house is actually the institution, the sanitarium where she is a patient.... This is all true; I did quite a bit of research once I had the idea. [The] cold spot [Eleanor feels in the doorway to the nursery] is [representative of] a shock treatment; I understand that, when you undergo shock treatment, you feel cold, *very* cold afterwards. And of course, the violence of the shock treatment itself is the noise and the banging [Eleanor hears inside] the haunted house.... It worked perfectly. I could give you chapter and verse, I had a very good case for it. (65, emphasis original)

After gathering evidence for this rationalizing theory, Gidding and Robert Wise, the film’s directors, travelled to Bennington, Vermont to visit Shirley Jackson herself, hoping to obtain verification from the source. After sharing their idea, however, “she said no—she said, ‘It’s a good idea, but—that isn’t it. [*Hill House*] is a ghost story’” (Gidding 65). Despite her insistence on the reality of Hill House’s specters, tropes of mental illness appear throughout the film. Subtle cues invite viewers to discredit the apparitions in favor of Wise and Gidding’s rational explanation of madness. For instance, toward the end of the film, Eleanor becomes increasingly erratic and climbs an unstable staircase up to the library. There, she encounters Grace, the wife of Dr. Markway (the filmic counterpart to Jackson’s Dr. Montague), and is so startled by the



unexpected visitor that she nearly tumbles down the stairs. In the novel, Eleanor is continually frightened by ghostly occurrences, but Grace (a natural or human figure) is often the source of Eleanor's apparently unfounded fears throughout the film. In this way, Gidding's "very good case" for a rational explanation supersedes Jackson's stated intentions. In an interview with Christina Radish, Flanagan explains that he too sought to decentralize the supernatural when repurposing Jackson's narrative: "A story is really only interesting to me if you can remove all of the genre moments, remove the supernatural element, and it still works" (*Collider*). But applying this creative process to *The Haunting of Hill House* sets a dangerous standard: removing the supernatural apparatus from the text reinforces the trope of feminine madness by implying Eleanor's haunting is merely a psychic manifestation. Rather than specularizing the real in order to glimpse the concavities in which alternative existences thrive, Flanagan falls in line with others who have attempted to reimagine Jackson's text through a realist lens that privileges dominant conceptualizations of the natural.

If we instead take Jackson at her word – if we unequivocally insist that *Hill House* "is a ghost story" – we can witness the critiques of gendered conventionality her inheritors forfeited in their adaptations. Eleanor is joined at Hill House by two other residents, Luke and Theodora, in addition to Dr. Montague, a scientist who wishes to test and prove "certain theories regarding psychic phenomena" (50). Though Dr. Montague reaffirms his belief in the supernatural throughout the novel, Hill House appears to affect Eleanor most strongly, and her companions gradually grow concerned by her apparently erratic behavior.<sup>8</sup> Though this influence appears to

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<sup>8</sup> Crain mirrors Dr. Montague, a character in Jackson's novel who takes up residence in Hill House in order to observe and record supernatural occurrences. His overbearing attention to detail is visible within the novel's opening pages as Eleanor, the main woman character, follows his hyper-specific directions along "Route 39, that magic thread of road Dr. Montague had chosen for her" (Jackson 11). When she arrives, Dr. Montague asks her and the other visitors to

signal that Eleanor is weaker or more prone to illusion, her connection to the supernatural rather reveals her awareness of transcendent invisible forces which her feminine subjectivity is uniquely suited to accommodate. She describes the psychic effects of this haunted space in a meandering confession: “I hate seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate [...], but I know I’m not really going to be hurt, and yet time is so long and even a second goes on and on and I could stand any of it if only I could surrender—” (118). The leaky, permeable quality of Eleanor’s psyche – her tendency to dissolve, slip, separate – defies modes of containment, or efforts to subordinate her by delimiting her actions and experiences. As Toril Moi argues, this feminine fragmentation can be wielded strategically: “The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself...fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant -ology” (30). In contrast to the paralyzed, shattering marble statues of Flanagan’s title sequence, Eleanor’s dissipating subjectivity allows her to enter a productive space of marginalization in which she is untethered from the dominant structures that seek to both confine and define her. Moreover, as we learned in Chapter 2, her desire to “surrender” herself to the liminality of Hill House represents her mastery of these same structures: the mystic woman’s “*abject surrender* becomes the moment of her liberation” (Moi

