

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: *MISERY BABY: A (RE)VISION OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN BY  
CARIBBEAN AND U.S. BLACK WOMEN WRITERS*

Heather Emily Rellihan, Master of Arts, 2005

Thesis directed by: Carla Peterson, Professor

English Program

Emerging from a description of the protagonist in Edwidge Danticat's short story "Caroline's Wedding," the phrase "misery baby," is developed as a critical trope to engage questions of gender, as well as individual, national and regional identity in the Caribbean and the United States. Using *misery baby* as a template, I discuss two other Caribbean *Bildungsromane*: Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. I then analyze Toni Morrison's *Beloved* to make larger diasporic

connections. The characteristics that mark *misery baby* include her positioning as a coming-of-age character between two nations/cultures; her questioning of false dichotomies; her travel across geographic borders; her ability to negotiate a hybrid identity through a questioning of borders and binaries allowing for the reconceptualization of an ironic nationhood; and lastly her participation in a new way of remembering the past through an understanding of the role of the past in the present.

*MISERY BABY: A (RE)VISION OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN BY*  
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by

Heather Emily Rellihan

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Carla L. Peterson, Chair

Professor A. Lynn Bolles

Associate Professor Sangeeta Ray

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## INTRODUCTION

*“In women’s novels” there is “a clear sense that we are outcasts in the land, that we have neither a homeland of our own nor an ethnic place within society. Our quests for being are thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do, which is different from what men are told to be and to do: when we seek an identity based on human personhood rather than on gender, we stumble about in a landscape whose signposts indicate retreats from, rather than ways to, adulthood” (Pratt 6).*

Most scholars mark Goethe’s 1795 novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*), as the official beginning of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, but novels fitting the definition of the *Bildungsroman* surfaced as early as the last half of the eighteenth century (Hardin IX). Though the specific contours of the conventional *Bildungsroman* are often debated by scholars, the plot generally follows the psychological and social development of its protagonist as he moves from childhood into adulthood. This journey into maturity is marked by an evolutionary development of self that rests on finding and accepting one’s place in society, and the coming of age of the protagonist is often defined by this accommodation which may involve giving up “inappropriate” dreams. Because readers of *Bildungsromane* were expected to emulate the hero’s actions, the tradition emerged not only as a story about the *Bildung* of the protagonist, but as an effort to influence the *Bildung* of the reader.

The role of the *Bildungsroman* in shaping the *Bildung* of its readers, like more formalized education systems, is intimately connected to nation-building. Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, institutionalized national education systems emerged; instruments of state formation and the *Bildungsroman* played a similar role in the creation of “good” citizens. Like institutionalized education, the *Bildungsroman* works to develop national identity and promote social cohesion by endorsing and perpetuating specific ideologies. In *Reconstructing Childhood: Strategies of Reading for Culture and Gender in the Spanish American Bildungsroman*, Julia Kushigian argues that “the goal in the German [*Bildungsroman*] was to inspire the middle class to a life of public service, with obvious benefits for the state” (Kushigian 16). Thus, the history of the *Bildungsroman* tradition is connected to nation-building and the socialization of “good” citizens.

The specific articulations of nation-building and citizenship reflect the ideology of the time and place in which the *Bildungsroman* surfaced. Emerging in eighteenth-century Germany, the *Bildungsroman* tradition “embodies the Goethean model of organic growth: cumulative, gradual, total. Originating in the Idealist tradition of the Enlightenment, with its belief in human perfectibility and historical progress, this understanding of human growth assumes the possibility of individual achievement and social integration” (Abel 5). Therefore, in its traditional expression the *Bildungsroman* narrative imposes a linear development, which “reinscribes the myth of the evolution of a coherent self, giving mankind precisely the illusion of a distinct, self-present subjectivity. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to progressively higher stages of maturity and

harmony” (43-3). Thus, the traditional *Bildungsroman* socializes its readers to equate social adaptation and linear development with proper adulthood.

In the conventional *Bildungsroman* this achievement of adulthood, however, has been limited to white, Christian, middle and upper class, European men. The *Bildungsroman* is a “European genre defined primarily by male theorists, in terms of works by and about men” (Lima 2). The term is based on a “European canon, and often ignore(s) gender, race, class, nationality, location, and sexuality” (Lima 3). Because of this, novels which focus on the coming of age of female, postcolonial, or other marginalized protagonists do not seem to fit the template of the conventional *Bildungsroman*. Therefore, some scholars give different names to such coming-of-age stories, names like “novels of development,” or “novels of awakening,” reserving true *Bildungsroman* status only for novels that fit the male, European template. This process further centers male, European identity and marginalize other identities. Thus, female, postcolonial and other marginalized articulations of the *Bildungsroman* “appear ill-conceived, forced, unfit, or extreme because they do not echo the white male experience as ‘normative human paradigm’” (Kushigian 14).

I argue that positioning marginalized *Bildungsromane* as faulty manifestations of the genre serves as a form of literary colonization, assuming that the coming-of-age stories of these protagonists make appropriate meaning only inasmuch as they accurately reflect the European, male standard. I agree with Kushigian that:

The female or disenfranchised hero should not be removed from the critical sphere of the *Bildungsroman*. Neither should she/he be located in a less prominent position in the weaker arena of the novel of development or the



*Entwicklungsroman*, which registers mere passage from one state to another.

Rather, these figures could be viewed as dialoguing with the others, including the conventional heroes. (30)

In this paper, I focus on this dialogue around identity and its manifestations for nation-building in four stories: Edwidge Danticat's "Caroline's Wedding" (1991), and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994); Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990); and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). It is my argument that the places where female, postcolonial, and other non-traditional *Bildungsromane* diverge from the conventional template tell us much about the effects of gender, race and colonialism on the production of both individual and national identity. "The female or marginalized *Bildungsromane* may reject society's rules in an effort to redefine society through culture and gender" (Kushigian 36). While "a male European (= "universal") model for *Bildung* has set a standard against which both female and post-colonial novels of development have been measured," understanding non-traditional *Bildungsromane* as entities unto themselves rather than as mere mimics will help demonstrate the meaning of these alternative stories (Lima 3).

It has been necessary for female writers to modify the *Bildungsroman* because in conventional coming-of-age stories female characters are not allowed access to self-development in the same way that male characters are. The traditional male-centered form allowed women roles only as helpmates to the development of the male protagonist. In her dissertation *Decolonizing Genre: Caribbean Writers and the Bildungsroman*, Maria Helena Lima argues:

Because the fully realized and individuated self who caps the journey of the *Bildungsroman* does not always embody the developmental goals and possibilities

of women, female fictions of development reflect the tensions among the assumptions of a genre that embodies norms constructed as male, and the social constraints that prevent women's development. (49)

Similarly, postcolonial cultures have experienced the *Bildungsroman* as an imposed European form. As part of imperial socialization, the *Bildungsroman* marked the male European childhood and journey to maturity as normative, however much these may have diverged from colonized experiences. Despite its association with European cultural colonialism, the "*Bildungsroman*, a literary form that seems to have outlived its usefulness and become virtually defunct in the European context" has assumed "a new and viable identity 'overseas'" (Lima 14). The selection of this Western form "has, ironically, been 'chosen' in numerous countries undergoing decolonization because it is a form of discourse that constitutes identity in terms of a relation to origin" (Lima 16). Lima suggests that more than merely mimicking, the "post-colonial *Bildungsroman* attempts both to represent this movement from fragmentation and loss toward wholeness and homeland, and paradoxically to deny the possibility of such recovery" (18).

It is my argument that female postcolonial *Bildungsromane* demonstrate, through their manipulation of the form's original template, new expressions of, and theories about, individual and national identity formation. As with conventional *Bildungsromane*, the *Bildung* of the protagonist prescribes a model of *Bildung* for the reader, but here "the renovation of childhood ... foregrounds reconstructed theories of culture and gender, the relational and collective, and signals an acceptance of new models of being that are characterized by wholeness, heroic character, relationships, or hybrid exchanges. These heroes seek to establish a new social model through a hybrid subtext" (Kushigian 36).

The notion of hybridity is central to my argument because, as I suggest, irony emerges as a strategy of development in the female postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. The word hybrid has two principal meanings: a plant, animal or human of genetically different parents, or a word with components derived from two or more languages. I invoke both meanings in my use of hybridity and I argue that in addition to new races and languages, the experience of colonialism has produced a new subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* – a textual progeny where multiple origins and meanings are necessary and desirable, and produce ironic couplings that are privileged over dialectical synthesis.

In her “Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway writes, “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (149). This concept of irony is an important counter to the binary constructions of patriarchal and imperial projects. Social hierarchies rest on clear and certain division into self/other, center/margin camps. Hybridity and irony serve to stymie patriarchal and imperial use of these hierarchies by challenging the mutual exclusivity of binary constructions. For example, if one can be *both* colonizer and colonized, the power of this division is weakened. Thus, hybridity and irony challenge social hierarchies at their source by blurring the divisions that underwrite their power. Applying this understanding to the socio-historic conditions of the Caribbean, irony becomes a strategy not only for negotiating a colonial past, but also for negotiating identities that are often pitted against each other like the “Haitian” and “American” in Haitian-American. Narratively, irony allows for stories to present conflict without negative connotation or resolution.

In an interview for *The Missouri Review*, Jamaica Kincaid discusses how she embraced hybridity and irony to navigate her postcolonial identity. Speaking about her education, Kincaid acknowledged the influence of the texts she read in school – like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as well as Christian mythology – and detailed the way her colonial education had socialized her to think about irony:

All of this has left me very uncomfortable with ambiguity. My sense of the world is that things are right and wrong, and that when you’re wrong, you get thrown into a dark pit and you stay forever. You try very hard not to do a wrong thing, and if you do, there’s little forgiveness. I was brought up to understand that English traditions were right and mine were wrong. Within the life of an English person there was always clarity, and within an English culture there was always clarity, but with my life and culture was ambiguity ... I was taught to think of ambiguity as magic, a shadiness and an illegitimacy, not the real thing of Western civilization.

Kincaid recognizes the problem of a binary worldview especially inasmuch as it was, and is, a tool for colonization. It is in her reclamation of ambiguity that Kincaid has made meaning both in her life and in her texts. That is, in representing fictionally postcolonial reality, Kincaid has reclaimed this ambiguity and transformed it. She says, “The thing I am branded with and the thing that I am denounced for, I now claim as my own. I am illegitimate, I am ambiguous. In some ways I actually claim the right to ambiguity, and the right to clarity. It does me no good to say, ‘Well, I reject this and I reject that.’ I feel free to use everything, or not, as I choose.” Talking specifically about her experience

with Milton's texts, Kincaid captures the problematic essence of addressing her colonial education. She remembers:

I was forced to memorize John Milton and that was a very painful thing. But I'm not going to make myself forget John Milton because it involves a painful thing. I find John Milton very beautiful, and I'm glad that I know it. I'm sorry that the circumstances of how I got to know it were so horrid, but, since I know it, I know it and I claim every right to use it.

By embracing irony – by simultaneously rejecting and accepting her colonial education – Kincaid represents the negotiations that are central to my analysis of the female postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. While Kincaid is talking specifically about colonialism, I think that her methodology can also work with a feminist negotiation of patriarchy. For example, in the Caribbean, female-headed households exist in large numbers despite a patriarchal culture. Thus, women must address the conflict between traditional models of male superiority and female subordination within the nuclear family system, and the realities of the society. As with Kincaid's experience of colonial education, hybridity and irony represent here an important strategy for addressing the dissonance between expected roles and opposing realities.

Women elsewhere in the postcolonial world have also adopted irony in efforts to challenge colonial gender hierarchies. Looking at political platforms of nationalist movements in the postcolonial world, scholars have shown how women's status and gender discrimination have generally been dismissed (though Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada are exceptions – and, interestingly, these nations have been nemeses of the Western powers). Of course, women have been involved with nationalist movements, just

as they have been involved in politics in the U.S. and Europe, but *women's issues* are often secondary. "In terms of the development of nationalism in the Caribbean and in other developing areas, some women find their participation in nationalist struggles particularly problematic because even if they actively work for independence and against neocolonialism, their own women's struggle is considered less important" (Renk 7). Thus, women working within nationalist movements have made connections between international, local/community, and family power dynamics, and have urged leaders to recognize these connections and acknowledge the status of women in their political platforms. But they have often met with hostility, their role as feminists being pitted against their support of nationalist goals. In this way, postcolonial feminists share the tensions experienced by U.S. Black feminists during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and after. Working in nationalist movements that make secondary the importance of women's issues, women in postcolonial countries have seen how nationalist movements can challenge colonialism while simultaneously keeping many of its structures in place.

With access to powerful political positions denied, and many of their issues given secondary importance, postcolonial women have found fiction writing a useful outlet. The novel has been used historically to make social commentary and bring about social change. It is a venue that women and other marginalized groups can often access more easily. Using parody, allegory and other techniques of fiction writing, novelists can protect themselves from the consequences of more overt political action. With the safety that fiction can offer, postcolonial women writers have used their writing to debate issues central to individual and national identity. Further, as Benedict Anderson argues, their

work allowed them to imagine communities: in the writing and distribution of texts postcolonial women writers have been able to disseminate information and offer critique.

First focusing on the Caribbean and then making connections to the U.S., I argue that many women have turned to writing to respond to the silences they hear in the political arena, using their work to address issues of individual, national and regional identities. Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, the editor of *If I Could Write This in Fire: An Anthology of Literature from the Caribbean*, posits that Caribbean literature has often provided a venue for international and interregional dialogues (6). The Caribbean text can provide a space for addressing international relations, understanding the history of colonialism, and envisioning both a national and a regional future. Further, female writers in particular are using this space to interrogate the relationship of gender to other issues. In *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Emma Perez addresses the possibilities of this interstitial space and although her analysis focuses specifically on Chicana history, I would like to apply it more broadly to include the Caribbean. Perez posits:

I think that the decolonial imaginary is that time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated. The decolonial imaginary is intangible to many because it acts much like a *shadow in the dark*. It survives as a faint outline gliding against a wall or an object. *The shadow is the figure between the subject and the object on which it is cast*, moving and breathing through an in-between space ... One is not simply oppressed or victimized; nor is one only oppressor or victimizer. Rather,

one negotiates with the imaginary to a decolonizing otherness where all identities are at work in one way or another (6, emphasis mine).

I argue that there is a “decolonial imaginary” at work in the writing of Caribbean and U.S. Black women and that it is an important site of nation-building in the region. I think the phantasmal figure that is the “decolonial imaginary” haunts women’s fiction writing in the postcolonial Caribbean and the post-slavery United States, often being represented through the trace imagery of ghosts or shadows. The “decolonial imaginary” outlines the specific lived experiences of these women and suggests new ways of understanding the relationship of gender to colonialism and slavery. However, like a shadow which changes its shape as it is cast from one object to another, so too does the incarnation of the “decolonial imaginary” change shape as it emerges in different literary/historical/geographical contexts. I argue that looking at several representative novels written by Caribbean and U.S. Black women in the past three decades we can see different metamorphoses of the same ghost. Looking closely at the images of the “decolonial imaginary” in Caribbean and U.S. Black, female *Bildungsromane*, I posit that we can better understand the lives of women in the Caribbean, and the ways in which their experiences of gender, colonialism and slavery have led them to move away from a Western emphasis on linear and evolutionary development towards an acceptance of hybridity and irony in the marking of maturity. Further, I argue that recognizing this common subjectivity can create new knowledge of the connections between gender, colonialism and slavery. Before I go on to discuss exactly what knowledge we can glean from the writing of this group of women, I want to talk about the broader history of fiction in the Caribbean. I begin with the Caribbean because this is where I see the



origins of a new type of *Bildungsroman* character that I call *misery baby*. Understanding the literary context in which Caribbean women write will help make more visible the appearance of the “decolonial imaginary.”

