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What Grace Was

Erotic Epistemologies and Diasporic Belonging in Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, Not Here*

If she could not go with this woman, whose speed she loved, who was all liquid, whom she took and agreed was her grace, her way of leaping into another life, then she could not live in any way worthwhile.

— *In Another Place, Not Here* 113

A small space opened in me. I carried this space with me. Over time it has changed shape and light as the question evoked has changed in appearance and angle. The name of the people we came from has ceased to matter. A name would have comforted a thirteen-year-old. The question however was more complicated, more nuanced. That moment between my grandfather and I several decades ago revealed a tear in the world . . . But the rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being.

— *A Map to the Door of No Return* 4–5

This book began with an examination of pleasure in Black lesbian neo-slave narratives as an imagined strategy of resistance for enslaved women. In order to imagine pleasure in the torment of slavery, the authors created irresolute, “undead” characters to navigate the incongruous terrain of social death, suffering, and momentary satisfaction. *Trumpet* also provided an
opportunity to discuss embracing irresolvable genders through the relationship between physical death and Black social death in the context of contemporary Scotland. Questions still remain concerning the representation of erotic love for “the dead,” the disremembered and structurally disenfranchised. For example, how do the dead love and what can come from loving the dead? This final chapter turns to the descendants of slaves still trapped in plantation settings in the Caribbean for a discussion of how the erotic functions as an epistemology of revolution and a practice of belonging. As long as part of the condition of the African diaspora is displacement, then finding ways to ameliorate the effects of rupture will require some thinking about self-love in a context of anti-Black violence. Each archival text that I have examined in this volume incorporates some form of erotic love between queers as an essential and complex element to recreating a disremembered Black past. In each instance, Black queer erotics are not to be taken lightly; rather, they are a necessary ingredient to creating sustained and persistent alternatives to displacement and loss.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand contemplates the point of African capture/departure from the continent as a tear in history, a collapse in what she calls “the quality of being” (5) and the psychic rupture that comes from separation from anything that can be called a “beginning” (6). As Brand explains, this rupture of being, of history, and of geography continues to take up tremendous space in the minds of the descendants of captured Africans—so much so that the moment of rupture has created a crisis of what Brand calls “belonging” and “unbelonging” for those of us who are diasporic subjects on the continent and in the dispersal (6). According to Brand, belonging can occur when memory is unbroken. The second quote above is from Brand’s description of an ongoing conversation that she has with her grandfather. He cannot remember the African nation that they are descended from, despite the fact that he thinks he once knew. She continues to beg him to remember, but he cannot. Brand connects the terms of unbelonging to the loss of memory.

Brand’s discussion in *A Map to the Door of No Return* resonates with what is now a well-worn academic argument: that the mass capture, transport, and subsequent colonial domination of African peoples has caused tremendous disruption, fracturing, and reconfigurations of Black identity and experiences of belonging and unbelonging. One of the many consequences of forced dispersal due to slavery is the disremembering of groups of Black people from the collective based on the modern categories of sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression. These physical and emotional displacements have led to a displacement of Black queer subjects from Black memory, leaving the queer often unrecognizable to the collective and therefore vulnerable
to multiple forms of violence from external and internal sources. As Marlon Bailey has argued, it is just as important to pay attention to emotional displacements as geographical ones. Black queer unbelonging happens through the emotional register. Bailey urges us to reconsider diaspora with regard to the affective breaks that take place between members of Black communities and to acknowledge that Black queer people face multiple displacements at once.²

In the introduction to this volume, I discussed the Black queer effacement from collective Black memory that occurs in part as a result of the historical displacement from the homeland and the subsequent affective ruptures between Black communities and families. Black queer people contend with both, and the Black lesbian authors I have studied in this book write about creative ways to invoke healing on multiple registers. To repair the affective break and to preserve intraracial connection requires resituating the queer from the outside of Black experience to the intimate inside. Brand deals with the pain of effacement and displacement by situating the literal “Door of No Return” at Elmina slave castle in Ghana as a psychic threshold that, once crossed, cannot be restored. Her disturbing assertion that there are “no beginnings” urges us to consider that perhaps the answer to rupture is not in the reclaiming of where, of place, but in the claiming of the who, the affective bonds between Black people.

Brand contributes to this volume’s investigation into the affective bonds between Black people through epistemological practices of Black queer resistance and self-making. In her now-groundbreaking essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde claims the erotic to be an internal epistemological source. It is epistemological because, as Lorde describes, it is a resource for information concerning the resistance to oppression. Specifically, she says, “[E]very oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.”³ According to Lorde, once touched, the erotic is a tremendous source of knowledge. It is where political consciousness takes root to become action.

Brand’s first novel, In Another Place, Not Here, imagines the erotic epistemology as a practice of diasporic belonging from the perspective of two Black Caribbean women, one a sugar-cane worker named Elizete, and the other an activist named Verlia, living on an unnamed island that is suggestive of Grenada. The novel portrays a multitude of racial and gendered violence, displacement, and disconnection as the female protagonists travel to and from the Caribbean and Canada feeling unrest and dissatisfaction at each location. Their unrest signals that the definition of “home” is independent of where they are on any geographical map. Instead, the novel steers
us in a direction that highlights the potential of intimate emotional bonds between the women as the most powerful strategy in which to mitigate affective rupture. These strategic practices of love and caring take place in the context of a burgeoning revolutionary movement on the island. Elizete and Verlia’s love exists in contradistinction both to the sexist hypocrisy of the revolution and to the misogynist violence in the Caribbean and in Canada. Even though the end of the novel is tragic, their relationship shows us a reconfiguration of diasporic belonging.

In Another Place, Not Here begins in the Caribbean in a context that speaks to the last days of the New Jewel Party in Grenada and ends with a fictionalized account of the U.S. assassination of the party leader, Maurice Bishop, his supporters, and civilians on October 25, 1983. Like Trumpet, discussed in the previous chapter, this is the story of two women who use their bodies and minds for actions unimaginable in the dominant mode of endless exploitation extended from slavery. When the two women meet, Elizete is living in brutal circumstances with an abusive husband she does not love, and she is enduring daily, backbreaking toil in the cane fields. Verlia is originally from the island but was brought up in Canada. She returns to the island as a revolutionary bent on changing the oppressive conditions of the working class. When the revolution falls apart, Verlia commits suicide by throwing herself off a cliff.