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take copious notes on their experiences at Hill House, though he refuses to provide background information because, to gather accurate evidence, his visitors need to be “ignorant and receptive” (50). However, while Jackson repeatedly critiques Dr. Montague’s patriarchal and patronizing rationalism, Crain is not subjected to the same scrutiny within Flanagan’s *Hill House*. He is presented as a sympathetic character despite his mistreatment of his siblings and wife, his need to control or monetize other people’s stories, and his dismissal of his mother and younger sister’s supernatural experiences. Flanagan first contributes to regressive narratives of feminine madness by portraying the conventional “demonic mother” figure – through Crain’s skepticism, he initially implies his mother’s supernatural possession may actually be a manifestation of her mental decline, spurred on by the pressures of motherhood. His sister takes after her mother and, when she ultimately commits suicide in Hill House, Crain again links this act to her madness rather than recognizing the ways in which the house itself contributed to his sister’s demise.

139, emphasis mine). As she “over-mimes” or surrenders to the discourses expected of her, she gradually gains ownership over these signifiers – in the small breaks between her “enunciation and utterance,” she strips them of their former coherency (Moi 79).

As distinctions between real and unreal are unsettled throughout the novel, Eleanor is ultimately able to inhabit a world in which her fantasies are translated into “deviant” realities. For instance, she achieves the independence of a single woman she had imagined so many times, working in opposition to the realist expectations outlined in the text itself which insist upon a romantic union between a man and woman. The primacy of this gendered convention is sustained by figures such as Mrs. Montague, a spirit-writing specialist who visits Hill House, and Mrs. Dudley, the housekeeper, who each assume that either Eleanor or Theodora will end up dating Luke, the only viable male suitor at Hill House. As Mrs. Dudley concedes, “you’re only young once...and it’s only natural” (164). On the one hand, the staple of a serendipitous romantic pairing is almost internalized by Eleanor – she repeats her mantra, “Journeys end in lovers meeting,” twelve times in the novel, but it is often paired with feelings of “helplessness,” “inadequacy,” or being “afraid” (28, 40, 66). Thrust into these gendered paradigms, she also appears to become increasingly jealous of the attention Luke gives to Theodora. However, after they share their first extended discussion, Eleanor evaluates his flirtatious responses and thinks, “this conversation must be largely instinctive” for him (123). While he falls easily into expected gender roles such as the eligible bachelor, Eleanor’s fantasies regarding her future prove incompatible with Mrs. Dudley and Mrs. Montague’s shared vision for young ladies. Eleanor continually refuses to linger on romantic images and instead maintains her insistence on singledom. For example, while passing by a country mansion en route to Hill House, Eleanor imagines taking her dinner alone in the long, empty dining room. When the prospect of “a prince

riding, bright in green and silver with a hundred bowmen riding behind him” then enters her mind, she abruptly ceases her reverie and immediately “smile[s] good-by” to the now-marred vision of the mansion (14). Later, Eleanor again prefers to sit “alone in joyful loneliness” rather than continue a fantasy that veers toward “a devilishly handsome smuggler” (23).<sup>9</sup> Though each of her fantasies risk falling into the traditional feminine paradigm of heterosexual marriageability, she continually rejects this conventional conclusion to explore alternative realities in which women need not be paired with male companions. The line “alone in joyful loneliness” also mirrors a famous quote from James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the governess who narrates the tale spies a ghostly intruder and attempts to retrace his steps. While examining the grounds of Bly manor, she finds they are “empty with a great emptiness” (James 26). While this emptiness follows a “flash of knowledge” encountered “in the midst of dread” within James’s text, signifying the oppressive nature of rationalism, Eleanor’s “joyful loneliness” stems from the isolation she achieves while travelling toward the irrational, supernatural Hill House (James 26).