The emergence of a literary tradition in the Caribbean region was initially limited to male writers. This group included Wilson Harris, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, Kamau Brathwaite, Derek Walcott and others who dominated and defined Caribbean writing in the second half of the twentieth century – the period marked by regional independence. The male writers of this period used their fiction to interrogate the meanings of independence, identity and nation-building. George Lamming, author of *The Castle of My Skin*, notes the role of the novelist in Caribbean society:

The novelist was the first to relate the West Indian experience from the inside. He was the first to chart the West Indian memory as far back as he could go. It is to the West Indian novelist – who had not existed twenty years ago – that the anthropologists and all of their treatises about West Indians have to turn. (38)

But, while the male novelist was politically vocal from the outset, his writings reinforced women’s disempowerment by contributing to their silencing.

However, by the late 1980s, female novelists had come into their own. Louis James, a Caribbean scholar and author of *Caribbean Literature in English* notes:

This development is striking. Out of the sixty West Indian novelists listed in Kenneth Ramchand’s 1903-67 bibliography, only six were women, credited with one title each, although the imbalance would have been less for poets. By contrast in 1988 an international Conference at Wellesley College brought together some fifty women Caribbean writers and critics. (199)

Many scholars mark Merle Hodge's novel, *Crick Crack Monkey*, published in 1970, as one of the first markers of this phenomenon. Her coming-of-age narrative marked a shift from male novelists like Harris, Lamming, and Naipaul. The shift was not just from a male to female protagonist, but to a different way of telling – one increasingly at odds with the more unified European coming-of-age story and the modernist search for unity (James 200-2). While writers like Harris, Lamming, Naipaul, Walcott, and Brathwaite, describe their colonized identities as fragmented, their texts search for wholeness, for synthesis of their conflicting identities. In his book *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*, Charles W. Pollard posits that despite the often uncritical equation of postcolonial with postmodern, writers like Walcott and Brathwaite wrote within a modernist tradition. Pollard argues that Brathwaite's theory of creolization seeks to bring about "a unified sense of the Caribbean self" and that in *Contradictory Omens* Brathwaite himself describes the goal of creolization in "standard modernist terms": "to see the fragments/whole" (qtd. in Pollard 32). And while Pollard concedes the many differences in the writing of Brathwaite and Walcott, he maintains that "they agree that a poetics should aspire after the modernist goal of offering a unifying vision of cultural wholeness for the region" (37).

Despite the fact that Brathwaite and Walcott are poets, and I am focusing on novelists, I think that Pollard's analysis is important because Brathwaite and Walcott, as well as Harris, Lamming and Naipaul, helped define the first outpouring of Caribbean writing, and thus became voices to which female novelists like Danticat and Kincaid responded. Kincaid, in fact, dedicates *Autobiography of my Mother* to Walcott. Thus

women writers' focus on hybridity makes its meaning, at least in part, in its dialogue with other Caribbean texts.

Working in conjunction with the move from wholeness to hybridity, the emergence of female writers also marks the beginning of a critical questioning of the relationship between gender and colonialism. Looking at the body of early independence literature, a body of work defined as primarily male, Kathleen Renk, author of *Caribbean Shadows and Victorian Ghosts: Women's Writing and Decolonization*, argues that

even though these narratives react to colonial hierarchy and focus on Caribbean rather than English landscapes and culture, they retain characteristics of “imitative elite” narratives in that they do not overturn the basic assumptions of English nationalist literature, which encode monolithic national and gender identities and hierarchical gender systems. (5)

Renk posits that female Caribbean novelists challenge the “Victorian myth of family” in order to make visible the “close ties between the rhetoric of nationalism” and “consolidated identities based on discrete categories of sex-gender, race, color, and nation.” She argues:

Rather than resisting the hierarchical relationship established in the Victorian-colonial paradigm, [women] writers overturn the very basis of the discourse –the myth of the family that perpetuates hierarchical systems and hegemony, discrete limiting categories, and an inexorable colonialism that still pervades the Anglophone Caribbean. (Renk 7)

Renk notes that while writers like “Lamming and Dawes acknowledge this myth they do not strategically target it as contemporary women writers do” (9). In contrast, Jamaica

Kincaid and Michelle Cliff “resist the metashrine of the family in colonialist discourses and discursively deconstruct the family as ideal social institution in order to overturn the legacies of colonialism that still pervade the politically independent islands” (9). The result is “new forms and characters based on the historical process producing cultural hybridity” rather than the reproduction of “static configurations of gender, race, identity, family and nation” (9).

My categorization of male and female traditions is not absolute, as essentialist arguments rarely are. I am not arguing that all male authors in the Caribbean tell stories one way, and all women another. Rather, I posit that the emergence of women’s writing in the Caribbean is marked with an increased emphasis on hybridity and irony as well as a focus on the connections between patriarchy and colonialism.

Positing that Hodge and the female novelists of the Caribbean who have followed her have complicated the male tradition preceding them, I would like to take the argument a step further and argue that *Crick Crack Monkey* also represents the beginning of a character trope born out of the unique experiences of women in the Americas, who have inhabited a world divided by gender, colonialism and slavery. Certainly, the history of the Caribbean novel is replete with the construction of opposing worlds. Caribbean writers have always tried to make sense of the binary world they inhabit. Part of colonial socialization is the theoretical construction of two mutually exclusive categories: one box which holds everything European, and one box which holds everything local. One of the most significant struggles of independence was dismantling these oppositional categories. How could newly independent nations dismiss, entirely, the culture of the colonizer once it had become part of their own past? And yet, how could they embrace

these Western traditions and practices without participating in the culture of colonization that had crippled their lives and psyches for so long? How could the cultures of the colonizer and the local exist together without assimilation or hierarchy?

What has defined the postcolonial moment, in some ways, is this very tension between the present and the memories of the past. In much Caribbean fiction, these two forces become metaphors, playing out narratively the struggles between colonization and independence. I want to suggest that Hodge creates a different methodology for dealing with the colonial binary system. In my account, Hodge's novel makes its meaning in the interstitial space between the two binaries so that these two worlds may exist simultaneously, even symbiotically, embracing irony rather than striving for unity. I argue that the shadow of the "decolonial imaginary" surfaces in Hodge's protagonist in her creation of *misery baby*, a new character trope that offers both a complex understanding of the relationship between constructions of gender and colonialism and a new route to empowerment. Tee, the protagonist of Hodge's text, is divided between the worlds of Tantie and Beatrice: Tantie's world is rural and unlearned in Western culture; Beatrice's world is focused on respectability and abides by colonial definitions. One of the hallmarks of Hodge's novel is that the narrative does not privilege either world, but allows a dialogue between the competing voices. The resolution of the novel does not bring with it a reconciliation of these two worlds, but rather, ironically embraces both of them despite their contradictions. Tee becomes a living, breathing space where these two worlds come together and are negotiated. Michelle Cliff's character Clare Savage embodies a similar dynamic: Cliff says of her character,

Her name, obviously, is significant and is intended to represent her as a crossroads character, with her feet (and head) in (at least) two worlds ... She is a light-skinned female who had been removed from her homeland in a variety of ways and whose life is a movement back, ragged, interrupted, uncertain, to that homeland. She is fragmented damaged, incomplete. (265)

I argue that the sustainable duality of these two protagonists represents a refinement of the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, refined even from formulations made previously by male writers in the Caribbean, who themselves complicated the European models for these story types. The fact that in these coming-of-age texts the protagonists graduate into adulthood as the children of two worlds legitimates irony and ambiguity not as a necessary step towards unity – as perhaps was the case with the male defined tradition in the Caribbean – but as a successful end in and of itself. Both Hodge’s and Cliff’s protagonists become an organic space that functions as a site of, and for, political negotiation. Further, it is my argument that although the protagonists of these two novels look different – that is, they each have their own individuality that reflects the uniqueness of their author as well as their historical and geographical contexts – they are both shadows of the same subjectivity. They are both incarnations of the “decolonial imaginary” and are rooted in a similar lived experience.

It is my contention that Hodge’s and Cliff’s protagonists are representative of a larger trend in the writing of Caribbean women, and that this new model for the *Bildungsroman* represents a potent entry point into political discussion. The world of the “decolonial imaginary,” the world in which these protagonists live, is not one of either/or, but rather a world where the past and the future exist at one and the same time, where

love and hate work within the same relationships, and where right and wrong are both true. In a time period which is marked by fervent debates about the power hierarchies of race and class, but which leaves gender largely unquestioned, it is apparent how this ambiguity can be politically useful to women within nationalist movements. While these kinds of ironies are cathartic in and of themselves – they enact a kind of postcolonial self-reflection where conflict is encouraged, but left unresolved – irony is also prescriptive for new strategies of individual and national identity.

Repeatedly, the protagonists in coming-of-age stories are placed between two worlds, sometimes figured as two cultures. The meaning of these texts lies in the protagonist's mediation of these two worlds, and ultimately, in the ways in which she can live in both at the same time. It is their ability to transcend the borders of these worlds that marks these protagonists as ironic and, it is within this irony that these texts engage in discussions of nation-building. An embracing of irony, the acceptance of two contradictory worlds, functions as a pointed and potent commentary on nation-building. In a region marked by numerous dichotomies: colony/nation, slave/free, nation/region, past/present, victim/oppressor, the protagonists of women's writing in the Caribbean inhabit a space where these dilemmas can be negotiated, but not resolved. While the texts might center on micro-level issues like mother-daughter relationships, they create the possibility of rethinking the terms of larger debates around nation and identity. In fact, family often becomes a metaphor for nation in these stories. Once irony is embraced as an end in and of itself, there is the possibility of participating in a patriarchal nationalist movement while arguing for other alternatives, accepting the necessity of the nation-state while suggesting new ways of regional identification. This embrace of irony

allows for a simultaneous forgetting of the past and an understanding of the importance of the past in the construction of a future. The acceptance of ironic couplings of binary opposites represents a rebellion against traditional colonial structures and definitions of progress, just as the comings-of-age of these protagonists rebel against traditional European models of the *Bildungsroman*. Moving from colony to commonwealth, or from colonial to postcolonial certainly represents a kind of development, but this linear path of advancement is still defined in relation to a foreign, imperial paradigm. Moving within a binary construction designed to suit foreign needs can never bring true liberation because progress is still being defined by the master's tools. Thus, the protagonists in these women's texts suggest the coming of age of a more real and self-defined notion of development. I argue that this ironic notion of progress hinges on an understanding of the history of gender and colonialism, and emerges as a new form of knowledge, a kind of theory that casts shadows in numerous incarnations throughout women's writing in the Caribbean.

For example, inasmuch as Caribbean (male) writers have addressed and reclaimed their identity by rewriting Shakespeare's image of Caliban, female writers like Hodge have used their own writing to question these reclamations. Female writers have argued that Caliban does not represent all Caribbeans and that gender must be taken into consideration. Caliban's daughters<sup>1</sup> must also be allowed to speak. They further argue that the passing of power from Prospero to Caliban is troubling inasmuch as it reproduces imperial gendered dynamics, and therefore allows hierarchies to exist on the level of gender even while they are being challenged on the levels of race, color, and nation.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Consuelo Lopez Springfield's text *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century* for this image.



Women in the Caribbean are demanding that Caliban's daughters be heard, and by dialoguing through literature they are accomplishing what they oftentimes could not through political movements.

I should note that although I am making connections among Caribbean women writers, I do not think that they are a monolithic group. Each country, and indeed each community, has its own unique identity that differs from other areas of the Caribbean based on language, culture, the specific experience of colonialism, and immigration. Some scholars argue that one cannot make sweeping statements about the Caribbean, and they might mark my argument as both grandiose in its pan-Caribbean scope, and dismissive in its focus more on similarities than differences. In her article "Decolonizing Feminism: The Home-Grown Roots of Caribbean Women's Movement," Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert cautions against such regional claims. She says:

It is commonplace, in these times of increased interest in Caribbean women – ideal canvases, it would appear, on which to theorize on the postfeminist postcolonial, chaos-driven societies of the twentieth century – to speak of our history, our literature, the quality of our feminisms or lack thereof, as if we constituted an homogenous block, an undivided, unfragmented and unfragmentable entity – knowable, understandable, whole ... Reference is often made in these discussions to the race and class differences that separate women in Caribbean societies, most often in a perfunctory aside about not assuming that the discussion that has preceded it applies to all women in the region. But these denials can be rather elliptical, managing nonetheless to infer that one could after all continue to seek to understand all Caribbean women through what they share

with other women *as women* if we only remind our audiences that the differences allow, like political polls, for plus or minus three percentage points of error. (2)

Certainly, this is one way of viewing my argument. However, I would like to suggest that despite the obvious problems with this approach there is also potential for insight. That is to say, while I think that Paravisini-Gebert is correct in reminding us that gender and race are not enough to group Caribbean women into one easily understood category, I think that the connections that I am highlighting are not made in the same spirit of generalization. At first glance, my comparison of texts from Haiti and Antigua seem to dismiss nation-based differences. However, it is my contention that the texts that I look at *themselves* attempt to recognize and simultaneously undermine the notion of nation-state boundaries. I argue that the kind of identity which the Caribbean female authors I look at here seem to be imagining is one which transgresses national boundaries; it resists boundaries of any sort. At the same time, while we might note similar histories of imperialism and patriarchy, the texts clearly allow for different experiences and interpretations. While a similar subjectivity might exist among the protagonists, the specter of the “decolonial imaginary” surfaces in diverse ways reflecting the differing contexts of author, time and place. Further, emerging out of the texts in this study and others, I see a movement away from the binary of nation vs. region. And so emphasizing similarities across region does not stand in stark juxtaposition to national distinctiveness. In fact, it is my argument that looking closely at several texts we can identify a trend: that the genre of the coming-of-age story becomes a place where Caribbean women can debate similarities and differences among them while theorizing common issues of individual, national and regional identity.

Though I argue that the trope of *misery baby* emerges out of the Caribbean region, this character exists in the literature of other areas of the African diaspora. Therefore, after looking at Caribbean texts, I turn to an example of U.S. Black fiction, Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. In my analysis I link the coming of age of Beloved and Denver with that of the protagonists in "Caroline's Wedding," *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and *Lucy*. I argue that *Beloved* is also pulled between nations/cultures, asserting that U.S. Blacks represent a colonized population within the borders of the United States – a nation within a nation. Thus, *Beloved*, like the other texts in my analysis, can be analyzed as a postcolonial novel. My point is that if we can understand female postcolonial *Bildungsromane* as a kind of theorizing – however different from the Western individual-focused theory paradigm – and further, if we can identify the use of a similar character type in both Caribbean fiction and U.S. Black fiction, then we may be able to hypothesize certain relevant similarities between the gendered experiences of both European colonialism and North American slavery. Analyses of female postcolonial *Bildungsromane* could function then as a strategic axis for coalition within the African diaspora. It seems that the fictions of Caribbean women and U.S. Black women have been speaking to each other. It is my proposition that in listening to this dialogue we might be able to better engage with the past and recognize that the common experience of oppression has led to similar contestations over identity. If there is one thing we can learn from Morrison's novel *Beloved*, it is that the past, the present and the future are hopelessly intertwined. It seems necessary then to recognize the conversation within and among female postcolonial writers. Inasmuch as they are images of the past in the present, they ask questions of the future.