The novel offers a queer commentary on a politically redolent moment in twentieth-century Caribbean history, namely, the revolutionary movement in Grenada and the U.S. invasion of the island. Elizete and Verlia meet and form a sexual relationship just as the socialist movement on the island is disintegrating and American troops are descending on the leftist insurgents, including Verlia. The text places Black women-loving-women squarely in the center of the Black struggle for political autonomy and social recreation. This centering of an intimate relationship between Black women in a Caribbean political context in and of itself is a radical intervention into how Caribbean history is imagined and, on a broader diasporic scale, how struggles of resistance and revolutionary actors are remembered. Furthermore, the novel interrupts conventional conceptualizations of Black political subjectivity by representing Elizete as a political subject in her own right. Both Elizete and Verlia comment on and respond to the violence of structural inequality and actively resist these conditions.

Although it is partially a love story, the novel does not let us rest safely in the romance plot (any more than it allows us to romanticize the revolution); rather, it highlights the ways in which class differences come between the two women. As diasporic subjects, they are constantly negotiating structural oppression in neo-colonial or colonial contexts that generate a sense
of unbelonging and alienation, even when at “home” in the Caribbean. Elizete’s and Verlia’s stories are laced with accounts of loss and forgetting that fuel their loneliness and alienation. This lost memory refers to the African diasporic condition of separation, and it is a metaphor for their symbolic position as “lost” subjects in Black memory. Their relationship and its overt political context call attention to how Black queer people often seek to ameliorate multiple forms of displacement through becoming active participants in Black anti-oppression movements, only to be forgotten by the movement itself. Although Verlia is the self-proclaimed activist, she is the one who does not have the emotional tools necessary to survive the pain of political loss. She cannot find her grace.

For both women, detachment, alienation, and displacement keep them from being able to love and sustain each other over the course of time. However, when they do come together, for brief moments, the novel shows us the grace of belonging that can be found in the arms of a loved one. Though not idealized, the ability to love and be loved, for Elizete at least, soothes the pain of unbelonging. In this way, the novel gives us a glimpse at the difference queerness makes to diasporic reimagining. Ultimately, the novel suggests that since we cannot return to an idyllic African “home,” and no diasporic site is without exploitation and alienation, the love and care that we show for each other is the closest we have to a return home.

“Home” is an unstable and volatile category for both main characters. According to Homi K. Bhabha, “The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.” Verlia and Elizete experience the moment of “unhomeliness” from different places of trauma. Elizete has lived with abuse and alienation since her early childhood. Elizete’s ancestors’ story is told along with hers, positioning her personal sorrow in a broader context of collective displacement and despair. As Mbembe states, the biopolitical manipulation of slaves includes the refusal of “home.” The end of slavery does not cure this condition but propagates a continuation of “unhomeliness,” which is consistent with Elizete’s immediate surroundings growing up. In Verlia’s case, she does not feel a sense of belonging in her aunt and uncle’s home in Toronto, and she is unable to connect that lack to a greater longing for redress until she becomes part of the political anticolonial movement. Building on Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s work on companionship in the Middle Passage, in this chapter I suggest that Black queers have come to embody “home” in each other, in our lovers’ arms, and in the way we recreate gender and the Black body. This is how we find grace through multiple displacements and disremerembrances.
Adela’s Flight

Elizete’s presence in the novel pushes up against the institutionalized silencing of the voices of those whose labor maintains the ongoing plantation structure that is hidden from view. The novel successfully places women cane workers and non-normative families at the center of the story of Grenada during the last days before U.S. invasion forces dismantled the revolution. The lives of the women who inhabit the lowest point of society’s socioeconomic structure are often forgotten and therefore not prioritized even in sympathetic versions of the history of the leftist movement. By focusing on their stories, the novel foregrounds the ways that racism, capitalism, and patriarchy work together to exploit Black women’s bodies. Elizete’s memories of childhood and her marriage to her abusive husband, Isaiah, reminds readers that slavery and wage slavery are designed to instill a sense of hopelessness and resignation in its victims and that these structures are connected to struggles in the domestic sphere. Regimes of capitalist exploitation, racism, and misogyny encourage exploited and abused people to withdraw from connections in order to survive these traumas, even though isolation and disremembrance foster despair.

Elizete’s memories of her childhood are a string of bleak episodes of abandonment and abuse. From a very young age, Elizete has lived in a condition of displacement resulting from generations of desertion and isolation. Little is known about Elizete’s blood relations except that they left her at the doorstep of a single woman in the community who is relatively financially stable. Her foster-child situation is a reminder that kinship is created in various ways, not just through bloodlines. Similar to the irresolute complications and contradictions of queer kinship evidenced in the previous discussions of the neo-slave narratives, Bridgforth’s communities in the South, Her, and Trumpet, this kinship arrangement is not a redemptive alternative family but is fraught with resentment and violence, a stark reminder that nonbiological or queer kinship models are not free from brutality. The surrounding community forces Elizete’s foster mother into childrearing because it sees her as the logical choice to take on an orphaned child. Elizete’s early home environment addresses two crucial points in the novel. First, even a home of only women can be an “unhomely” space and not necessarily a refuge. Second, blood ties are not the only means of transmission of ancestral coping strategies for “unhomeliness,” but they incorporate a variety of kinship relationships, even when strained or reluctant.