Formally, Jackson confirms Eleanor’s refusal to conform to feminine scripts through the conclusion of the novel itself – *The Haunting of Hill House* ends as it began, entering the reader into a cycle as the first and last paragraphs are almost identical. This repetition operates genrelexively: it foregrounds textual construction by emphasizing structural patterns, and it simultaneously revises multiple generic tropes. The duplicated passages risk reinforcing a sense

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<sup>9</sup> In an unpublished essay, Jackson laments “When i first used to write stories...i used to think that no one had ever been so lonely as i was and i used to write about people all alone.... i thought i was insane and i would write about how the only sane people are the ones who are condemned as mad and how the whole world is cruel and foolish and afraid of people who are different” (qtd. in Heller, “Haunted Mind”). Though Eleanor’s “joyful loneliness” might be read as a regressive form of spacey escapism, here Jackson’s posits her isolated characters as immune to madness.

of permanence or stability characteristic of hegemonic realisms by suggesting little has changed throughout the course of the novel; however, the variations that do occur between the first and last paragraphs critique the entrenched convention of supernatural possession. At the end of the novel, Eleanor achieves her act of “surrender” – she dies on the grounds of Hill House (either by suicide or supernatural intervention) and her spirit takes up residence within. In this way, she transitions from being passively possessed *by* Hill House to actively sharing the house’s ability *to* possess:

Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (1)

Hill House **itself**, not sane, stood against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, **its** walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (182)

In the concluding passage, only two changes occur. In the first, rather than describing Hill House as standing “*by* itself” against its hills, Jackson writes that “Hill House itself” stood amongst the hills. Hill House is no longer “*by* itself,” or disconnected from Eleanor – she is now integral to its act of possession as she is part of the house “itself.” In the final alteration to the opening passage, Jackson changes the line, “within, walls continued upright” to “within, *its* walls

continued upright.” The addition of a pronoun further implies a new form of possessiveness which is linked to Eleanor’s presence within the space. Her death at the end of the novel, far from robbing her of agency, prevents her from entering an expected romantic union with Luke and instead grants her the solitude – the “joyful loneliness” – that once existed only in her imagination, demonstrating the provisional nature of conventions in both fiction and reality. The cyclical nature of the novel’s structure paradoxically gestures towards futurity – towards an understanding that the story does not end here, but continues indefinitely through Eleanor’s solitary, spectral presence: “Whatever walked there, walked alone.”

### **Igniting the Celluloid Ceiling**

Recent supernatural media successes such as Jennifer Kent’s queer-influenced film *The Babadook* (2014), Jordan Peele’s black cinematic blockbusters *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), and Netflix’s zombie-inspired *Santa Clarita Diet* (2014–present), explicitly tackle issues of racial and gendered representation. Yet, we are likely not surprised to learn the contemporary media industry continues to be plagued by a “Celluloid Ceiling.” As Martha Lauzen explains, women directors are few and far between, and their numbers diminish even further when considering the realm of horror.<sup>10</sup> Within the films themselves, female characters typically conform to many of the literary stereotypes explored throughout this project – the mad woman, the charlatan, the monstrous mother, the nefarious conjure woman. Indeed, such categories are particularly appealing to film directors for the symbolic affordances they offer. For example, when rebooting Jackson’s novel, Flanagan found it was “a fantastic opportunity” to explore what

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<sup>10</sup> Jason Blum, one of the most influential producers within the contemporary horror industry, came under fire in October 2018 when he claimed, “there are not a lot of female directors,” implying that this is because women are not “inclined to do horror” (qtd. in Patches, *Polygon*).

he “loves most about the [supernatural] genre,” which is “the chance to...look at the real darkness that we all have, in a safe and metaphorical space” (*Collider*). To continue to understand women’s supernaturalism as purely metaphorical is to perpetuate the separation between women’s experiences and believability, thus discounting “othered” or marginalized realities.

But where there is celluloid, there is fire. Examining women’s genreflexive texts allows us to glimpse models for igniting the celluloid, letting it burn itself out to make way for a new method for projection. For marginalized subjects, self-representation is often achieved through extraction – they must withdraw, separate, or splinter from dominant conceptions of reality which seek to eradicate the other. As Jackson states in the opening line of *Hill House*, “No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality” (1). We can move beyond both stagnant realities and purely metaphorical realms to instead enter spaces that account for the “other things” women know, the specular visions they possess, and the opaque forms of multiplicity in which they furtively flourish.

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