## CHAPTER 1

“CAROLINE’S WEDDING”: *MISERY BABY AS THE “DECOLONIAL IMAGINARY”*

An analysis of the protagonists who have emerged out of women’s novels in the Caribbean in the last half of the twentieth century (particularly post-1970s) helps us understand the feminist critiques of nation-building in the postcolonial Caribbean by providing a fictional language of irony which engages a dialogue around identity and nation-building. Looking closely at one representative text, Edwidge Danticat’s short story, “Caroline’s Wedding,” in the collection *Krik? Krak!*, I use the character of Grace as a model of the “decolonial imaginary” discussed above. It is my argument that this character type is a shadow of the unique subjectivity of women in the Caribbean during this period. Using Grace as a model, I suggest that feminist postcolonial coming-of-age stories allow us to engage critically with questions of gender, as well as individual, national and regional identity in the Caribbean.

True to its title, *Krik? Krak!* is a collection of stories about telling stories, specifically stories that are passed from mother to daughter. “Caroline’s Wedding” is the last story of the collection. Through the narrator, Grace, we are privy to many of her mother’s stories about both their native Haiti and their life in the United States. In fact, to fully understand the character of Grace, we need to piece together these stories, quilting her identity out of the various and fragmented glimpses we see through her

interaction with others. The project of Grace's coming of age is simultaneously both displaced and central. Although the story is about Grace, and it is told through her words, we get to know her only in a relational way. We glean our understanding of Grace in her approval of her sister's behavior or her anger toward her mother, in how much she differs from the other characters in the text.

One such moment comes out of Grace's parents' attempt to "understand" Grace's sister Caroline and her newfangled "Americanness"; it is actually more revealing for our understanding of Grace than Caroline. In an attempt to distinguish between their daughters, and therefore make Caroline's rebellions all the more unwarranted, Grace's parents remark that Caroline – who was born a U.S. citizen – has had a much easier life than Grace and therefore has less reason to rebel. As Grace recounts this story, she tells the reader that her mother refers to her as "misery baby" – indicating the situation of Grace's birth and her early years in Haiti. Grace says:

I, on the other hand, was their first child, the one they called their "misery baby," the offspring of my parents' lean years. I was born to them at a time when they were living in a shantytown in Port-au-Prince and had nothing.

When I was a baby, my mother worried that I would die from colic and hunger. My father pulled heavy carts for pennies. My mother sold tubs of water from the public fountain, charcoal, and grilled peanuts to get us something to eat. When I was born, they felt a sense of helplessness. What if the children kept coming like the millions of flies constantly buzzing around them? What would they do then? Papa would need to pull more carts. Ma would need to sell more

water, more charcoal, more peanuts. They had to try to find a way to leave Haiti.  
(189-90)

This moment in the text is wonderfully revealing both for the development of Grace and perhaps more importantly because it raises issues about Haitian-American identity. The combination of the two terms – the intense hopelessness of “misery” with the promise of “baby” – creates an interstitial space that allows for, and encourages, an ironic and fractured identity. The importance of this space becomes more patent as we realize that the “misery” in Grace’s birth is both the conditions of poverty that surrounded her, and the geography that might imprison her. That is, as we look closely at the themes of class and citizenship in the story, the “misery” of Grace’s birth becomes more clear.

This passage introduces the character-type of *misery baby*. I outline here the themes that the coming of age of *misery baby* makes clear: first, that class and citizenship inform each other and that citizenship marks a position in an international class hierarchy; second, that class and gender are inextricably related; third, that constructions of gender and nation work together symbiotically in the Caribbean; fourth, and connected to the third, that there exists a strong relationship between the processes of imperialism and constructions of masculinity and femininity; fifth, that the interrogation of binaries, borders and borderlands (both real and imaginary) has emerged as a form of resistance in the literature of the Caribbean region; and lastly, that this literature has provided the space both for the interrogation of national borders and for the “rememory”<sup>2</sup> and re-imagining of an ironical nation. Through a focus on these themes, I suggest how

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<sup>2</sup> This term, ‘rememory,’ is borrowed from Toni Morrison. The term will be analyzed in more detail in the final section of this paper, which looks at *Beloved*, but I would like to note here that Morrison has merged the verb remember and the noun memory into one word that implies both a concrete experience and an

*misery baby* as a character type in a woman's coming-of-age story can function in political discussions about nation-building.

After sketching the outline of this character type, I want to show how such protagonists emerge in other novels in the Caribbean. Then, having identified the similarities and differences in this character type among writers of different countries and conditions, I will posit that the *misery baby* character type is a shadow of the "decolonial imaginary." It is my argument that recognizing the various shadows that are *misery baby* will help us better to understand the specific subjectivity of women in the Caribbean, how their experience of nationalist movements has created a political dialogue voiced through fiction, and how this political dialogue can help us to redefine definitions of nation and nation-building. Further, after recognizing this political discussion in the Caribbean region, I think it could be useful to make connections to the fiction writing of other women in the African-diaspora. In the last section of this paper I will attempt to make these connections.

In analyzing the character of Grace in "Caroline's Wedding," I want to tease out the meanings of my six themes and show their importance to the coming of age of *misery baby*. Because the first four of my themes are so interrelated, I will discuss them together. And while I attempt to give some specific evidence for each of them separately, I will allow for their interconnectedness. My argument first raises questions about how the story makes meaning around the concept of citizenship – what does citizenship mean, and to whom? Further, I will look closely at how gender, race and class are tied to these definitions of citizenship. This section relies on an understanding of the family as a

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active dealing with that experience. In this way, Morrison emphasizes the way in which the past is always an active part of the present.

metaphor for nation in “Caroline’s Wedding.” Once I have discussed the identity of this family/nation, I will move on to the last two of my themes and ask questions about the use of binaries and borders and, most importantly, how the story problematizes binaries and borders to re-imagine nation and re-vision progress.

Even though “Caroline’s Wedding” is ostensibly about the wedding of Caroline, the younger of the Azile sisters, it is framed by the story of Grace’s U.S. citizenship. In fact, “Caroline’s Wedding” begins with Grace’s moment of “naturalization” from Haitian immigrant to Haitian-American. As Grace relates her first moments as a U.S. citizen, the prose assumes the familiar imagery of battle that is so often tied to decisive moments of national identity. Adopting the role of true patriot, Grace wants “to run back to [her] mother’s house waving the paper like the head of an enemy rightfully conquered in battle” (157). Though battle imagery is customarily associated with declarations of independence – we might think of the “cannons ablaze” as Francis Scott Key wrote the national anthem – the most striking factor here is gender. Women are seldom admitted into these illustrious moments. So the moment of Grace’s naturalization is also a moment of gender-bending, and as such it offers us a thinly-veiled commentary on the constructions of U.S. citizenship. The image of Grace brandishing the head of a conquered enemy surrounds her citizenship with visions of both imperialism and masculinity, characteristics that Grace, as a Haitian woman, does not possess. The use of battle imagery suggests additional rights and privileges not outlined in her naturalization papers: her paperwork may allow her to transgress borders of nation, but perhaps more importantly, her new identity as “American” allows her to test the borders that have marked her as both colonized and female. The connections seem revealing: U.S.



citizenship allows her rhetorically to adopt the position of the white male colonizer. The text clearly emphasizes the connections between citizenship, gender, and power, but perhaps more importantly it shows how these variables of identity take on differing meanings when they overlap. The text illustrates the ways in which citizenship can alter the meanings of gender. If colonization can emasculate local men, even feminize them, it seems fitting that U.S. citizenship – membership in the new “imperial” power – should allow Grace the ability to masculinize her own identity. The power of U.S. citizenship can seemingly turn girls to men.

Despite the triumph of her naturalization certificate, Grace is not satisfied; she cannot completely claim victory until she shares her naturalization with her mother, Mrs. Azile, a woman who knows first-hand the horrors of being “without papers.” Citizenship for Grace’s family is inextricably tied to a physical definition of freedom, one that is haunted by the shadow of colonialism, a shadow made dark and sinister in its ability to position both nations and its peoples into international hierarchies even in the postcolonial era. Grace recounts: “When my mother was three months pregnant with my younger sister, Caroline, she was arrested in a sweatshop raid and spent three days in an immigration jail. In my family, we have always been very anxious about our papers” (158). And so, Grace’s naturalization papers bring her more than just citizenship, they bring a kind of physical freedom complicit with the dynamics of race and class. U.S. citizenship brings with it the freedom not to have to work in a sweatshop because other jobs are legally available; therefore, Grace’s “papers” function not only as a membership into a new country, but into a new economic class. Further, because both sweatshops and

immigration jails bring with it the connotation of racial “otherness,” Grace’s naturalization also tinges her with whiteness.

Because telling her mother will make her naturalization all the more real, Grace wants to run all the way home to show her certificate, but, she settles for a phone call against the iconic backdrop of a mall McDonald’s. When Grace calls her mother, her declaration of independence is conveyed with a rationalized simplicity both appropriate to, and revealing of, its manufactured-ness; she says, simply: “I am a citizen” (157) and, as readers, we are left to wonder if that piece of paper does, or should, have the power to redefine her. Though Mrs. Azile is happy to hear of Grace’s naturalization, she is quick to remind Grace that the real prize of U.S. citizenship is not only, or even primarily, the right to *stay* in the U.S., but, paradoxically, the right *to leave*. Foreshadowing the issues that come to a climax later in the story, Grace’s mother admonishes her to “trade in” her naturalization certificate immediately for a passport. Grace’s mother tells her, “A passport is truly what’s American. May it serve you well” (158).

The constructions of “Americanness” implicit in Mrs. Azile’s response are interesting. She associates U.S. citizenship with another kind of very physical freedom, the freedom to travel. Like the threat of sweatshops and immigration jails, this freedom is based on international hierarchies that channel the memory of colonialism. Citizens of the U.S. are free to travel virtually anywhere in the world because of the assumed value of their home nation, and so Grace’s passport will allow her to cross geographic borders. This freedom of travel is another marker of Grace’s membership in a new economic class. The position of the U.S. in an international hierarchy presumes that travel to other countries will be, for the most part, temporary; that U.S. citizens will eventually return to

their home country. This assumption understands America as “the best nation in the world” and, consequently, believes migration to be unidirectional. Further, as the U.S. is one of the wealthiest nations, U.S. travel is seen as desirable because it will bring in foreign funds – specifically dollars, which are seen as more stable and therefore more inherently valuable than other currencies. Consequently, as a U.S. citizen, Grace is immediately more valuable and more desirable in these international hierarchies. This positioning allows for a freedom of movement that is not available to other citizenships – especially third world citizenships.

In addition to class, Grace’s ability to cross geographic borders also allows her to transgress traditional gender dynamics. Many countries in the Caribbean region have experienced a phenomenon colloquially known as the “brain drain,” meaning that those who can leave (the wealthy, the educated) do leave (often to go to Europe or the U.S.); but since childcare is almost always seen as “women’s work,” and since children make it difficult to leave, the “brain drain” phenomenon is overwhelmingly male. This migration pattern has contributed, in part, to the fact that many countries in the Caribbean have a majority of female-headed households. Therefore, Grace’s ability to travel also allows her to assume an identity usually reserved for men.

However, because the value of U.S. citizenship is one based on relational hierarchies of race, class, gender and nation, the true worth of Grace’s new identity is always relative. That is, in relation to her mother, Grace’s citizenship allows her to take on characteristics of masculine freedom and self-assertion, but in relation to Caroline, Grace’s U.S.-born sister, or Eric, her sister’s Caribbean-born fiancé, it is interpreted in differing ways. When Grace tells Caroline about her naturalization, Caroline is not as

convinced of its value as Mrs. Azile. When Grace tells Caroline, “There’s another American citizen in the family now,” Caroline counters with a characteristic response, mitigating her approval by saying, “I don’t love you any less” (160). Grace reminds us that “Caroline had been born in America, something that she very much took for granted” (160). Caroline is interpreting Grace’s citizenship through a different set of experiences. Her birthright has established her with a set of privileges that differentiates her from the other members of her family. Already imbued with the value that Grace seeks, Caroline is positioned differently in terms of the hierarchies of race, class and nation. This positioning allows her the freedom to disassociate with the plight of both Haiti and the Haitian immigrant. Further, it allows her the specifically U.S. freedoms of sexuality and identity. But, perhaps most importantly, it allows her to leave the family. And, as is the case with most kinds of privilege, Caroline’s birthright brings with it the luxury of taking it for granted, and not seeing it as privilege.

Like Caroline, Eric has a particular reaction to Grace’s citizenship, one that is similarly revealing of his positioning vis-à-vis international hierarchies of race, class, gender and nation. Eric – himself a Caribbean immigrant – congratulates Grace on her naturalization saying, “So you are a citizen of America now? ... Now you can just get on a plane anytime you feel like it and go anywhere in the world. Nations go to war over women like you. You’re American” (183). As in the previous passage, the text emphasizes the connection between gender and nationhood, while participating in the imperial value system. Nations go to war to protect American women who are imbued with value by international ideologies of race, class and nationhood. Nations do not go to war over women in Haiti. However, what marks this exchange as different from Grace’s

conversation with her mother is that here Eric's comments serve to re-feminize Grace. She is no longer an actor of manly conquest, but rather the passive symbol of feminine victimhood, the damsel in distress.

While Eric's comments function to foil Grace's own self-conception, they are also revealing of how Eric interprets his own identity, and, further how the text presents postcolonial masculinity. As Cynthia Enloe demonstrates in her discussion of British colonial postcards in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, colonized women become objects of colonial propaganda and as such, tools for emasculating colonized men. Eric, a Bahamian, and the only male figure aside from Mr. Azile in the text, interprets Caroline's citizenship through the eyes of the emasculated colonial male. He too sets her citizenship within the context of battle, but it is significant that in his revision Grace becomes the prize not the pugilist. According to Eric, Grace is valuable because the men who share her citizenship are powerful enough to fight for her. Emphasizing the differences among Grace's conversations with her mother, Caroline, and Eric, the text makes clear that the interpretive ideologies of citizenship are not absolute, but relative, and immersed in the memory of imperialism.

After the preliminary details of Grace's naturalization, the story quickly moves into the drama of Caroline's wedding. However, even though the plot shifts focus, the questions of citizenship that Grace's experiences have raised haunt Caroline's story. It seems clear that by telling the story of Caroline's wedding within the frame of Grace's citizenship, the narrative is self-consciously linking family and nation. But further to emphasize the comparison, the narrator relies on the language of alliances, allegiances, and homeland to tell of Caroline leaving the Azile household to create a new family with

Eric. The text emphasizes the connection between family and nation with the surname Azile, which translates from French as refuge or asylum. The Azile family is a refuge for its members, providing shelter and comfort in the same way that America provides asylum for immigrants. Using the metaphor of family to debate issues of nation and citizenship is not unique to this text, but what is unusual is that here the focus is almost exclusively on women. Patriarchal traditions dictate that the heads of both family and state must be gendered male, and yet, from the outset of this story men are relegated to the sidelines – Eric appears only through brief exchanges, and the deceased Mr. Azile only through dreams. Yet, these men and what they represent still function as potent forces in the narrative. It is, after all, Eric’s comments to Grace that takes away some of the power she felt through her naturalization, and later in the text, it is Caroline’s marriage to Eric that threatens the sovereignty of Mrs. Azile’s household and the insularity of this family of women. But also, it is ideas about gender – the position of women in relation to men, real or perceived – that inform notions of both family and nation throughout the text.

By self-consciously combining the stories of Grace’s citizenship and Caroline’s wedding – stories of national naturalization and family allegiance – the text invests the conflict between Caroline and her mother with implications about the meaning of nation. This tension between Caroline and Mrs. Azile is central to the text and structures its plot; it also contributes to the coming of age of Grace, the family’s *misery baby*. Significantly, one of the central tensions between Caroline and Mrs. Azile, and consequently, one of the issues that Grace is continually asked to mediate, occurs around identification and allegiance to Haiti.