Elizete’s estrangement and alienation from her foster mother are symbolized in the fact that her foster mother’s name is not even mentioned in the
text. She is simply “the woman they’d given her to” (28) or “the woman” (32). The woman resentfully takes care of Elizete, mumbling bitterly, “[I]f I wanted child I woulda make child. . . . I look like I want any child?” (28–29). She resists the expectation that Black women have to be caregivers by using traditional folk methods to “[tie] up her womb in brackish water” (31). She does not want the additional labor of caring added onto her already overburdened life as a cane worker. As another queer character in the text, the woman wants to navigate her life outside the normative expectations of heterosexual relationships and childbearing, but the community denies her that right. The woman is the “logical choice” to be Elizete’s foster mother because she is not married and does not have any other children. Elizete surmises that the woman “had been left by everyone” (33). The woman’s isolation suggests that one of the effects of defying normative gender roles for women is often community rejection and isolation. Consequently, she takes her frustration out on Elizete, abusing and neglecting the child, explicitly refusing to show her anything that could be confused with love. The woman is especially concerned that her need to express her anger through language would be considered affection. Therefore, she makes Elizete face the wall in silence while she complains about her life circumstances. The woman does this so that Elizete will not feel as though she was being engaged in a conversation or so that the child would not “imagine loving” (32). The novel rejects the expectation that an all-female environment is a space for nurturing. The female-centered home is not inherently oppositional to the patriarchal abuse that Elizete will encounter with her husband later on in life. It takes Elizete’s finding of Verlia to create a counterspace of erotic pleasure and love that (painfully) cracks open possibilities for an existence beyond suffering for Elizete.

However, Elizete does connect to love in her childhood through an ancestor. During her tirades, the woman often speaks of her slave ancestor, Adela. Elizete develops a strong tie to Adela that is based not on blood but on a kinship strengthened by the oral retelling of history. Throughout childhood, she waits, staring at the wall, for the woman who takes care of her to tell Adela’s story. She savors whatever bits of memory the woman shouts to her. “Turned to the wall she could feel the story crawl over her shoulders and up her neck, she could feel it like something brown and sweet making the hair at her neck tremble” (33). Imagining Adela is the only sweetness in her life. The story itself is like a caress and a kiss on her skin. The kiss of memory that Elizete experiences in the Adela stories is the first hint in the novel of the power of the erotic to demonstrate how the dead love each other. The novel shows us that even when extreme measures are taken to prevent love from entering into the imagination, it still creeps in, for Elizete,
up her neck and over her shoulders. The story of the dead is her first brush with erotic possibility and heralds her tremendous capacity to embrace the dead as a way to resist suffering.

The act of remembering further instantiates the queerness of the house, creating a lineage and a connection to ancestors outside of a nuclear family setting. Elizete soaks up Adela's story, including the names of the line of ancestors from Adela to the woman to herself. Their lineage is afflicted with sorrow, rage, and forgetting. A powerful woman, Adela was able to focus her energy and make things happen. She kills the slave master by focusing all of his evil into a circle for three years until “he could not resist himself” (18), and he physically dies on the very spot she has cursed. Her curse follows his entire lineage into perpetuity, such that none of his line are ever happy, despite their wealth (19). Adela's sorrow at not being able to remember her African homeland and being forced to exist in a foreign and unwanted territory turns into a melancholic longing for her homeland. “Adela call this place Nowhere and with that none of the things she look at she note of or remember to pass on. She insists so much is nowhere she gone blind with not seeing” (19). Remembering Adela and her struggles is what links the generations and creates a bond for Elizete that she otherwise would not have had. It also opens Elizete to Adela's profound grief and displacement. Adela is so filled with mourning and rage that she goes blind from her refusal to notice or remember where she is. Adela resists her circumstances by not remembering or acknowledging anything, including her original name or language. She refuses to name or mother her eight children. She could not love, could not see where she was; but more importantly, she could not see her own importance to those who came after her, her own place as a revered ancestor. What she does pass down through her lineage is the inability to love and the memory of her abandonment.

For Adela, love has been warped by the violence of displacement. She does not allow herself to feel anything, nor can she recognize the impact of the retraction of her emotions on generations to come. She does not let in any emotions or sensory information. Her only coping strategy is to close out the world in order to protect herself from the tremendous pain of having what she loved ripped away from her—a strategy that has appeared in slave narratives and neo-slave narratives alike. For example, real-life runaway slave Harriet Jacobs asks, “Why does the slave ever love?” Adela copes in a similar way, shutting herself off from emotion and memory: “Her heart just shut. It shut for rain, it shut for light, it shut for water and it shut for the rest of we what follow. Adela feel something harder than stone and more evil than sense. Here” (22). The word “Here” is left dangling by itself as its own statement. The “here” of the island will later be juxtaposed with the
“here” of Toronto. Both are brutal and difficult places to live in—hard like the experience of capture that Elizete imagines for Adela. Eventually, Adela walks away from the plantation, “naked as she born” (23) and into the darkness. Finally, Adela disappears. One explanation that the novel offers is that she committed suicide, and another is that she joins her ancestors by flying “all the way back to Africa,” like the legendary Igbo, leaving her progeny behind (23).11

Elizete feels Adela’s abandonment for “all we that follow” as if she were someone she knew in the flesh. The loss of Adela’s love is so close to Elizete because she took her memories when she left—her memories of her African language and culture, of the plants and their medicinal purposes. At first, Elizete learns to shut down in the face of suffering, a strategy she picked up from Adela. Even though Elizete envies Adela for being able to “put [her] foot in the darkness when the time come” (23), she realizes that Adela’s strategies are too limited. She says, “I used to make my mind as empty as Adela’s but I never like it because it make me feel lonely and blind an sorrowful and take me away from myself and then I know is so Adela fell when she come here” (20). Elizete’s love for and identification with Adela almost leads her to follow Elizete into physical death. Already in a context of despair, Elizete recognizes that adding to her situation with more loneliness, sorrow, and blindness is not a path to relief. She instead begins to deepen her relationship with Adela by speaking to Adela in ways that make it possible for her to find beauty. As a child she converses with the spirit of Adela, thinking,

how the names of things would make this place beautiful. I dreaming up names all the time for Adela’s things. I dream Adela’s shape. . . . Tear up cloth flowers, stinking fruit tree, draw blood bush, monkey face flowers, hardback swamp fish. I determine to please she and recall. . . . I say to myself that if I say these names for Adela it might bring back she memory of herself and she true name. And perhaps I also would not feel lonely for something I don’t remember. (23–24)

Elizete’s naming is an embodied practice of remembering and a practice of erotic connection to the land and to Adela. She moves through her world imaginatively recreating what has been disremembered through the lyricism of her voice. Unlike most of the other texts I have analyzed, In Another Place, Not Here does not rely as heavily on traditional musical forms to structure its vernacular epistemologies. In this way, it is similar to the neo-slave narratives. There is no music represented on the island except in Elizete’s own thoughts and their lyricism and in the spoken language of the novel. In her idioms, heterosexist and patriarchal regimes unravel. The novel prioritizes
the lyricism of Anglophone Caribbean speech, positing the body as an epistemological vessel. Elizete’s words are a love song of remembrance for Adela. She names the plants and birds in her world: “busy wing, better walking, come by chance, wait and see” (24). The words are light and seductive to the tongue. The erotic is Elizete’s resource for creating beauty in her life, a tool Adela refused to use. The act of remembering/singing offers a chance to introduce more than sorrow and toil in her life; it is an act that contradicts the purpose of the laboring body, which is exactly what Adela could not do. As Paul Huebner points out, Brand highlights the “relationships to both human and nonhuman elements” in order to “remind us of the transformative power of relationships.”12 In this case, Elizete’s relationship to her surroundings is the beginning link to the erotic.

The lesson of Adela is that a heart shut to love can be open only to temporary resistance strategies. Both Adela and Verlia take flight from the “fleshy” (247) dimension of existence fueled by racist misogyny, abandoning possibilities for some form of healing through their connections with other Black people. Elizete connects Adela’s shutting down to Verlia’s suicide: “I know Adela set her mind to stopping her breath after that. Verlia leave me like nothing too” (22–23). Elizete places Adela’s giving in to death and Verlia’s suicide in the same register of abandonment.

Elizete’s Relief

The opening pages of the novel come from Elizete’s perspective, thereby foregrounding Black working-class women’s viewpoint and voice. Elizete is raised to consider herself lucky to have a domestic arrangement with her husband, Isaiah. She describes an exhausting, plantation-driven life for which she is expected to be grateful: “I born to clean Isaiah’s house and work cane since I was a child and say what you want Isaiah feed me and all I have to do is lay down under him in the night and work the cane in the day. It have plenty women waiting their whole blessed life for that and what make me turn woman and leave it I don’t know, but it come” (4). Elizete distinguishes her choice to “turn woman and leave” from the limited options offered to the women around her. She is aware that many women want to fit into the dominant framework as a resolution to emotional and economic uncertainty. She is conscious of the relationship between the cane plantation and the patriarchal home, seeing them as cooperating extensions of power over her life and body.

Under a capitalist and patriarchal regime, Elizete is expected to endure backbreaking labor in the fields, create a home for her husband, and stay
sexually available in order to reproduce plantation labor. The scars on her legs left from her husband’s brutal beatings and from the slices of the cutlass as she worked in the field symbolize the cooperation of capitalism and patriarchy. She remembers the beatings she endured from Isaiah:

“All over from one thing and another, one time or another, is how Isaiah whip them for running, is how he wanted to break me from bad habit. Whip. ‘Don’t move.’ Whip. ‘Don’t move.’ Whip. ‘Run you want to run! Don’t move.’ Is how the cane cut them from working. Same rhythm.” (55)

Her scars show where both Isaiah and the cutlass eat away at her mobility. Piece by piece, through the grueling toil of domestic and field labor, not only is she hampered by the physical restriction of her husband and not having the available capital to change her situation; she is also mired psychologically in the resignation and hopelessness that keep her bound to continued exploitation. Slowly she becomes disconnected from any hope of escape. She runs away only to be stopped by Isaiah and his whip at first; then she gives up: “When I see it was his play, I resign” (8). Once she gives up, she begins to forget where and why she ever decided to run. She does this for many years until Verlia appears in the cane field to organize the workers.

Brand shifts the terms of diasporic displacement to consider emotional bonds as the site of beginnings. What we know from the opening page is that Elizete considers it grace, the “free and unmerited favor” of the divine that gifts her Verlia like a “drink of cool water” (3) in her arid existence. She says, “GRACE. IS GRACE, YES. AND I TAKE IT” (3). These are the first words of the novel. Elizete finds a small grace; comfort and belonging come to her not in or from a nation-state but in Verlia’s arms. Elizete uses her queer desire to realign the alienation of rupture, shifting belonging and beginnings from a geographical site to an emotional one. Under these circumstances, the novel suggests that perhaps the only reprieve or escape is through grace, or the unexpected circumstance. The only space of comfort that she has is in the arms of Verlia, and that too is temporary.

Loving Verlia is a resistance to the patriarchal and capitalist regimes of exploitation and raw extraction of labor power that situated her as supposedly “lucky” in her brutal existence. By taking Verlia as a lover, she resists structures of patriarchal violence and racist misogyny that offer up her body for her husband to consume. Once another option is presented to her, Elizete “turn[s] woman and leave[s]” her secure yet soul-killing routine. Elizete takes a chance on an improvised future, one that does not have a clear set of expectations or a predetermined outcome. Before Verlia, she had
tried to leave Isaiah, to escape to Maracaibo, but could only make it to the junction.

The junction takes on an almost mythical quality throughout the novel. It is metaphorically a crossroads, as seen in the work of Sharon Bridgforth, a place that represents the intersection of the living and the dead. Adela’s trip to the junction is the precursor to her journey to be with the ancestors. It is also a literal jumping-off place. It is the cliff where Verlia takes her leap at the end of the novel. One of the outcomes of the regulation of bodies is that people are often brutalized into a tacit disregard for life—their own lives as well the lives of others. This disregard creates a situation in which it seems better to physically die than to exist under conditions of social death and brutality. In effect, as Achille Mbembe argues, biopolitics and necropolitics create the “living dead.”

In this case, I read Verlia’s and Adela’s suicides and Elizete’s thoughts of suicide as a consequence of biopolitics. When Verlia comes into Elizete’s life, she temporarily shifts the endless suffering in Elizete’s state of living death to a state of increased sensory and emotional depth. This shift is not painless; it does make her reconsider jumping off at the junction. We can learn from her decision to return.