Despite her life in the U.S., Mrs. Azile identifies as Haitian and Caroline considers herself a U.S. citizen despite her Haitian heritage. This situation serves to differentiate these two women in their responses to community and tradition. Mrs. Azile is both constant and consistent in her adherence to Haitian culture. She is forever trying to serve her daughters bone soup because she thinks it will cure all their ills, and she is appalled by Caroline's adoption of U.S. traditions like bridal showers. Though she left Haiti years ago, and will likely never go back, Mrs. Azile subscribes to the idea of an "imagined community" of Haitians, one that allows her to be a Haitian citizen despite her U.S. geography. Caroline does not feel any connection to this community of Haitians and so it is only Grace who accompanies their mother to a mass in memory of a "dead refugee woman" (165). The mass begins with a welcome from the priest, which emphasizes both in content and language, the ties that bind this Haitian community:

We have come here this far, from the shackles of the old Africans [the priest read in Creole]. At the mercy of the winds, at the mercy of the sea, to the quarters of the New World, we came. Transients. Nomads. I bid you welcome.

We all answered back, "Welcome." (166-7)

Both Grace and her mother are affected by the mass. Grace listens to "a list of a hundred twenty-nine names, Haitian refugees who had drowned at sea that week" and feels her "heart beat faster" with each name called, "for it seemed as though many of those listed might have been people that [she] had known at some point in [her] life" (167). Mrs. Azile reacts similarly, clearly internalizing the loss of fellow Haitians. During the mass, Mrs. Azile "tightened a leather belt around her belly, the way some old Haitian women tightened rags around their middles when grieving" (168). At this moment in the text –

when the experience of Grace and her mother are clearly linked – the differences between Mrs. Azile and Caroline are especially evident. Mrs. Azile attends the mass because she feels attached to the larger (imagined) community of which she is a member, and of which, it seems, Caroline is not.

In fact, Grace comes home from the church to find Caroline still in bed, playing solitaire – an appropriate card game to juxtapose with Grace’s and Mrs. Azile’s experience of community at mass. Caroline is both dismissive and curious about her mother’s attachment to these masses for the dead. She argues, “It’s not like she knows these people” (169). Defending her mother, and perhaps herself, Grace retorts, “Ma says all Haitians know each other” (169). Grace is describing a community that transcends both geographic space and national organization, one that, whether by birth or choice, Caroline does not belong to.

Brushing aside her hair, which is “chemically straightened and streaked bright copper from a peroxide experiment,” Caroline is not the visual epitome of a traditional Haitian culture. Yet this is not the limit of the differences ascribed to her. Mrs. Azile, for example, accuses Caroline: “You think you are so American ... You don’t know what’s good for you. You have no taste buds. A double tragedy” (160). Mrs. Azile positions Caroline’s Americanness as a loss – Caroline lacks the attachment to Haitian culture which is a rich source of strength in Mrs. Azile’s life. And, in fact, a closer look at the text reveals that Caroline’s Americanness come with an even more valuable price than the loss of taste buds.

The psychological and emotional cost of Caroline’s citizenship is represented metaphorically by a physical handicap. Caroline was born without a left forearm, and



according to Mrs. Azile, this loss was directly related to her arrest during the sweatshop raid and imprisonment in an immigration jail. Pregnant with Caroline, “a prison doctor had given her a shot of a drug to keep her calm overnight”(159). Grace recounts, “That shot, my mother believed, caused Caroline’s condition. Caroline was lucky to have come out missing only one forearm. She might not have been born at all” (159). Mrs. Azile says to Grace about Caroline, “She’s my last child. There is still a piece of her inside me” and the reader is left to wonder if that “piece” represents her Haitian memory (162).

Another anecdotal moment further expresses this loss of Haitian memory, figured in the memory of her father, Mr. Azile. One night, when Caroline and Grace were young, they slept in the same bed with their parents. Grace remembers that “Caroline woke up in the middle of the night, terrified. As she sobbed, Papa rocked her in the dark, trying to console her. His face was the first one she saw when Ma turned on the light. Looking straight at Papa with dazed eyes, Caroline asked him, ‘Who are You?’” (188). After not recognizing her father’s face, Caroline went on to say, “I don’t have a papy” (188). Grace says that her “mother and father stayed up trying to figure out what made her say those things” (188). While this moment suggests Caroline’s separation from her Haitian heritage, we can also understand this story as marking another absence in Caroline’s life. In Grace’s and Caroline’s dreams of their father – he died from untreated prostate cancer ten years previous to the time of the story – he is surrounded by images of France, and thus is associated specifically with a colonized Haiti. This is another important difference that separates Mrs. Azile and Caroline since, having never lived in Haiti, Caroline’s citizenship is not tied to French colonialism. Caroline never had a French “father”; she doesn’t know the experience of French colonization. Interestingly,

while Caroline is positioned as the future for the Azile family – the first U.S. -born – she also threatens to erase their past.

This loss is neither positive nor negative, it is not that simple. Although Caroline certainly benefits from never knowing the post/colonization of her mother's experience and the poverty of her family's life, she is also left without ancestors and without history, thus without the community from which Mrs. Azile takes so much strength. If Mrs. Azile limits herself by being so immersed in Haitian culture that she allows no room for a present as a U.S. resident, it also seems clear that Caroline's Americanness is so invested in the present that she has forgotten the collective past. It is here that the role of *misery baby* becomes clear. Grace functions as a mediator between these two extremes, but not in a way that attempts a dialectical resolution. Rather, Grace becomes an organic space where both positionings can exist simultaneously and ironically. Grace's development is in fact directly related to her ability to bring together these two opposing forces – both literally, in how Grace creates compromise between Mrs. Azile and Caroline over the wedding plans, and more figuratively, in how Grace negotiates the two identities represented by her mother and sister, her Haitian heritage and her U.S. citizenship. Consequently, Grace simultaneously lives the memory of her Haitian past, and her U.S. present. And although there are conflicts between these two identities, as there are between Mrs. Azile and Caroline, Grace does not attempt to resolve them, but rather, lets both identities exist ironically.

The night before Caroline's wedding, Mrs. Azile tells Grace the story of how Mr. Azile fell out of love with her once he moved to the United States. The revealing of this history positions Grace as both mediator and medium, and brings to a thematic climax the

tensions between Mrs. Azile and Caroline, between past and present. Grace alone has the ability, and perhaps the responsibility, to help Caroline move out of the house – to enable her sister to switch allegiances<sup>3</sup> while remaining connected to her mother and her Haitian traditions. Caroline is leaving her mother’s family to start a family with Eric. Grace articulates this dilemma: after looking at letters between her mother, living without her husband in Haiti, and her father, who had gone before her to America so as to bring his family over later, Grace says, “That night Ma and I sat in her room with all those things around us. *Things that we could neither throw away nor keep in plain sight*” (emphasis mine 195). Understanding the letters as a metaphor for Haiti’s history of French colonialism, this quote becomes heavily meaningful for the dilemmas of the postcolonial moment. Colonial history is something that independence can neither throw away nor keep in plain sight, just as the history of Haiti can neither be completely dismissed or embraced for Grace’s coming of age as a Haitian-American.

Moreover, the role of memory – with its implied emphasis on the past – is clearly a problematic issue for Haitian-American identity in the context of U.S. life, which rewards assimilation and “forgetting.” And it is this tension – between the traditions and memories of the ancestral past, and the immediate demands for cultural conformity to “American-ness” – that so many individuals of hyphenated communities articulate. In learning the stories of both her mother and her sister, Grace recognizes the tensions of her own identity; her mediation between Mrs. Azile and Caroline represents the internal negotiations of her own journey to adulthood. Tellingly, the text implies that the night Mrs. Azile shares her history with Grace helps Mrs. Azile to reinterpret Caroline’s

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<sup>3</sup> Grace uses the language of nationhood in talking about Caroline’s marriage to Eric. She says, “I couldn’t help but feel as though she was divorcing us, trading in her old allegiances for a new one” (205).

marriage. Rather than seeing the wedding as treasonous, Mrs. Azile begins to accept her daughter's choice to move to a new family as one that does not necessarily have to negate the bond between them. At dinner after Caroline's wedding, Grace says, "A few years ago, our parents made this journey ... This is a stop on the journey where my sister leaves us. We will miss her greatly, but she will never be gone from us" (207). Caroline calls soon after her wedding and Mrs. Azile tells her that even though she has moved in with Eric, she will always have a bed at her house. Mrs. Azile seems to accept the fact that just as Grace can have two national identities, so too Caroline can have two families.

At the end of the story, Grace receives her U.S. passport in the mail. She says, "For the first time in my life, I felt truly secure living in America. It was like being in a war zone and finally receiving a weapon of my own, like standing on the firing line and finally getting a bullet-proof vest" (213). But this securing comes with a price: "We had all paid dearly for this piece of paper, this final assurance that I belonged in the club. It had cost my parents' marriage, my mother's spirit, my sister's arm. I felt like an indentured servant who had finally been allowed to join the family" (214). Here again, the text uses militaristic language to allow Grace to transgress borders of gender and nation. And so it becomes clear that the passport is important both in its literal significance for border-crossing, as well as its metaphoric importance in representing the numerous transgressions of borders and binaries in the story – that of male and female, Haiti and the U.S., and past and present. Therefore, the coming of age of *misery baby* is the figurative passport – a kind of technology of identity – that allows Grace to move in and out of different kinds of borders, be they borders of geography or identity. However, the text makes clear that this passport does not bring with it the power or inclination to

resolve the conflicts that arise between these borders and the binaries they contain, but rather allows for a freedom of movement between and across, creating dialogue but not synthesis. Therefore, Grace says she feels as if she has been given a weapon, but she is still in a war zone; and though she has been welcomed to the family, it is as an indentured servant. Grace's passport does not minimize the pain of her hybrid identity, nor does it erase the complex processes and atrocities that contributed to her positioning between the disparate worlds of Haiti and the U.S. And so, this is neither a happy nor a tragic ending – it has elements of both. And it is not the role of Grace, the *misery baby*, to resolve this paradox, but rather to embrace it.

Although Caroline, born in America, marks Mrs. Azile's hope for the future and the success of her emigration from Haiti, it is Grace who represents the future for Haitian-Americans. Grace will be the one to carry on the stories of her mother(land). It will be up to Grace to determine how these stories are told. Her ability to negotiate the experiences of both postcolonialism and neo/colonialism (marked by her life in the U.S.) will color the memory of Haitian history and therefore influence the future of the Haitian community. One of the ways in which Grace mediates the history and remembering of Haiti is through a new definition of nation and citizenship. Within the family, Grace works as a foil against the extremes of Caroline and Mrs. Azile. Whereas they seem to live and understand national identity as an all-or-nothing category, and one closely associated with birth, Grace refutes these clear-cut definitions. She at once embraces her Haitian nationality and her U.S. nationality. She accepts the irony of these two opposing nationalities and does not try to meld them. She embraces the irony of living between these borders rather than within them. Further, though it is Caroline who gets married – a

traditional trope of the *Bildungsroman* used to mark adulthood – the story suggests that it is Grace who really comes of age, for it is she who comes to a new understanding of herself. Grace models a new type of identity, one marked by both irony and movement. Similarly, she models a new type of nationality: the story is framed by Grace's citizenship, but it is not the U.S. citizenship marked by her passport. Grace's coming of age is marked by her citizenship in a new concept of nation that locates itself in permeable borderlands rather than by solid borders. It is this new concept of citizenship that allows Grace to part of both Haiti and the U.S. simultaneously and symbiotically.

Further, this new citizenship allows the possibility for another kind of union, one like the kind symbolized by Caroline's marriage to Eric. Caroline marries a Bahamian, not a Haitian. And even Caroline's mother, who is at first adamantly against the coupling, begins to approve by the end of the text. Perhaps this acceptance might speak to issues of regional partnership in the Caribbean. A short-lived attempt at federating the West Indies died in 1962. Mrs. Azile's changing attitude towards Caroline and Eric's marriage may suggest a rethinking of these kind of regional alliances. It is particularly significant that Eric is Bahamian since some question the Bahamas inclusion in Caribbean regional politics because of their close affiliation with the U.S. Danticat's text seems here again to interrogate the borders of community, pointing to their constructedness, to how, in this case, the Bahamas' relatively recent "Americanization" has eclipsed its British colonial history. Inasmuch as *miserable baby* is supportive of this marriage – this alliance between Haiti and the Bahamas – and enables it both to come about and be accepted by her nationalist mother, we can understand the role of *miserable baby* in expanding a definition of community within the Diaspora.

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In characterizing Grace's negotiations with individual, national and regional identities, *misery baby* can provide a starting point for understanding and interpreting the feminist postcolonial politics emerging in the Caribbean region. Starting with the premise that the *Bildungsroman* tradition has used the growth of its protagonist to establish and consolidate nation-building, I think it is important to note the ways that the *misery baby* protagonist diverges from the conventional *Bildungsroman* tradition in significant ways.

First, I want to suggest that *misery baby* is a postmodern construction of self. That is, *misery baby* is characterized by a fractured identity – her coming of age does not seek the wholeness often associated with the *Bildungsroman* tradition. As the term *misery baby* itself brings together conflict, so too does Grace embody an interstitial space uniting the extremes of her mother and sister. To allow for this irresolution, *misery baby* rejects the binary value system of her colonized past. Rather, she embraces her own irony without seeking resolution of her dueling identities.

The ability to appreciate incongruity allows *misery baby* a new perspective on the traditional borders of identity. Embracing irony helps *misery baby* to challenge definitions, and therefore, to recognize their constructedness. *Misery baby* acknowledges the constructions of gender and hence feels free to move between traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity. Further, reacting against the traditional *Bildungsroman* that sees marriage as a marker of maturity, *misery baby's* coming of age ends in an

embracing of self rather than a merging into union. *Misery baby* also recognizes the construction of nation, and challenges nation-state paradigms when they prevent regional and diasporic alliances. Further, through the experience of two communities, both of which relegate women to second-class status, *misery baby* gains the ability to deconstruct gender, race, class and national hierarchies that have been central to her colonial history. And so, rejecting the colonial dynamic of her past, she recognizes the importance of *choosing* community affiliations based on shared values, norms, and ideologies, and in allowing these communities to be both self-serving and transitory. Grace affiliates herself with both Haiti and America when and as it suits her. Her definition of national citizenship, therefore, rewrites the rules of naturalization. Nation is no longer bound by geographic boundaries. Mrs. Azile tells Grace, “All Haitians know each other,” recognizing some connection stronger than geography. I would like to take Mrs. Azile’s statement further and argue that, on some level, all of Caliban’s daughters know each other. This is not to say that all of Caliban’s daughters have the same histories of colonialism or nationalism, but rather that there is some commonality in the ways that they experience these histories. It is my contention that this commonality is imaged in the character of *misery baby* and can form the basis of a potent coalition.

Looking at *misery baby* characters in Caribbean fiction, I think that there are enough connections to warrant such an assertion. In the following discussion, I use the term *misery baby* as a critical trope, allowing me to make comparisons among the experiences of Caliban’s daughters. As shadows cast from the same experience, the examples of this character type are both similar and different. They have analogous root experiences; yet their similarities manifest themselves within particular socio/political



contexts. Therefore, I imagine *misery baby* as a frame of sorts, but one with a permeable perimeter. Unlike a literal frame, *misery baby* acts as a guide not as a definitive boundary. And just like a shadow changes its form as it is cast on different objects, so too will the examples of *misery baby* look different as they appear in the context of the unique experiences of the novelist and her national and historical positionings.