Verlia provides Elizete an alternative to abandonment and instead embraces longevity. Her longevity comes from developing a muscle of pleasure and caring. She soaks in Adela’s story but moves toward another strategy to resist annihilation by her willingness to love and be loved. Through Elizete’s character, the novel reminds us that the erotic is an underrecognized source of political consciousness. According to Lorde, once touched, the erotic is a tremendous source of power. It is where political consciousness takes root and becomes action, where “we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like [the] only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.”

Lorde contends that the erotically empowered person rejects “resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.” These are the very states-of-being demanded of the dispossessed, displaced, and oppressed according to the representations of Adela and Elizete. Both women suffer tremendously from various forms of sexual violation, physical torture, and extraction of labor that create a deep desire for “home” that they continuously seek; also created is a feeling of “unhomeliness” that they try to resolve by withdrawing from the world to different degrees. For Black women, the compounding of racism and misogyny in a context of ongoing labor exploitation all too often eradicates spaces of refuge in the domestic sphere. This is as true for Adela and Elizete on a diasporic scale as it is for them on the level of personal space. In their daily surroundings they face...
sexual exploitation and endless physical toil, both of which are indicative of continuous structures of oppression.

For Elizete, the way out of the ordinary drudgery of heteropatriarchal oppression appears in the form of Verlia, whom she describes as a bridge: “A woman can be a bridge, limber and living breathless, because she don’t know where the bridge might lead, she don’t need no assurance except that it would lead out with certainty, no assurance except the arch and disappearance . . . a way to cross over” (16). Elizete’s affirmation of uncertainty is an eloquent articulation of a politics of improvisation. She is willing to see where the bridge might lead her, without being certain of the destination or having a map of the route. She knows that if she follows, she will be able to “cross over” into the grace of unexpected possibility—something that certainty forecloses. In contrast, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes the bridge as a utilitarian object of expressed desires of the “citizens.” He says, “If the building of a bridge does not enrich the consciousness of those working on it, then don’t build the bridge.” Verlia is the bridge that Elizete crosses over to reach a burgeoning erotic consciousness. Fanon goes on to warn that the bridge “should come from the muscles and the brains of the citizens.”17 Far from Fanon’s bridge meant for conclusive ends, Elizete imagines Verlia as a bridge to erotic abandon, letting her flesh swallow her, open her, enjoy the “shudder between her legs” and “the swell and bloom of her softness” (5). She lets desire lead her somewhere unpredictable—to something close to escape, to “home.”

Fortunately, the novel does not make desire between women an easy ideal, and it acknowledges the “inescapable” (54) and unbreachable distance that class creates between the two lovers. At times Elizete sees the estrangement between them in Verlia. She sees “someone she did not know. . . . [someone] . . . not from here, someone who felt pity for the people less capable” (54). The class divide between the women disrupts the ways that they recognize and acknowledge each other. One moment Verlia is the bridge from a life without meaning to a life worth living; the next moment she is just “someone,” an unfamiliar stranger from a different place. Elizete sees the pity on Verlia’s face, which she experiences as “coolness like a draft of cold air passing a doorstep” (55).

However, Elizete is not simply oppressed in their relationship. The text honors Elizete as a political subject, not a sociological object. Early in their relationship, Elizete reminds Verlia that she is not just someone to study but is her own person. “I tell her I not no school book with she, I not no report card, I not no exam, I not she big-time people with they damn hypocrisy, she want to dig and probe she could go to hell” (77). Elizete is quite aware of external and academic methods of dehumanizing her as a tragic and piti-
able object of study. Verlia is part of a vanguard movement that portends to know what is best for the cane laborers, and as a labor organizer she probes Elizete with questions about her family. For Elizete these questions are an interrogation. She says, “She make things hard, she make me have to say everything, she make me have to tell everything” (76). Elizete concludes, “Love is too simple and smooth and not good enough name for it. It was more rough. Coarse like a bolt of crocus sacking full of its load of coconuts or husks for mattress ticking” (75). The novel does not rest at lesbian love. Elizete says, “All that touching. Nothing simple about it. All that opening like breaking bones” (78); instead, it’s where the work begins. The moment that she sees Verlia, she is no longer a body to be used on the plantation and held under her husband’s physical and sexual control. Unlike in the work of male anticolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon or Che Guevara, who do not focus on women’s experiences but do appear in the novel as Verlia’s intellectual mentors, the novel follows Elizete’s perspective as she encounters desire for the first time. What unfolds is a decolonization of Elizete’s consciousness through an epistemology of the erotic.

Furthermore, Brand’s erotics appear not only in the realm of enjoyment but also through pain as well as physical and emotional discomfort. The text describes that the coupling of pleasure and sorrow, sweet sensations of ecstasy along with excruciating agony, is necessary to open up Elizete’s consciousness. In the opening pages of the novel Elizete says this mixture is the bridge to consciousness: “I See she. Hot, cool and wet. I sink the machete in my foot, careless, blood blooming in the stalks of cane, a sweet ripe smell wash me faint. With pain. Wash the field, spinning green mile after green mile around she. See she sweat, sweet like sugar” (3–4). In this moment, Elizete takes her own leap, embracing the pleasure and the pain of her new erotic consciousness. When her hand slips and her machete cuts her foot, Elizete’s blood washes the fields in a ritual that cleanses her from her past limited familiarity with love. Verlia’s presence requires her to be willing to make herself open to a different kind of pain than she is used to. The gash on her foot foreshadows how her relationship with Verlia cuts her open, making a fresh wound and a new map of her body that includes sweetness along with blood. She herself is the sacrifice, but it does not take her life.

Verlia’s Sacrifice

While Elizete’s story is contextualized through the memory of women’s lives in Caribbean agricultural work, Verlia’s narrative deals with the disremembered urban revolutionary. Verlia spends her teenage years with her aunt and
uncle in their middle-class apartment in Sudbury, Canada. She decides to leave them because she cannot stand how her middle-class family is encouraging her to forget her Blackness. They urge her to “blend in and mix,” to forget her skin “so that no one will notice” (142). They primarily want her to live with them so that they can fit in with white heterosexuality. According to Elizete, “they need her for perfection, acceptability” (140). The pair dreams of conformity, “man, woman, husband, wife, couple, parents” (141). Verlia considers their vision of middle-class acceptance a “grave” (149) and heterosexual marriage a “coffin engraved in ice” (149), so she decides that “she does not want to be harmless” and leaves after college to join the Black Power movement in Toronto (150).

She embodies the quintessential revolutionary ideal: a woman who has emptied herself of connections except to the cause and to her love for “the people.” By seventeen, Verlia has become disillusioned with her aunt and uncle’s middle-class suburban existence and goes in search of engagement and belonging. She leaves her family with a tremendous anticipation for finding the joy that she is lacking in her family’s bourgeois environment, which she experiences as complicit with racism. She idealizes the movement, anticipating that she will find all of the answers to her questions.

Verlia becomes a dedicated student of revolution, following the path laid out by Fanon to a new consciousness, only to find duty, sadness, and an emptiness that drains the life from her soul. Verlia’s romance with revolution is a seduction of words. From Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara to the Last Poets and Nikki Giovanni, she takes inspiration from various sectors of the diaspora. Frantz Fanon is an icon of revolution in the text, giving Verlia some of her guiding principles for revolutionary change. As Darieck Scott has stated, Fanon was “a kind of Abrahamic father for intellectuals and artists associated with the Black Power Movement in the United States” and for anyone interested in decolonization around the world. Brand gives us a glimpse into the scope of how Fanon’s work coupled with Black Power perspectives outside of the United States. The text includes quoted passages from the first chapter of Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, “Concerning Violence.” In that chapter, Fanon describes the process of the “native intellectual” extricating himself/herself from the limiting linguistic episteme of bourgeois capitalism. In the novel, Verlia adapts Fanon’s discussion of the process of decolonization. She quotes him:

> Decolonization is always a violent phenomenon. . . . It is willed, called for, demanded . . . in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonised. . . . This change is equally experienced in the
form of a terrifying future and the consciousness of another “species” of men and women: the colonizers. (157)

Verlia follows Fanon’s suggestions and assumes that her transformation into a revolutionary would create a “terrifying future” for the colonizer she imagines in Toronto. According to Fanon, the formerly colonized bourgeois subject will return to “the people” and find a “different vocabulary” that releases him/her from the raw desire of accumulation to the desire for camaraderie in “brother, sister, friend” and from the isolation of individual advancement to the appreciation for collective processes of community in the “people’s committees” and “village assemblies.” For Fanon, language is the gateway to consciousness. In Black Skin, White Masks, he devotes much attention to the effect that absorbing European language has on the Antillean who travels to France and then returns to the Caribbean. It is the doorway into affective erethism or white identification and Black self-annihilation. Productive decolonization slays the colonizer’s linguistic hold on the native. Language represents an epistemological shift from bourgeois sources of knowledge to local sources. Fanon contends, “The native intellectual takes part, in a sort of auto-da-fé, in the destruction of all his idols: egoism, recrimination that springs from pride, and the childish stupidity of those who always want to have the last word.” The “auto-da-fé” that the native intellectual must take part in suggests both a leap of faith and an internal coup that roots out the bourgeois colonial individualist indoctrination and displaces it with a language of collectivity and camaraderie. At all times this native intellectual is ready for battle, preparing to strike when the opportunity arises. Fanon writes, “This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression.” Fanon imagines the native potential revolutionary as a male with pent-up aggression and frustration. “He is overpowered but not tamed; he is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his inferiority. He is patiently waiting until the settler is off his guard to fly at him. The native’s muscles are always tensed.”

In her mind, Verlia is ready to take on the white majority. In her imagination she is powerful, causing whites to tremble with fear at the audacity of her stride and the magnitude of her pride in Blackness, symbolized by her Afro, which demands “Black power straight up” (158) to anyone who sees it. She stays up all night “learning this new language” (166) of resistance and dreaming of embodying the “terrifying future” (157) of decolonization in her interpretation of Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth. Once she finds the movement in Toronto, she feels that “she’s come into some real love” (158). Verlia falls in love with the ideal of political activism and the apotheosis of
the movement, “the people.” When she leaves her family, her intention is “to walk right into the Movement when she arrives” in Toronto and she expects to find “joy, just plain joy” (164).

Verlia tracks the revolution to Toronto, where she imagines that the (lyric-al) language of the revolution will engender communion with other like-minded urban rebels, and that in itself will be her shield against the racist onslaught. The poetics of revolution echoes in the musicality of the verses from the Last Poets and Nikki Giovanni that resonate in her daydreams. She hears the Last Poets confront racism head-on in a fusion of jazz and spoken word: “But you see, but you see, me knowing me Black proud and determined to be free could plainly see my enemy” (157). She uses Nikki Giovanni’s call for Black women to “stop the pattern” of Black women’s tragic and early deaths to “deliberately misunderstand her family saying go make something of yourself” (160). She immediately begins to “read Fanon and Nikki” (160). The twist of this moment of deliberate recalculation of words is also an unfortunate mishearing and misinterpretation of Giovanni. Giovanni’s “Poem for Aretha” actually warns against the use and consumption of Black women’s talents. Aretha Franklin, the main character of the poem, is a tired and drained musician who is pulled at from many sides but who has to keep going no matter what—a symbol of how Black women are valued for their labor only as long as they are continually in motion and producing. Giovanni says that “the way we’re killing her / we eat up artists like there’s going to be a famine at the end / of those three minutes” when the song is over and she is begged again, “just sing one song, please!”

Giovanni’s poem is a warning to “stop the pattern” of Black women sacrificing their lives (160), but Verlia does not understand its warning. Instead, she plunges full on into a movement that demands her obedience to the will of the party and to political doctrine.