My discussion of *misery baby* will center on the issues of boundaries and identity that surround gender and nation. I hope to demonstrate first, the ways in which using this critical trope as a fictional reference can help us better to recognize and interpret the realities of post-independence Caribbean life in the twentieth century, and second, to consider how the language of *misery baby* might create a larger diasporic conversation. I suggest that the similarities in the construction of the *misery baby* character across national boundaries and individual inspirations mark the beginnings of a theory that is emerging out of the fiction of Caribbean women writers.

In thinking about the trends and similarities that I found in the formulations of female protagonists in Caribbean fiction, I was drawn to a human metaphor because I see *misery baby* as an organic, ever-moving and changing tradition. And yet, there is some structure, some skeleton that allows us to distinguish this formulation of the *Bildungsroman* from others. The characteristics that mark *misery baby* include her positioning as a coming-of-age character; her location between two nations/cultures which are represented by two family members; her search for self with an implied questioning of the false dichotomies in the traditional constructions of identity; her literal travel across geographic borders; her ability to negotiate a hybrid identity through a questioning of borders and binaries allowing for the reconceptualization of an ironic

nationhood; and lastly her participation in a new way of remembering the past through an understanding of the role of the past in the present. It is this skeleton, I argue, that will provide insight into the experiences of women in the Caribbean – specifically how they have developed irony as a strategy for negotiating the conflicting pulls between feminist and nationalist camps and are applying this strategy to debates over citizenship and nation. Further, I posit that *misery baby* suggests a language for marking similarities between women in the Caribbean and women in the larger African diaspora.

Using *misery baby* as a template, I will analyze the protagonists in other Caribbean *Bildungsromane*, Kincaid's *Lucy* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. The trope of *misery baby* becomes an important tool for engaging these two novels in that it allows us to make connections despite the differences of language, culture, and colonization: *Lucy* works against the backdrop of the Anglophone Caribbean, while *Breath, Eyes, Memory* takes place in, and with reference to, the Francophone Caribbean.

## CHAPTER 2

*MISERY BABY* AS POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECT: LUCY AND BREATH, EYES,  
MEMORY

**Introduction: “Why Should My Life Be Reduced to Two Possibilities?”**

Jamaica Kincaid’s novel, *Lucy*, chronicles the coming of age of a West Indian young woman named Lucy, who, charmed by the fiction of the American Dream, has come to urban North America<sup>4</sup> in hopes of finding a happiness that has eluded her in her homeland. Kincaid’s novel tells the tale of this transition from a Third-World postcolonial society to the land of “life and liberty.” It is in the movement between her homeland and the U.S. that *misery baby* is born. Kincaid, who has lived for long periods in the United States, uses her text to examine the necessary negotiations of hyphenated identities – how does one make sense of two national allegiances? *Misery baby* is always positioned between two cultures and this pull is often represented fictionally by competing loyalties to two mother figures. In *Lucy* the binary between the two seemingly disparate worlds of the West Indies and North America becomes personified in Lucy’s relationships with her Caribbean mother and her North American employer, Mariah. Significantly, it is Lucy’s positioning at the interstices of these two polar pulls that allows her to fashion a new identity, one that embraces the irony of her situation rather than

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<sup>4</sup> The text never makes clear exactly where Mariah, Lucy’s employer, lives. However, most critics have assumed she lives in the U.S.

resolve it. Throughout the text, Lucy continually asks of herself, “Why should my life be reduced to these two possibilities?” And it is in the nature of this question that both the character of *misery baby* and the larger novel make its meaning.

Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells a similar story. Sophie, a Haitian from the village of Croix-des-Rosets, moves to New York at the age of twelve. As with Lucy and other *misery babies*, the cultural anxiety of this move and the dissonance it creates in Sophie’s identity – how can she be both Haitian and American? – is figured in her relationships with her two “mothers”: her Tante Atie, who raised her in Haiti from the time that she was born, and her estranged biological mother, Martine, who provided for her financially from her self-exiled residence in the United States. Atie and Martine, though sisters born in Haiti, become positioned opposite one another in both their experiences and their contingent sense of self as women, mothers, and Haitians. Feeling connected to both, Sophie feels the duality of her identity. And so, like Lucy, Sophie’s negotiation of this situation – how she understands herself in relation to these two women – has specific implications for issues of citizenship and nation. Like Lucy, Sophie learns that freedom, as it is defined at the intersections of gender and nation, comes by embracing irony. Like Lucy, Sophie realizes the importance of asking why her life should be reduced to two possibilities. By the end of the novel, then, the text asks Sophie, not whether she has been a “good girl” or a “bad girl,” but “*Ou libéré?*” Are you free? As *misery baby*, Sophie must learn to redefine citizenship to include the irony of hyphenated identities such as her own. Her ability to do this marks her maturation and coming of age of this *Bildungsroman*.

### **Daffodils and Identity: Postcolonial Negotiations of Self**

Understanding the similarities between Lucy and Sophie can help us contextualize and deepen our understanding of the trope of *misery baby*. We are introduced to both young women amidst events directly related to their coming to America. And while they enter America from two different locations – Lucy, from the (British) West Indies<sup>5</sup>, Sophie from Haiti – their social identities reveal certain significant similarities. They both have African ancestry and are descended from enslaved peoples in the Americas; they both occupy a female body and experience the gendered socializations and expectations contingent to this body. They both grew up in the Caribbean in a time defined as post-emancipation, but still amidst the ongoing struggles to define independence; therefore they both share the experience of freedom defined in relation to slavery and colonization (however hopelessly immersed this freedom may be in a postcolonial reality). Perhaps most importantly though, both Lucy and Sophie have in common the socio-economic possibility of leaving their place of birth and, with this leaving, the opportunity to create a hybridized consciousness that comes with both distance and juxtaposition. Class and citizenship are connected: for both Lucy and Sophie, their relative class status in their homeland allows them the possibility of leaving, but the class status of their homeland relative to other nations makes it a place from which they would want to, or have to, leave.

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<sup>5</sup> Kincaid is vague about exactly where Lucy is from, although because Kincaid was born in Antigua, critics assume Lucy to be from Antigua. Based on Lucy's language, we may at least assume that she is from the British West Indies. Of course, my use of the term 'West Indies' is quite problematic. This is the name given to islands in the Caribbean which emerges in connection with the mistaken 'discovery' of the Caribbean as India, and the indigenous peoples as 'Indians'. I am using this name because it is still widely used in reference to the islands in the Caribbean which where/are colonized by Britain, but I want to emphasize here that naming is an absolutely integral part of discussions around identity in the Caribbean.

The development of these two texts, therefore, chronicles this experience in the social, political and literary contexts of postcolonial and nationalistic discourses. Both *Lucy* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory* use the image of the daffodil to represent this larger process of colonial socialization. In my discussion, I focus on how this flower acts as a symbolic carrier of meaning between the mother and daughter figures in the texts, and comes to represent the powerful memory of colonialism in both individual identity articulation and nation-building. The daffodil has become an important marker for cultural colonialism in the work of many Caribbean writers and scholars. Indeed, Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, a Kincaid scholar, argues that because “repudiation of the daffodils has become a frequent motif in West Indian literature written in English,” the daffodil has begun “appearing recently in Francophone literature in the Caribbean” (123). Like the rose and other European flowers, the daffodil was consistently used as a symbol of beauty and refinement by European colonial culture. Wordsworth’s daffodil poem, for example, became part of many Caribbean children’s curriculum. The idea that colonial culture would need to “import” an image of beauty in an area surrounded by numerous native flowers shows the all-or-nothingness of colonial socialization: *everything* European was superior to *everything* native. Paravisini-Gebert notes:

For children being schooled in the West Indies in the early part of the twentieth century, like George Lamming, Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and Kincaid herself, [Wordsworth’s] poem glorifying flowers that were not found in the Caribbean has become emblematic of a colonial system that imposed its own values and cultural standards through a system of education that fell outside local control. (123)

Of course, this process was not limited to flowers or poetry and, in fact, includes almost every facet of culture. Native Caribbeans were continually told that their stories, religion, music, food, and other customs were inferior to their European counterparts. As the daffodil becomes a symbolic connector between both Lucy and Sophie's dueling "homelands," the characters' relationships to daffodils becomes a meaningful representation of the two protagonists' struggle to come to terms with their colonial history. Further, in both novels the daffodil provides a symbolic connector between the protagonist and her mother-figures.

### *Lucy*

The novel introduces Lucy as she arrives in North America and attempts to negotiate both her culture shock and her disappointment.<sup>6</sup> This epiphanal moment in which the *expectations* and the *realities* of the "promiseland" come into jaded juxtaposition is a foundational moment Lucy's development as *misery baby*; it is the moment when she begins her journey, when *misery baby* is born. It is here that all the characteristics of *misery baby* converge: the dissonance between the fiction of the American dream and the darker truth of her experiences in America enables Lucy to recognize the falsity of the center-periphery binary. As Lucy begins to recognize that the stories she has been told of America are not all true, she can ask similar questions of all stories and storytellers. Having crossed geographic borders, Lucy can recognize how these stories create ideologies which separate and stratify nations. Confronting the values

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<sup>6</sup> It is significant to note that the text positions its readers as North Americans. Thus we are introduced to Lucy as she arrives from the West Indies in the same way that Lewis and Mariah are – as a "poor visitor". Lucy is presented as a visitor to *our* country. It is important to note this so that we might recognize the complicity of Western readers in Lucy's experiences.

and truths of her homeland with those of America brings into doubt the power of any value or truth to be definitive. Feeling her own life plagued with discord, Lucy then comes to appreciate the value of irony. In her own inability to fit into a national mold, Lucy constructs, out of necessity, an alternate way of identifying herself.

Disillusioned with her expectations of America, Lucy begins to understand their constructedness, and simultaneously, the power they once had over her:

As we drove along, someone would single out to me a famous building, an important street, a park, a bridge that when built was thought to be a spectacle. In a day-dream I used to have, all these places were points of happiness to me ... for I would imagine myself entering and leaving them, and just that – entering and leaving over and over again – would see me through a bad feeling I did not have a name for ... Now that I saw these places, they looked ordinary, dirty, worn down ... and it occurred to me that I could not be the only person in the world for whom they were a fixture of fantasy. (Kincaid 3)

Immediately, the text juxtaposes American “myth” with American “reality,” and Lucy’s experience begs the questions which remains central to the text: how do these “ordinary, dirty, worn down places” become the stuff of fantasy? For whom is the American dream created? How does it become a global dream? Further, how does the myth of America reify geographic borders and international hierarchies?

Lucy’s disillusionment comes with the recognition that power sustains itself. That is, she begins to realize that these ordinary places have become “the stuff of fantasy” because the U.S. has the power to tell its stories internationally. When a global superpower has the access, wealth, and influence to convince others of the superiority of



its values, and when other nations acknowledge this myth as truth, the superpower's dominance is strengthened.

The intensity of Lucy's disappointment is two-fold: first, she believed in and fantasized about a place that does not exist, and second, this fantasy had created a certain disdain for her West Indian homeland and life. Lucy realizes that she has been duped:

What a surprise this was to me, that I longed to be back in the place that I came from ... Oh, I had imagined that with my one swift act – leaving home and coming to this new place – I could leave behind me, as if it were an old garment never to be worn again, my sad thoughts, my sad feelings, and my discontent with life in general as it presented itself to me. (Kincaid 6-7)

The text begins, therefore, with a focus on the intersection of individual and national identities – identities which for Lucy develop and become articulated out of the language first of myth and then of disillusionment. These first moments of binary juxtaposition lead Lucy to question all the binary systems that had been so central to her socialization: America/West Indies, civilized/uncivilized, good/bad, myth/reality. It is in this context that we are introduced to Lucy's "U.S. family," and perhaps most importantly, Lucy's "U.S. mother," who in conjunction with Lucy's "West Indian mother" serves as a focal point in Lucy's emerging sense of identity.

Lucy describes the U.S. household in which she lives in the language of superficiality. For Lucy, her new family seems to exist on the same two-dimensional level as the "photographs of themselves, which they placed all over the house, their six yellow-haired heads of various sizes ... bunched as if they were a bouquet of flowers tied together by an unseen string" (Kincaid 12). The narrative increasingly defines this family

in relation to yellow flowers – daffodils – that, for Lucy, are inextricably associated with imperialism.

Kincaid's text specifically concentrates on the relationship between Lucy and Mariah, whose character is developed around the image of the daffodil. At an early point in the text, Mariah says to Lucy with genuine exhilaration, "Have you ever seen daffodils pushing their way up out of the ground? And when they're in bloom and all massed together, a breeze comes along and makes them do a curtsy to the lawn stretching out in front of them. Have you ever seen that? When I see that, I feel so glad to be alive" (Kincaid 17).

It is at this moment that Lucy perceives the stark contrast between Mariah's experience of daffodils and her own. Lucy remembers "an old poem [she] had been made to memorize when [she] was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School" (Kincaid 18). At her school, a bastion of cultural imperialism – note the appropriate name – Lucy had been required to memorize a poem about daffodils. This event becomes a significant marker in Lucy's understanding of herself as a colonial subject. She was taught to give value to a poet, a content, and a context foreign to her own experience. Although there are numerous flowers and many talented writers native to the Caribbean, Lucy was forced to memorize a poem about a daffodil written by a British poet. This memory points to the importance of these colonial exercises and the specific problems that they create for the development of a Caribbean identity.

Lucy was praised for memorizing and reciting this poem. She recounts that she had "recited the whole poem to the auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils" and that after she was finished:

everybody stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me, and later they told [her] how nicely [she] had pronounced every word and how [she] had placed just the right amount of special emphasis in places where that was needed, and how proud the poet, now long dead, would have been to hear his words ringing out of [her] mouth. (Kincaid 18)

Such praise was meant to encourage Lucy to define herself in relation to her ability to mimic an imperial artifact that in fact devalued her sense of self. Lucy understands this moment to be one of cultural colonialism, confessing, “I was then at the height of my two-facedness: that is, outside I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true” (Kincaid 18). Lucy recognizes this event as a moment of self-betrayal: she was allowing the colonial system of socialization access to her identity and legitimating, with eagerness, the very value system responsible for her oppression. Thus, in *Lucy* the daffodil becomes a symbol for colonial education and the systematic socialization into colonial values and ideals. Further, and more painfully for Lucy, the daffodil becomes symptomatic of the process of the native interpellation of these values and with them the dismissal and erasure of a native identity. Lucy recognizes that in her recitation of this poem she was an unwitting agent in British cultural colonialism.

Concomitant with the fact that the daffodil is a symbol of Lucy’s colonial education, the color of the flower itself points to *misery baby*’s recognition of the symbiotic relationship between nation and race. By comparing Mariah’s blonde family with the yellow petals of the daffodil early on in the text, the daffodil is made to represent whiteness. In this way, when Lucy is reciting the daffodil poem she is taught to value not only British culture but also the superiority of whiteness. This repeated association of

whiteness with beauty and superiority has led to a system of “shadism” in the Caribbean. A form of racism where those who are “more white” in appearance are given preferential treatment, shadism illustrates the lingering and painful effects of cultural colonialism. And of course, this process has the effect of adding to white culture’s feeling of superiority and blinds them to the plight of women like Lucy. Lucy attempts to communicate to Mariah her problems with daffodils; Mariah’s inability to understand her marks one of the great turning points in Lucy’s coming of age.

One of Lucy’s dreams visually enacts the cultural oppression of her childhood recital of the daffodil poem and provides a powerful image of the violence of cultural oppression:

The night after I recited the poem, I dreamt, continuously it seemed, that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches and bunches of those same daffodils that I had vowed to forget, and when finally I fell down from exhaustion they all piled on top of me, until I was buried deep underneath them and was never seen again.