In another act of misinterpretation, Verlia sacrifices the women in her life for the movement. Quoting Che Guevara, she selectively memorizes a line of his speech: “At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love” (165). She interprets this line as an encouragement for revolutionaries to evacuate the erotic from their lives, giving her an excuse to abandon whatever emotional reservoir she has to the movement. Verlia leaves out key elements of context from Guevara’s 1965 “Socialism and Man in Cuba” speech:

> Within the country the leadership has to carry out its vanguard role. And it must be said with all sincerity that in a real revolution, to which one gives his all and from which one expects no material reward, the task of
the vanguard revolutionary is at one and the same time magnificent and agonizing. At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality. Perhaps it is one of the great dramas of the leader that he must combine a passionate spirit with a cold intelligence and make painful decisions without flinching. Our vanguard revolutionaries must make an ideal of this love of the people, of the most sacred causes, and make it one and indivisible. They cannot descend, with small doses of daily affection, to the level where ordinary men put their love into practice.25

Verlia distorts Guevara’s message into a demand for emotional ascetic denial. Her lovers fill a need for contact, for touch, for physical comfort. She stops short of love, emotionally intimacy, caring. Verlia refuses the parts of Guevara’s message that would align with the erotic—his call for “passion” and the depth of feeling that creates a “true revolutionary.” Similar to her misinterpretation of Giovanni’s suggestion to not repeat the past mistakes of other Black women, Verlia misunderstands Guevara’s words and proceeds to do just the opposite. His warning not to engage in simple “small doses of daily affection” is not heeded. This is exactly what she does, portioning out her affections in small doses with different women lovers.

For Verlia, the movement comes first, but that too leaves her empty. She does not have anything to give to the women in her life. She gives herself to the work. Her life is filled with a haunting vacancy. Verlia replaces connection with a detached sparseness: “She wants nothing more. Not the bed that comes with it, not the kitchen, not the key to the door. She hates the sticky domesticity lurking behind them. She doesn’t want wanting more. Just her sparse room, sparse, sparse and clear, just the empty floor and sometimes a woman with her back to kiss, company to keep all night” (204). This does not turn out to be a viable substitution for real human relationships. She writes in her diary: “I was going to write about the revolution; instead this book is full of loneliness” (220). She says, “As soon as I think I’m all right it falls apart. And nothing I can put my finger on, just some small knowledge that it won’t work out or if it does I’ll still be unhappy. No one is enough company, no one enough absence” (220). She is the quintessential romanticized Black political subject, focused on “the people,” acting on behalf of the liberation of the collective, and propelled by revolution, so much so that her body is taken over by the anxiety of covert operations. Abena, her lover before Elizete, remembers, “She was all adrenalin, so tense after every action that her eyelids jumped uncontrollably,” and she was smoking and drinking
more often (190). While in Toronto she becomes so estranged from her own pleasure that she cried when she made love with Abena, weeping that she was “too open” (190).

In *Salvation*, bell hooks discusses the crucial importance of love in Black resistance struggles. However, even she separates love from militant Black resistance. hooks posits Martin Luther King’s religious love ethic in contrast to the Black Power movement’s secularist militancy. In hooks’s ideal, Black radicalism’s religious roots are necessary in order to maintain a strong connection between love and liberation. She states that “as black radicalism was divorced from its religious roots, becoming more secular, discussions of love were silenced.” hooks equates secular militancy with patriarchal domination, citing that the “creation of strong black patriarchs” brought about a message of the “will to power” not the “will to love.” In this schema, love and radical militant politics are seen as distinct and disparate strategies of healing and resistance.

Verlia, too, cannot see the connection. Her misinterpretation of Guevara leads her to eschew the power of the love that arrives in her life. She dismisses the transformative potential of the loving relationships that circle through her world. Overwhelmed by the tedium of constant struggle in Toronto, where she feels that the movement has become “useless” and inert, Verlia decides to join the fight for socialist revolution in Grenada (190). She returns to Grenada to “move” again (190). There she finds Elizete, and for one moment she allows herself to open up to possibilities, to understand resistance from another frame, and to feel comfort. However, when Elizete’s husband finds them together in bed, Verlia resolves to get out of the relationship. She says, “I stayed with her the night in case he would come back and kill her. I didn’t know what I thought I’d do. Shit. How many times have I heard that this is what fucks up revolutions? How the fuck am I going get out of it? She didn’t talk to me all night, just touched my face” (218). Verlia’s preoccupation with protecting herself from emotional ties removes the potential for her to grow as a revolutionary in that moment. She could return the affection and embrace Elizete’s love, but instead she sublimates her desire and passion to standing with the militia and absorbing “the love of the people” (218).

The language of revolution fails Verlia. Her comrade in the movement warns her that “if the people go one way and the party another, the party is wrong no matter how correct the political line” (223). All of her training as a “materialist” (219) does not prepare her for the contradictions she encounters between leftist theory and her experiences on the ground. The split is so disturbing to her that it is literalized in the splitting headaches that she endures on the island.
The erotic is a powerful force in the novel. When it is ignored, the consequences are dire. The revolutionary government does not recognize how much the people of the island love their fallen leader, Clive. Thus not only are they vulnerable to outside pressure from the imperialist forces of the United States and Britain, but they also lose the confidence of the island population who back Clive. He is a “romantic” (225); he uses the power of the erotic in his leadership, and the people are willing to follow him whether or not he is guilty of crimes against them. As long as Verlia cannot integrate the erotic in her life, then she will be an ineffective lover and revolutionary, and eventually she will not able to go on living.

True to character, she misreads this affection from “the people” just as she misreads Isaiah’s reaction to finding her in bed with Elizete. Verlia believes that the crowd loves the militia, but really it is Clive they love, and they support the militia only to the extent that the militia supports him. Again Verlia distrusts Elizete’s interpretation of events. When Isaiah runs off in emotional turmoil from Elizete’s infidelity with Verlia, Elizete states that “it’s vindication” (219). However, Verlia doesn’t trust Elizete’s perception of divine vindication, stating that she is “a materialist” (219). For a brief moment, while she is trying to sort out the events of her relationship with Elizete and their discovery by Isaiah, Verlia begins to doubt her purpose on the island and declares that she was afraid that she was “losing parts of [her] memory,” but she stops questioning and comes to the conclusion that she’s perfectly fine (219). However, she is wrong on both counts. Isaiah never returns; he goes insane and disappears. She doesn’t recognize parts of the island after a big rain, and she loses a prized possession, both of which indicate that she is not as in control as she thought. Lorde warns of “the false belief that only by suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory” (53). Verlia’s illusion of control and strength in isolation begins to crumble the moment that she realizes that “the people” love Clive and that his success was in being a “romantic” (225). She learns too late that “[p]eople love of flesh and blood. They love who speaks to them” (225). By the time she learns this lesson, the U.S. imperialist forces are already on their way to the island, and all is lost.

Through Verlia’s dismissal, the text helps us realize that love is necessary, in a Marxist sense, to reproduce the revolutionary. It could nourish, sustain, and motivate her to continue on even when the revolution falls apart. Her distant love of “the people” proves to be an insufficient epistemology for long-term thriving. It is not enough to love the people and separate oneself from a range of pleasures. Discovering desire is not the same as succumbing to lust. Each woman has only one half of the equation. When joined together, they make a powerful resource for creating a sustainable life. Sepa-
rate, they fall. When the two women are together, they provide a narrative of an epistemology of resistance through erotics that contributes another dimension to the revolutionary expressions that inspire Verlia at the beginning of her journey.

Verlia’s training from Fanon did not prepare her for the ways in which her own body could discover embodied epistemologies through the erotic. Fanon theorizes decolonial consciousness through the figure of a formerly bourgeois-aspiring native (male) intellectual and his reacquaintance with local epistemes as reintroduced through revolutionary language and embodied within a set of tensed, battle-ready muscles. Fanon writes of taut muscles ready for a fight; this act of muscular tension brings the mind into (decolonial) consciousness. For the women in the novel, it is the point of muscular contraction and release in pleasure that brings one into consciousness. Elizete says,

I sink in Verlia and let she flesh swallow me up. I devour she. She opened me up like any morning. Limp, limp and rain light, soft to the marrow. She make me wet. She tongue scorching like hot sun I love that shudder between her legs, love the plain wash and sea of her, the swell and bloom of her softness. And is all. And it is all I could do on Earth, is all.” (5)

In a woman’s body, muscular tension (and release) can be initiated by a different set of muscles than Fanon imagined. Elizete uses her muscles as a springboard to other dimensions of decolonial consciousness. Instead of the body being a site of a separate consciousness, it is this embodied act of mutually pleasurable erotic experience that cracks open the boundaries of self-making, as was the case for Joshua Davis and Booka Chang, and for Miss Sunday Morning and Sweet T in love conjure/blues. Here as well, for Elizete especially, orgasm makes her aware that her body can be used for other things besides demeaning labor and sexual violation. For the first time, she experiences her body as a vessel for the fulfillment of her own desires and the creation of a mutually satisfying sensation. This point of fulfillment and satisfaction is an epistemological juncture, creating the knowledge of belonging and connection and upending the previous narratives of displacement, alienation, and disappointment that were depicted in the story of Elizete’s childhood and past marriage, in Verlia’s experience in the movement, and most drastically in Adela’s extraction from the world. The couple’s lovemaking nurtures their mutually inchoate consciousness.

The text does not sentimentalize the muscular epistemologies unearthed in their sexual relationship but rather introduces us to the profound psychic reorganization such revelations require—a reorganization that Elizete
is willing to make, although Verlia is not. Verlia’s training did not prepare her for the decolonization of desire, and without it she is at the mercy of a doomed and incomplete revolution. Verlia signs up to cut sugar cane with the seasoned cane workers in order to “come close to the people” (203). But she begins to wilt and blister under the sun and from the backbreaking labor. She takes a moment to “[look] up from her exercise in duty and revolutionary comradeship” to notice the “avenging grace” of the arc of Elizete’s arm as it comes down to slice the cane stalks (203). In this moment, she falls in love with the arc of her arm and realizes that she was wrong to think that she could arrive from Toronto and think that she “knew everything” and that she could “change this country woman into a revolutionary like her” (202). Instead she realized that this “country woman” “would know more [and] be more than she” (203). In this moment she “left herself so bare” (203) that in the morning she “reached over and felt for her,” letting Elizete soothe her loneliness by “pulling the woman towards her, comforted in the thighs lapping against her” (201–2).

Eventually, Verlia does not allow herself the comfort and the escape provided by Elizete’s arms. She returns to a narrative of displacement and reliance on a physical geography to create her belonging. She does not find it. The island is crowded with forgotten meanings and disconnected memories: “The meanings underneath are meanings I don’t know even though I was born somewhere here, but I can hear in the way people say them” (211). She is simultaneously from there, but not of there. Not even Elizete’s strong and ample arms can hold onto her, and she returns to a state of restless emptiness. She cannot accept her grace. Eventually, her estrangement consumes her. Before Verlia dies, Elizete says that “she bet all of she life on this revolution” (114). When the revolution unravels, there is nothing left of Verlia.

Verlia’s suicidal death is a metaphor for the sacrificed queer—one who is dedicated to the struggle yet unseen by history, disremembered by the collective because it is deemed a threat to or a disruption of the collective’s progress, however defined. Usually, queer identity and activity are considered to be the cause of nonbelonging. In the novel, Verlia is an unfailing revolutionary in the core of armed struggle and covert resistance, yet this does not calm her inescapable loneliness. Elizete’s acceptance of grace is the key to resistance to structural disparity. Only when they take advantage of the grace that brings non-normative, unconventional pleasures and love into their lives do the women rest for a moment, each belonging to herself and to the other and, by extension, remapping diasporic belonging in each other’s arms.

Elizete and Verlia’s struggle with the work, pain, and pleasures of creating home with each other is an elaboration on the story of Bastua and
Champagne Lady that ended the first chapter. Two Black women from disparate backgrounds look to each other for some resettling of the questions of what happens next. In both stories slavery has separated them by chasms of privilege (to varying degrees of course) and the tragedy of unrecoverable histories. The ones left behind, Abena and Elizete, come together to love the dead by remembering the story. Ultimately, what comes of loving the dead is what Abena and Elizete do—they embark on the task of mutual recognition and a commitment to the bone-cleaving work of sitting, as Lorde suggested, “eye to eye.”

In the “Champagne Lady” and In Another Place, Not Here, we get to witness the dialogue begin before it is interrupted by the end of the narrative or the end of the character herself, just as Verlia has taken the leap and abandoned corporeal form for an existence less “fleshy” (249). Who can blame her? After all, it is the flesh that Hortense Spillers reminds us is “ripped,” torn, and enervated with suffering. In all instances, the story is just beginning, just as this book only begins to excavate this archive.