Here the juxtaposition becomes intentionally blurred: the dream *is* reality. Lucy’s history and identity are being erased. And, if these images of cultural imperialism continue to supplant her own culture there was/is the very real danger of forgetting, or more to the point, of being made to forget.

Mariah’s love of daffodils and her expectation that everyone should love them, and thereby accept the universality of her concept of beauty, renders her complicit in this imperialist moment. Further, recognizing that the daffodil is a symbol of white hegemony, we see Mariah’s love for these flowers as self-serving and imperialistic: she

becomes a representative colonizer in love with whiteness and intent on “teaching” this love to Lucy. Mariah’s efforts to make Lucy admire daffodils are veiled attempts to convince Lucy of white/Western superiority. Aware of this, if perhaps without the language to completely articulate it, Lucy responds, “And I thought, So Mariah is made to feel alive by some flowers bending in the breeze. How does a person get to be that way?” (Kincaid 17). Later, when Mariah interprets the occurrence of snow on the first day of spring as a personal betrayal, Lucy asks herself, “How do you get to be a person who is made miserable because the weather changed its mind, because the weather doesn’t live up to your expectations? *How do you get to be that way?*” (emphasis mine, Kincaid 20). We are made to ask questions about Mariah, but also to link Mariah’s expectations to Lucy’s expectations of the U.S. We recognize that Mariah’s and Lucy’s expectations were created by the same international hierarchy. Mariah was socialized to see herself at the center of the world and her values as universal, while Lucy was taught that her culture was always second to the West. Thus, both women saw their world through the same center-periphery binary, but it left them with a different sense of self. *How do you get to be that way?* This phrase echoes throughout the book, continually deconstructing in the most basic terms the neo/post/colonial imperative of politically useful cultural ideologies.

Following this scene, Mariah, seemingly undaunted, covers Lucy’s eyes with a handkerchief and leads her to a garden of daffodils. Lucy describes:

Along the paths and underneath the trees were many, many yellow flowers the size and shape of play teacups, or fairy skirts. They looked like something to eat and something to wear at the same time; they looked beautiful, they looked simple

as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them.

(Kincaid 29).

Dismissing Lucy's earlier comments about her relationship to these flowers, Mariah tells Lucy that she hopes she will "find them lovely all the same" (Kincaid 29). It is during this moment, that Lucy realizes how much daffodils –and the larger imperial context that they represent – define Mariah's identity as much as they were intended to define her own. That is, Lucy begins to understand that Mariah's identity is inextricably tied to her determination to introduce Lucy to "beauty," defined by her unquestioned standards. Mariah is quite literally reproducing the ideologies of imperialism and international hierarchy, and her identity is based on her ability to do so.

Understanding, if not accepting, this, Lucy reacts first in anger: "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?" (Kincaid 30). But she then draws back, feeling regretful that she had "cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes" (Kincaid 30). This is a pivotal moment in the text because here Lucy refuses to perform the colonial mimicry of becoming another yellow-haired flower in Mariah's family photograph. Imperial ideology will not be reproduced in her.

This image of the daffodil functions analogously to other kinds of knowledge structured around the center/periphery binary. Lucy had to learn about the beauty of daffodils and the Lake region. But Mariah, and those whom she represents, need not

know Lucy's beauty, history, or geography. Colonizers are allowed the privilege of seeing the Caribbean as "the islands" – limiting their vision to the sun and sand, shielding their view from the socio-political effects of colonialism: poverty, sickness, silence. They do not know the misery of *misery baby*. This is significant for Mariah's and Lucy's relationship because if Mariah cannot understand the situation of *misery baby*, she cannot connect with her or recognize her complicity in *misery baby's* oppression. The text offers an important moral here in that the closeness that Mariah and Lucy might have had, the strength that they might have had found in each other, is stymied by the narrowness of Mariah's vision. The text suggests here the limitations of an international feminism in which first world women cannot actively question the center/periphery paradigms of first/third world, and developed/developing nations, or recognize the importance of class and race in defining identity.

The text does make us somewhat sympathetic to Mariah's position, to her ignorance; after all, she is also miserable. This sympathy is clearly problematic, however. Lucy says, "It wasn't her fault. It wasn't my fault. But nothing could change the fact that where she saw beautiful flowers I saw sorrow and bitterness. The same thing could cause us to shed tears, but those tears would not taste the same" (Kincaid 30). Both Lucy and Mariah were made to identify the daffodil as beautiful, but based on their race, class and nation, this lesson has differing consequences. Here the text encourages an ironical understanding of Mariah in which her acts of ignorance are both forgivable and unforgivable, and she must take responsibility though not blame. Later, when Mariah tells Lucy that she has "Indian blood," Lucy articulates this position more clearly, asking: "How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished

also?”(Kincaid 41). The text begs the question: Is Mariah the colonizer? Is this role inextricable from her identity as a U.S. citizen? Is Lucy the colonized? Will she always be?

The text does not resolve these issues, and instead, I think strategically skirts the analysis back to its structuring question – how does a person get to be this way? That is, how is identity, both individual and national, formed? As Mariah leaves Lucy’s room, “her face ... miserable, tormented, ill-looking,” looking at Lucy “in a pleading way, as if for relief,” Lucy decides to resist, deciding “no matter what, [she] would not give in” (Kincaid 41). In place of this forgiveness, Lucy – and, I would argue, the text as a whole – attempts instead to understand the processes of these power dynamics, the way they infect and constitute the identities of both the powerful and the disempowered. She says, “All along I have been wondering how you got to be the way you are. Just how it was that you got to be the way you are” (Kincaid 41). Characteristically attempting to resolve the issue, Mariah tries to hug Lucy. Lucy, however, steps away, leaving Mariah “holding nothing” (Kincaid 41). Lucy repeats, “How do you get to be that way?” while watching Mariah’s face fill with sadness. “The anguish on her face almost broke my heart,” Lucy says, “but I would not bend. It was hollow, my triumph, I could feel that, but I held on to it just the same” (Kincaid 41).

Inasmuch as Lucy holds Mariah accountable for her position as colonizer, Lucy also refuses her mother’s role as colonized. Though Lucy’s mother is physically absent from the text, her presence is felt throughout in that she represents what Lucy sees as the colonial experience. Lucy’s mother is “a deeply compromised colonized subject who has been seduced into complete acceptance of colonial cultural mores and English ways of



being that she then tries to impose on her daughter. Conspicuously unnamed in the novel, she is both an agent of empire, and symbolically rendered as the loving and rejecting mother-country” (Burrows 95). As with Mariah, the symbolic value of Lucy’s mother is represented by the image of the daffodil. Lucy associates both daffodils and her mother with her colonial socialization.

Lucy’s mimicry in her performance of the daffodil poem is the very mimicry Lucy’s mother demands of her. Lucy says, “I had come to feel that my mother’s love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her” (Kincaid 35). Lucy resists her mother’s efforts just as she later refuses to be wooed by Mariah’s love for daffodils: “I didn’t know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone. That was not a figure of speech” (Kincaid 36). In *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* Victoria Burrows notes that Lucy “is not just refusing to become an echo of her mother: she is refusing her mother’s passive mimicry of the imperial mother country” (95). Lucy sees her mother as a victim of colonialism; even more problematically, she sees her as an instrument of colonization. Thus, Lucy’s mother ironically represents both British colonialism and its victims. Like Mariah, she has become both the victor and the vanquished. However, unlike Mariah, who is able to see herself as the vanquished despite her obvious role as victor, Lucy’s mother enables the victor despite her suffering as the vanquished; this, for Lucy, seems less excusable. For Lucy, any forgiveness of her mother creates the possibility that she will fall back into her mother’s shadow, into colonial mimicry.

The success and failure of Lucy's attempts to separate herself from her mother speak to the identity formation of *misery baby*, as Lucy at once tries to free herself from the colonial memory, but recognizes its power as part of her history. Like Lucy's mother, the past cannot be forgotten, but it must be contained. Lucy says, "my past was my mother" (90). And, like her past, Lucy is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by her mother. She says:

I could hear her voice, and she spoke to me not in English or the French patois that she sometimes spoke, or in any language that needs help from the tongue; she spoke to me in language anyone female could understand. And I was undeniably that – female. Oh, it was a laugh, for I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother – I was my mother. And I could see why, to the few feeble attempts I made to draw a line between us, her reply always was "You can run away, but you cannot escape the fact that I am your mother, my blood runs in you, I carried you for nine months inside me." How else was I to take such a statement but as a sentence for life in a prison whose bars were stronger than any iron imaginable?  
(90-1)

Having been oppressed as a colonized woman, Lucy's mother attempts to perpetuate this same oppression with Lucy. Lucy thus feels both connected to her mother as oppressed, but also resentful of the role her mother simultaneously plays as oppressor.

Lucy's resentment is compounded because her mother pushes her to mimic an imported femininity. Even though Lucy demonstrates early in her life that she is a bright child, capable of pursuing an education and any career she wants, Lucy's mother pushes

her into an “appropriate” female field tied to colonial definitions of womanhood. Lucy remembers that one of the last things her mother said to her before she left the Caribbean was, ‘Oh, I can just see you in your nurse’s uniform. I shall be very proud of you.’” (93). Lucy is disappointed in her mother. She thinks, “I could only guess which nurse’s uniform she meant – the uniform made of cloth or the one made of circumstances” (93). Lucy recognizes that her mother has subscribed to a binary ideology of gender which positions women as nurses even when they are not qualified. After all, Lucy argues:

I was not good at taking orders from anyone, not good at waiting on other people. Why did someone not think that I would make a good doctor or a good magistrate or a good someone who runs things? As a child I had always been told what a good mind I had, and though I never believed it myself, it allowed me to cut quite a figure of authority among my peers. A nurse, as far as I could see, was a badly paid person, a person who was forced to be in awe of someone above her (a doctor). (92)

In order to gain her independence, Lucy must find a way to negotiate her relationship with her mother/past. She says, “I understood that I was inventing myself ... I did not have position, I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair” (134).

As *misery baby*, Lucy comes of age by negotiating her relationships with her two mothers, in the process deconstructing the myths of center/periphery ideology. Mariah and Lucy’s mother represent opposite sides of the same power dynamics: Mariah is privileged by her race, class and nation, whereas Lucy’s mother is not. Yet, despite these differences of race, class and nation, Mariah and Lucy’s mother both end up in unhappy

situations by the end of the text. Mariah's husband leaves her for her best friend, and Lucy's father dies leaving Lucy's mother alone; both women, when left without patriarch, become financially unstable. The power that marriage brings to Mariah and Lucy's mother is dubious since it can be taken away. Thus, the text exposes the myth of patriarchal protection, and questions the separate sphere ideology which it supports. Lucy sees that both Mariah and her mother played by "the rules" and yet lost in the end. She then begins to recognize the "choicelessness" of their choices, and the pervasiveness of gender systems that oppress women despite, and in conjunction with, differences of race, class and nation.

Similarly, Lucy's understanding of Mariah and her mother as they each play roles of victor and vanquished allows an ironical acknowledgement of the larger social and historical contexts which shape and explain identity, but do not negate individual responsibility. Thus, Lucy can at once feel both sympathy and anger toward her "mothers." But perhaps more importantly, armed with the knowledge of how the binary systems of gender and imperialism construct "truth," Lucy can begin to disentangle herself from the ideological manacles responsible for her mothers' misery.

By the end of the novel, Lucy, like her mother and Mariah, is alone. She has moved out of Mariah's house into an apartment she shares with Peggy, and she has come to realize that her boyfriend is spending an increasing amount of time with Peggy. In intended contradistinction to her mother and Mariah, Lucy remarks of her love loss, "I had noticed that this happened more and more; the two of them were busy at something, and I suspected it was with each other. I only hoped they would not get angry and disrupt my life when they realized that I did not care" (163). But then, picking up the new

journal that Mariah had given her, she writes: “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it” (164). Reading back her sentence to herself, she felt a “great wave of shame” that caused her to weep “so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur” (164). And so on some level the text makes connections between Lucy and her mothers – she too is left alone, and like Mariah has lost her boyfriend to her best friend. Lucy admits to herself that she needs love despite her understanding of love as a process of giving power to another. Yet, there are also differences between the two. Lucy is economically independent and does not rely on a man for her sustenance. Nevertheless, this ending is enigmatic, and the eagerness of the reader to make sense of it demonstrates the power of the paradigm that Lucy is struggling against.

*Lucy* is about questioning borders, not only geographic ones, like those marking Lucy’s mother and Mariah, but also the borders that, like the daffodil, house moralisms like “civilized” and “uncivilized,” as well as binaries of “masculine” and “feminine,” and “oppressor” and “oppressed.” As *misery baby*, Lucy attempts to live in and among the tensions of opposing forces: she says that she wishes that she could love someone so much she would die from it, but she also sees that love creates the very real danger of losing her *self*, the freedom she had worked so hard for. Throughout the text, Lucy asks, “Why should my life be reduced to these two possibilities.” The ending of her story offers another possibility, one steeped in irony and ambiguity. It is the coming of age of *misery baby* because her travel across geographic borders has allowed her to question the bounds of identity and recognize them as social constructions. The recognition of these borders as cultural artifacts working in connection with both patriarchal and imperial

ideologies allows Lucy to free herself from the rigid binary constructions of identity, and accept her connections both to Mariah, her surrogate mother with whom she shares some privilege, and to her biological mother with whom she shares a past. Lucy's coming of age, represented by a "room of her own," is contingent on her accepting the ironies of these two mothers, and the irony of her position as both a West Indian citizen and an U.S. resident. In allowing these two identities to exist side by side, Lucy's love/hate relationship with both her surrogate and her biological mothers ask questions about the construction of nation. Lucy accepts, but does not forgive her mothers for their role as oppressors, despite their experiences as oppressed. And therefore, the text offers a new definition of hybrid citizenship that ironically allows for both allegiance to and distance from two mothers and two nations. This relational view of nation challenges traditional nation-state ideologies that see nations as distinct and separate. *Misery baby* is critical of this dominant paradigm inasmuch as it makes invisible the relational aspect of international hierarchies. That is to say, the poverty of Antigua is directly related to the wealth of the United States. Therefore, Lucy's critical embrace of her two mothers engenders not only a strategy for hyphenated communities like Antiguan-Americans, but more transparency in the symbiotic relationship between the first and third worlds.

### ***Breath, Eyes, Memory***

As in *Lucy*, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* the daffodil is an important symbol for *misery baby*. However, while in *Lucy* the daffodil is associated with colonial education and the mimicry of colonial culture, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* it is connected to colonial

regulations of female sexuality and the nuclear family. Kathleen Renk emphasizes the link between female sexuality and colonial power; though she is speaking specifically about British colonization, her comments can be applied to my discussion of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Renk argues that:

In an era of social chaos, religious skepticism, and post-Revolutionary fear, the ideal nineteenth-century middle-class English family acquired a mythological connotation as it represented an isle of tranquility and stability in a tumultuous sea. Thy mythical family consisted of the moral and intellectual father, the angelic, asexual mother, and the dutiful child whose character has been shaped by the moral strengths of his parents.

This mythical family also served as a paradigm for the English-colonial relationship. The archetypal Victorian colonial family comprised the superior, moral, “enlightened” parental country, a country that possessed heavenly truth, and the inferior, acquiescent, “uncivilized” but cheerfully submissive child country. (8)

Thus, the colonial construction of family literally supports the male/female binary and the metaphor of family as nation supports the center/periphery binary. I maintain that *Breath, Eyes, Memory* narratively links the daffodil to the rape of Martine – which results in the *misery baby* Sophie’s birth – to expose the symbiotic relationship between patriarchy and colonialism.

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* foregrounds the daffodil’s importance by opening with Sophie’s *literal* construction of a Mother’s Day card: “A flattened and drying daffodil was dangling off the little card that I had made my aunt Atie for Mother’s Day.” This is

followed closely by a more *figurative* construction of the concept and character of motherhood (Danticat 3). Sophie has made the Mother's Day card for her aunt, but Atie tells her to save it for her mother in the United States. This early moment in the text foreshadows not only Sophie's identity crisis, but also those of both Atie and Martine. As with Lucy, Sophie's position between two mothers allows her to juxtapose two nations and two truths. From the resulting contradictions, *misery baby* is born.

Unlike Lucy, who has never seen daffodils until she comes to the U.S., Sophie sees daffodils growing in her town. Despite their literal presence in Croix-des-Rosets, they still represent absent colonial power. Sophie says,

Tante Atie told me that my mother loved daffodils because they grew in a place that they were not supposed to. They were really European flowers, French buds and stems, meant for colder climates. A long time ago, a French woman had brought them to Croix-des-Rosets and planted them there. A strain of daffodils had grown that could withstand the heat, but they were the color of pumpkins and golden summer squash, as though they had acquired a bronze tinge from the skin of the natives who had adopted them. (Danticat 21)

This passage underscores the hollowness of colonial mimicry: a required performance that can never be fully realized. Like Atie and Martine, whose lives have been dictated by the gender ideology of French colonialism, the daffodils of Croix-des-Rosets bear the mark of their mimicry, further reifying the center-periphery binary.

At the beginning of the novel, Martine sends for Sophie from the United States. It is Tante Atie's duty to send her. The Mother's Day card is the visual manifestation of the two women's contest over Sophie; the definition of mother is as fragile as the dried



daffodil “squashed ... against the plain beige cardboard” (Danticat 3). The slippage between Tante Atie, whom Sophie considers her mother, and Martine, Sophie’s biological mother, places these two women in juxtaposition to each other and problematizes definitions of motherhood and female sexuality. These two women represent the either/or reality of Sophie’s identity. They carry ties to history, culture, nationhood, and identity. Inasmuch as Lucy continually asks “How does a person get to be that way?”, Danticat’s text seeks to answer this question by tracing the lives of Sophie’s mothers and the way in which their misery – patriarchal and colonial oppression – is reproduced in their daughter Sophie. Therefore, to understand Sophie’s identity as *misery baby* we must first analyze the sister characters of Tante Atie and Martine. We must understand why it is that these two women, who grew up side by side in the Haitian cane fields, followed different paths to the same end: loneliness, desperation, and self-hatred.

The Mother’s Day card symbolizes a duty/desire binary that controls both Atie and Martine. The card is revealing of Atie because it exemplifies her binary thinking: Sophie can only have one mother and so she, Atie, does not deserve a Mother’s Day card. Atie believes that Martine should receive the card because she is Sophie’s *real* mother, and puts aside her feelings so that she can do the right thing. This moment in the text illustrates Renk’s argument: the colonial emphasis on duty, honor, and the proper nuclear family has defined, and thus contained, Atie. The Mother’s Day card is also a metaphor for the relationship between Martine and Sophie. Like the daffodil, Sophie is a flower of colonization. She is a child of rape – the embodiment of her biological mother’s deflowering. Because her mother is raped by a Haitian soldier, this deflowering

is connected to internal conflict, like the self-hatred that eventually takes Martine's life. Now plucked from her environment and sent to her mother, Sophie risks becoming lost in exile like the daffodil of her Mother's Day card, like Martine herself. Like all *misery babies*, Sophie is figured in images of life and death; despite her origins in colonialism, she can grow beautifully, but like the dried flower, when taken from her native soil, she may wither and die.

The birth of Sophie has saved Martine from total self-destruction – Sophie is, after all, a piece of Martine that lives on, an image of renewal like the flower. However, Sophie is also a constant reminder of the rape that changed her life, which made her an orphan of Haiti and produced the self-hatred that ultimately destroys her. Thus, the Mother's Day card, with its missing flower, becomes a symbol for the relationship between Sophie and Martine; Sophie is a constant reminder of Martine's deflowering.

After Sophie's birth, Martine fled to the United States, leaving behind her home and her daughter because she saw both as contaminated. And so, it is fitting that the daffodil on the Mother's Day card also holds an empty promise for Martine:

[Martine] ran her fingers along the cardboard, over the empty space where the daffodil had been. "I haven't gone out and looked for daffodils since I've been here. For all I know, they might not even have them here." (46)

All of the promises that Martine has believed in prove empty. She was told that if she was a "good girl" she would be happy, but after the rape she was held responsible for her deflowering. She believed that motherhood would free her from her past, but it only serves to end her future. She believed that America would help her forget Haiti, but her exile only brought isolation, self-hatred, and fear.

When Martine fled to the U.S., Sophie was left to be raised by her aunt. Responsible for Sophie, Atie moved to Croix-des-Rosets so that Sophie could attend school; but after Sophie leaves, Atie returns to Dame Marie to take care of her mother, Grandmè Ifé. These are the markers of Atie's life; in fact, Atie is defined almost exclusively by what she does for others, by doing her duty. Atie selflessly took care of Sophie, moved to Croix-des-Rosets for Sophie's schooling, suffered silently when her child was summoned to New York, quietly lost the man she loved to a woman of the right class, and moved back to Dame Marie to wait for her mother to die. Like her refusal of Sophie's daffodil, she endures all of this in the name of duty. When Sophie tries to talk to Atie about her obvious depression, Atie's response highlights the hollowness of Haitian femininity:

I know old people, they have great knowledge. I have been taught never to contradict our elders. I am the oldest child. My place is here. I am supposed to march at the head of the old woman's coffin. I am supposed to lead her funeral procession. But even if lightning should strike me now, I will say this: I am tired, I woke up one morning and I was old myself ... They train you to find a husband ... They poke at your panties in the middle of the night to see if you are still whole ... They make you burn your fingers learning to cook. Then still you have nothing. (136)

Atie has been a "good girl" – she has done everything that she was supposed to do. Yet happiness eludes her. Her anger boils below the surface because all of her desires have been suppressed. She recognizes that she has been duped, and that what she has lost is a lifetime. Sophie and, symbolically, the daffodil, mark this loss. Atie tells Sophie, "The

past is always the past ... Children are the *rewards* of life and you were my child” (emphasis mine, 173). Her role as a Haitian woman has brought her many duties but few rewards.

Here we see Atie’s inability to address the past and recognize the degree to which the past informs the future. Like her sister, Atie lives in the present to the exclusion of the past, and thus has no future. Without coming to terms with her past – her disappointments, her betrayals – she silences a part of her that needs to be actively remembered. These silences haunt her and parallel Martine’s nightmares. Like Martine, who has been deflowered by a soldier, so too has Atie been deflowered: her loss of Sophie’s Mother’s Day card represents her loss of Sophie, and with it, the rewards of her life of duty. After a lifetime of doing as she was told, she tells Sophie, “My life it is nothing.” In the text’s paralleling of family and nation, Atie functions much like a daughter colony, socialized to see her needs and desires as secondary.

Inasmuch as Atie has always been the “good girl,” always doing what she was told, Martine seems to be her foil. Martine is raped as a young woman and this rape “soils” her; she can no longer pass her mother’s “test.” While ideology subordinates Atie, physical violence subordinates Martine, whose rape also represents the rape of the land, people, and culture of Haiti. Though Martine survives the actual rape, her refusal to deal with its memory causes her to ultimately succumb to its ghost. The text thus makes an important statement about the nature of memory. The nightly haunting of Martine’s rape signifies the memory of colonization. The text “gives this pain a personal face; it haunts a mother and daughter’s dreams, populating them with the threat of perpetuated life” (Nesbitt 203). Sophie says,

Some nights I woke up wondering if my mother's anxiety was somehow hereditary or if it was something that I had somehow "caught" from living with her. Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up mornings wondering if we hadn't spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl (193, qtd. in Nesbitt 203).

As a visible reminder of Martine's rape, Sophie "serves *as the trace* of a violence at once personal and systemic" (Nesbitt 203, emphasis mine). Inasmuch as Sophie is herself haunted by her mother's misery, Sophie also becomes a ghost of her mother's past. Like Martine, if Haiti does not deal with the haunting memory of this rape, she is doomed to suffering and eventual suicide.

In her self-exile in the U.S., Martine represents the possibility of larger diasporic alliances. Because she cannot address her past, however, she cannot make new and possibly beneficial friendships. Like Mrs. Azile in "Caroline's Wedding," Martine is a Haitian living in America, not a Haitian-American. The failure of this potential diasporic connection is imaged in the death of Martine's second child, who, if born, would have been a U.S. citizen with Haitian parents. The baby, a *misery baby* like Sophie, could have represented a new future, but because Martine has not dealt with her past – shown in her inability to allow herself pleasure in her sexuality – she can only interpret this new child as another incarnation of her rape. The new baby, despite being the product of a loving relationship, only serves to remind Martine of her deflowering and resulting impurity. Thus, Martine prevents her second *misery baby* from coming to life, and from coming of age. Its death, like the death of any *misery baby*, represents a failure – an

inability to move from colonialism to independence. Sophie, the surviving *misery baby*, must come of age by confronting Martine's ghost.

The text intentionally creates a slippage between the hauntings of Martine's rape and mothers' "tests." The "test" is a practice whereby a mother examines a daughter with her finger to see if her daughter is still a virgin. In this act of rape, Grandmè Ifé, like her mother before her, violated her daughters to insure their purity. Martine, in turn, "tests" her daughter. This "testing" becomes a powerful issue in the text: it encapsulates the double standard around sexuality and the role that women's sexuality plays in issues of family, community and national honor. Perhaps most importantly, like Lucy's memorization of the daffodil poem, the "testing" exposes the role of these women as unwitting agents of colonialism. By perpetuating colonial expectations of female sexuality, Grandmè Ifé and Martine reify the gendered binary of moral father/asexual mother and the colonial binary of enlightened colonizer/uncivilized colonized. That is to say, European colonial culture used female chastity and purity to sustain patriarchy; inasmuch as the images of chaste, white, European women were contrasted with the "barbaric" nature of colonized women, any evidence of a colonized woman's sexuality (outside of the sanctity of marriage, and thus patriarchal control) was ready proof of a woman's depravity and, by extension, her people's depraved nature. Like Lucy, who feels doubly pained by her mother's actions as oppressor, Sophie, Martine, and Atie all feel a measure of resentment towards their mothers for perpetuating this violation. However, it is in their response to the "testing" that the characters mark their relationship to this past and have the possibility of changing their futures.

When Sophie asks her mother and her grandmother why girls are “tested,” they both invoke the language of tradition and honor. Martine responds:

I did it ... because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day. (170)

Martine’s equation of “testing” and rape is powerful both in how it speaks to the violence of the “test” and in how it speaks to the strength of these gendered dictates. Despite the fact that Martine lives with the testing “every day,” she nevertheless replicates the process with her own daughter.

Sophie’s grandmother also invokes the language of gender and nation. Earlier in the text, Grandmè Ifé talks to Sophie about how women are treated in their culture. Sophie learns from Grandmè Ifé how to tell if a pregnant neighbor has had a girl or a boy. If a boy is born, a lantern will be left on and, if there is a man around, he will stay awake with the new child all through the night. But, if a girl is born, “the midwife will cut the child’s cord and go home. Only the mother will be left in the darkness to hold her child. There will be no lamps, no candles, no more light” (156). Grandmè Ifé reminds Sophie that her own actions were prescribed by the values of her community: “From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me” (156). Seeming to find her own answer hollow, Grandmè Ifé hands Sophie a statue of Erzulie, the Haitian goddess of love originating in West African culture, for comfort. Significantly, Erzulie represents both

sensuality and motherhood; one of her symbols is a fan decorated with the image of a cross in a circle, indicating the meeting of two worlds. While Grandmè Ifé cannot give Sophie back the past, she can give her the tools for dealing with it. Sophie slowly realizes the significance of her grandmother's gift. If Martine's womb will ultimately cause her death, Sophie's womb will bring her salvation: Sophie's healing is marked in her decision to not "test" her daughter.

To emphasize the role of "testing" at the interstices of gender and nation, Sophie describes the process of "doubling" as a strategy for dealing with the disgrace of her mother's "test." She says that she would "close [her] eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that [she] had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tante Atie's gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils" (155). Making an overt connection between the "testing" and the larger dynamics of nation, Sophie says,

There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had *doubled*.

Following in the *voudou* tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives. (156)

The presidents' "doubling" represents the interstitial space of the decolonial imaginary, where Haiti's current political struggles are (over)shadowed by the colonial past.

Dealing with her own "testing" and her mother's rape, Sophie realizes that if she does not face her ghosts she will be haunted by them forever, like both her mother and her aunt. Sophie's therapist encourages her to address her relationship with her mother and her mother's rape. Responding to a question about Martine, Sophie tells her



therapist, “I want to forget the hidden things, the conflicts you always want me to deal with. I want to look at her as someone I am meeting for the first time. An acquaintance who I am hoping will become a good friend” (207-8). Her therapist, “a gorgeous black woman who was an initiated Santeria priestess” and has a “collection of Brazilian paintings and ceremonial African masks on her wall” in the clinic, encourages Sophie to come to terms with her feelings of hatred for her mother, persuading her that you can love and hate someone at the same time. Further, the therapist wants Sophie to “confront her feelings about [her biological father] in some way, [to] give him a face” (209). She tells Sophie that by not addressing the past, she is bound to relive it:

Your mother never gave him a face. That’s why he’s a shadow. That’s why he can control her. I’m not surprised she’s having nightmares. This pregnancy is bringing feelings to the surface that she had never completely dealt with. You will never be able to connect with your husband until you say good-bye to your father. (209)

Martine’s nightmares represent the space of the decolonial imaginary, where the past shadows the present. So too, Sophie’s painful present – her sexual phobia and the resulting strain in her marriage to Joseph – is linked to her past. Further, Sophie’s affiliation with her therapist, a U.S. Black woman shrouded in images of Africa, emphasizes the strength of African-American sisterhood. Black women’s common experiences of patriarchy and slavery can form the basis of a potent political alliance that creates community outside of nation. An international dialogue about the symbiotic workings of these oppressions can expose their often hidden nature and help women like Sophie and Martine find a way to exorcise their ghosts.

The coming of age of *misery baby* involves actively remembering the past and embracing hybridity and irony. It is in fact Sophie's return to Haiti that brings a new sense of hope with a concomitant redefinition of home. Following her first trip back after so many years, Sophie begins to equate Haiti with home, and home with future. Joseph underscores the significance of this movement as he reminds Sophie, "You have never called [Haiti] [home] since we've been together. Home has always been your mother's house, that you couldn't go back to" (195). This reclamation of home is accompanied by a new and ironic understanding of her mother. Sophie begins to see the two of them not as opposites, hopelessly conflicted in battle, but rather as children of the same oppression. Sophie recognizes that she and her mother were "twins, in spirit" (200). After burning her mother's name in a rite of healing, Sophie voices the words her mother and grandmother had been searching for: "I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too" (203).

With this connection, these new eyes that understand her life and that of her mother as bound together by something larger than themselves, Sophie worries for her own daughter. The text has traced the genealogy of *misery baby*, showing how the colonial apparatus has used both Martine and Atie in the reproduction of the binaries responsible for their own oppression: male/female, center/periphery, "good girl"/"bad girl" and duty/desire. By facing her painful past, both the rape of her mother and the "tests," Sophie begins to understand how the shadow of colonialism works to reproduce mothers' misery in their daughters. She recognizes that she must negotiate the space of the decolonial imaginary to free herself from her past and give her daughter a future. She realizes, "It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that

*my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had her name burnt in the flames”* (my emphasis, 203).

When her mother dies, Sophie recognizes the fragility of her own survival and the need to immediately deal with her own ghosts. Sophie is not only a character born of rape, she represents her home, her country, Haiti. Like Sophie, Haiti is the bastard offspring of colonial rape, haunted by its past. In the character of Sophie, the text fashions a new Haiti that involves not merely a strategy for nation-building, but a strategy for rethinking the terms of nation. The ritual of Sophie’s rebirth is prescriptive for a new Haiti:

I ran through the field, attaching the cane. I took off my shoes and began to beat a cane stalk. I pounded it until it began to lean over. I pushed the cane stalk. It snapped back, striking my shoulder. I pulled at it, yanking it from the ground. My palm was bleeding.

The cane symbolizes both the fields where Martine was raped and the atrocities of slavery and colonization that ravaged Haiti and its people. It also ironically represents Sophie’s freedom. The blood on Sophie’s hand is the blood of her mother, and her mother before her. Recognizing that Sophie’s reclamation is also their own, Sophie’s grandmother and aunt echo her call. Grandmè Ifé calls out “Ou libéré?” and Tante Atie echoes, “her voice quivering with her sobs, Ou libéré,” Are you free? (233).

Sophie’s coming of age is tragic. It has cost the lives of both of her mothers. But it is also a freedom replete with promise because, by embracing irony, Sophie has broken free from the circle of violence. Her coming of age rests on her recognition of the self-serving colonial constructions of “good girl” and “bad girl,” of “pure” and “impure,” of

“duty” and “desire” and of “past” and “present”. Sophie achieves her independence by replacing these binary constructions with ironic couplings: understanding that both Atie and Martine are her mothers, and that Martine was both oppressor and oppressed. Perhaps most importantly, Sophie deconstructs the binary of duty and desire that has imprisoned both her mothers. The duty/desire binary, born out of what Renk calls the “Victorian myth of family,” works to sublimate the desires of women and colonies by placing them in opposition to duty. Thus, in Sophie’s ironical embrace of duty *and* desire, Sophie can reclaim her sexuality and her marriage. Inasmuch as Danticat’s text shows how *misery baby* is (re)produced, she also articulates a strategy for ending the lineage: Sophie will not reproduce misery in her baby.

## CHAPTER 3

*BELOVED: MISERY BABY* IN A U.S. CONTEXT**Introduction: Intra-national Colonialism**

Scholars, writers, activists and others have long been making connections between Afro-Caribbeans and U.S. Blacks. Movements such as Pan-Africanism and individuals like Marcus Garvey have urged the unification of these populations. These arguments have spawned a great deal of debate about the nature of the connection among peoples of the diaspora. While the connection to the African past brings with it similarities of culture, language and history, many have cautioned that such an understanding may invoke the racist rhetoric of colonialism: that all Blacks are the same. While there are clear historical connections – for example, the experience of slavery – the question remains whether shared pasts necessarily indicate commonalities in the present.

In his essay “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” Robert Blauner posits an analogy between colonialism and U.S. race relations. He argues, however, that the usefulness of this comparison is limited by an understanding of the differences between “colonization as a process and colonialism as a social, economic, and political system” (393). Blauner posits, “It is the experience of colonization that Afro-Americans share with many of the non-white people of the world. But this subjugation has taken place in a societal context that differs in important respects from the situation of ‘classical colonialism’” (393). He notes, for example, that colonialism in its traditional definition, defines a relationship between a geographically-absent authority (mother country) who

rules over a “different race and culture, where this domination is political and economic, and the colony exists subordinated to and dependent upon the mother country” (395).

Blauner notes that “typically the colonizers exploit the land, the raw materials, the labor, and other resources of the colonized nation; in addition a formal recognition is given to the difference in power, autonomy, and political status, and various agencies are set up to maintain this subordination” (395). Clearly then, the situation of U.S. racism does not fit this model completely. In the U.S., Blacks represent a portion of the population that has been historically oppressed. However, there are significant variables that complicate this dynamic. Class has played an increasingly important role in the U.S. as in the Caribbean, but the position of the U.S. internationally versus the Caribbean places these class differences within a first world/third world dynamic. That is to say, differing definitions and standards of class operate within both of these locations, and in fact, the “superiority” of the U.S. is relationally built on the “inferiority” of the Caribbean. Some U.S. Blacks – due to privileges of class, shadism and nation – have been able to gain varying degrees of privilege due to their location in a first world country that have been less available in some of the less “developed” areas of the Caribbean. I would argue, though, that despite these differences, there is a unifying experience that links U.S. Blacks in their experience of racism to the Caribbean and its legacy of colonialism.

It is my argument that both U.S. Blacks and Afro-Caribbeans are experiencing what Perez calls a “decolonial imaginary.” In support of this argument, Blauner notes that

The common features ultimately relate to the fact that the classical colonialism of the imperialist era and American racism developed out of the same historical

situation and reflected a common world economic and power stratification ... The essential condition for both American slavery and European colonialism was the power domination and the technological superiority of the Western world in its relation to peoples of non-Western and non-white origins. This objective supremacy in technology and military power buttressed the West's sense of cultural superiority, laying the basis for racist ideologies that were elaborated to justify control and exploitation of non-white people. Thus because classical colonialism and America's internal version developed out of a similar balance of technological, cultural, and power relations, a common *process* of social oppression characterized the racial patterns in the two contexts – despite the variation in political and social structure. (395-6)

Accepting Blauner's argument that there are certain similarities in the experience of colonized peoples and U.S. Blacks, I would like to suggest that comparing the trope of *misery baby*, as I have articulated it in its Caribbean context, to *misery baby* characters in U.S. fiction might enable us further to understand the similarities between colonialism and what Blauner calls "internal colonization."

I argue that the frequency of the *misery baby* character in fictions of both locations, can help us to understand the ways in which the legacy of slavery created similar power structures of racism and sexism in the U.S. and the Caribbean. Therefore, despite the differences that distinguish the U.S. and the Caribbean – and individual nations within the Caribbean – from one another, I suggest that a comparison of their respective fictions demonstrates connections that emerge out of ironic couplings of identities. Like women in the Caribbean who confronted the patriarchal underpinnings of

many nationalist organizations, U.S. Black women often found their identities were often pitted against each other: in the Civil Rights movement, Black women were asked to push aside questions of gender, and in feminist movements Black women's race was made invisible. Analyzing these connections can help us better understand the power dynamic created out of, and further sustained by, imperialism and the concomitant system of racism.

Addressing the importance of making such connections through the study of literature in his introduction to a 1988 conference on Caribbean women's writing sponsored by the Black Studies Department of Wellesley College, Selwyn R. Cudjoe argued:

The rise of women's writing in the Caribbean cannot be viewed in isolation. It is a part of a much larger expression of women's realities that is taking place in the postcolonial world and post-civil rights era in the United States. The enormous production of literature from the women of the Caribbean does not only contribute to our literary development but it begins to change the very contours of that literature as well. (7)

I suggest that placing the voices of *misery baby* characters in conversation with each other across the diaspora can help transnational coalition building. It might lead us to a more nuanced appreciation of the relationship between U.S. racism and the neocolonial relationship that the U.S. maintains with many islands in the Caribbean.

To further this goal, I want to discuss Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in the context of the *misery baby* trope. Though several of Morrison's novels would have worked well for this analysis, I have chosen *Beloved* because of its use of the term "rememory," which I



have identified as an integral parts of *misery baby*. “Rememory” is important for *misery baby* because it erases the rigid boundaries among past, present, and future. Thus, *Beloved* links the coming of age of its characters to their ability to engage with the past in an active and ironic way. *Misery baby* often uses such a process of coming to terms with the past to deal with the painful memory of colonialism. She recognizes the importance of the past but not privilege it over the future

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*Beloved* tells a history of U.S. Blacks immediately pre- and post-civil war. Morrison voices an untold history of the past, that is also the story of the present, in order to challenge the future of racism in the U.S. Like *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, *Beloved* maps the genealogy of *misery baby*, illustrating the means by which oppression is passed from mother to daughter. The character of Beloved, who can be characterized alternately as a baby, a ghost, the experience of slavery, a daughter, a demon, and a savior, is one of the *misery baby* characters of this novel. As *misery baby*, Beloved represents numerous ironic and blurred boundaries. Through her various incarnations, Beloved becomes an embodiment of the “borderlands” between real and imaginary, good and evil, and past and present. Her presence in the text stymies the easy separation of these binaries.

Beloved is also intimately connected to the borders of masculinity and femininity. The image of Beloved’s death – a mother killing her own child – questions traditional definitions of both femininity and motherhood. Because gender constructions are always tied to civility, especially inasmuch as they are used as tools for racist/imperialist ideologies, the image of Sethe breaking the “natural” confines of womanhood and killing

her own daughter renders her “uncivilized.” As *Beloved* represents Sethe’s “uncivilized” act, she at once represents undisciplined femaleness.

Sethe’s act of killing her child defines the misery of *Beloved*. Stamp Paid refers to the death of “crawling already?” baby as “Misery”: “He had stepped foot in this house only once after the Misery (which is what he called Sethe’s rough response to the Fugitive Bill)” (171). It is through Sethe’s actions that *Beloved* becomes positioned between two worlds. However, unlike the Caribbean stories discussed above, *Beloved* reflects the unique context of intra-national U.S. colonization. In Morrison’s novel, the two worlds of *misery baby* are not two separate countries, but divisions within one country. Though there is a physical movement in the text between slave and free state, the two worlds of *Beloved* are temporal, not geographical: the past of slavery and the present of freedom. *Beloved* is born a slave, but dies before emancipation, and while Sethe flees with *Beloved*, she also kills her daughter before they have a chance to experience freedom. Thus, *Beloved* is trapped between slavery and freedom, and as *misery baby* her coming of age is marked by her ability to allow for the ironic couplings of these two worlds. That is, *Beloved*’s coming of age, shown in the text by her moving into the afterlife, and no longer left to haunt Sethe’s house, marks her successful negotiation of the past and the present.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek has argued that “*Beloved* specifically investigates what happens when a character refuses a postmodernist world – that is, when a character clings to one interpretation, one meaning, of the past. Unable to change her understanding of a painful past, Sethe becomes its prisoner” (20). Sethe is bound by her past and, like the ghost that haunts 124, this past is hidden, silenced, and angry. Sethe’s past is so powerful

that she must actively push it out of her mind, keeping her safe from the memory of slavery, but also alienating her from the memory of friends and family. Sethe cannot even remember her own children. Her “memory of Buglar was fading fast. Howard at least had a head shape nobody could forget. As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (6). Because, like Martine, Sethe cannot confront her memories, her defense is to keep her past as distant as possible, to remember as little of it as she can. In her constant efforts to forget, Sethe, like Martine, becomes defined by her past and remains its victim.

Despite her attempts to separate herself from the rest of the world and its reminders of her past, Sethe recognizes that her isolation is tenuous. The past comes back to taunt her, to remind her:

She might be hurrying across a field, running practically, to get to the pump quickly and rinse the chamomile sap from her legs. Nothing else would be in her mind. The picture of the men coming to nurse her was as lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard. Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting ever last bit of sap off – on her carelessness in taking a shortcut across the field just to save a half mile, and not noticing how high the weeds had grown until the itching was all the way to her knees. Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stocking awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling,

rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on the farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty ... Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her – remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that.

Like the baby's fury that terrorizes the house, Sethe's memory continually threatens her with destruction.

Sethe's life changes when a piece of her past comes into her present: "As if to punish her further for her terrible memory, sitting on the porch not forty feet away was Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men" (6). The presence of Paul D on her porch and in her mind forces Sethe to confront her past. Paul D tells Sethe the terrible news of her husband Halle. He talks to her about the horrors of slavery that they had both endured at Sweet Home, and Sethe then recounts the events of her last day at Sweet Home. She says, "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it ... And they took my milk ... And they took my milk!" (16-7). Paul D violently awakens memories which Sethe has fought hard to forget. "Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make white women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could" (17). Sethe cries and shares the burden of her past with Paul D and "what she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands" (18). Sethe asks herself:

Would there be a little space ... a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread? Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal – not even leave the stove – and feel the hurt her back out to. Trust things and *remember things* because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?” (my emphasis, 18).

In Paul D’s arms, Sethe can share the burden of her past, but the pain cannot remain a distant haunting – Paul D, like Sophie’s therapist, forces Sethe to meet her past face to face.

The text narratively crafts this transition – the moment when Sethe allows her past into the present – as violent altercation between Paul D and the ghost of 124:

“God damn it! Hush up!” Paul D was shouting, falling reaching for anchor.

“Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. (19)

“It was gone” – Paul D had evicted the haunt from the house just as he had forced Sethe to awake her buried memories. Sethe gains a momentary peace, a release from the pain of “beating back the past.” But with this peace comes a responsibility to deal with her memories, to deal with Beloved.

Personifying this new shift in Sethe's life, we are introduced to the character of Beloved as a childlike woman. As a fitting ending to her first community outing since the death of "crawling already?" baby, Sethe comes home to find Beloved waiting outside her house. Ushering in a new stage in Sethe's life, this scene is replete with birthing imagery – the presence of Paul D has "given life" to Sethe's memories and to the guilt that she has been suppressing for eighteen years. Beloved stays with Sethe and becomes the vehicle for her further to acknowledge and share her past. Sethe's past sustains Beloved: "It became a way to feed her ... Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (38). Sharing her past with Beloved is therapeutic for Sethe – it provides her with a kind of healing even Paul D couldn't bring her: "Even when Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there – like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left" (38). It also gives her a release: "Sethe was excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember" (183). Thus, as Sophie's therapist tells Sophie to give her father a face, Beloved encourages Sethe to face her demons.

The "unexpected pleasure" that Beloved gives Sethe turns problematic, however, when Sethe identifies Beloved as the reincarnation of her "crawling already?" baby. She understands Beloved's return as a forgiveness that will allow her finally to be free of her past. Sethe thinks, "I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all" (183). However, moving from guilt to forgiveness will not free Sethe because she is still contained by the binary construction which defines these emotions as

mutually exclusive categories. Sethe must actively deal with the shadow of the decolonial imaginary in order to move from oppression to freedom. And so, Sethe's remembering does not bring her peace: instead of running from her past, she now obsesses over it. Before, Sethe silenced Beloved, keeping the memories of her past in check, but now Sethe lets the past control her. Sethe becomes a slave to her past, a slave to her *misery baby*. The text makes meaning here about the workings of binary systems – they are always tied to oppression. Sethe's movement from guilt to forgiveness only reverses the master/slave binary, it does not overturn it. Thus, until Sethe finds an ironical understanding of her past, she remains its prisoner.

Inasmuch as Sethe represents a “colonized” history, her daughter Denver's life represents a moment of independence. The text uses the imagery of Beloved's death to define Denver's freedom, and to link the two sisters as *misery babies*, both children of the same past. Denver says, “Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk” (205). Combining Sethe's milk with Beloved's blood demonstrates how the sacrifice of Beloved gives Denver her freedom. Denver's sustenance becomes not just her mother's nourishment, but her sister's death.

Denver is the only character in the novel who has not experienced slavery directly, and yet because of Sethe's inability to deal with the past Denver is imprisoned in the present. As *misery baby*, she too is haunted by the shadow of colonialism. Denver has no history, represented by her isolation from her neighbors. Both literally and figuratively, she has no connection to the U.S. Black community. And thus, Denver's coming of age is stymied; without an understanding of her past, she cannot have a future. Sethe's decision to kill “crawling already?” baby gave Denver her freedom, but it also

forced her into a life of seclusion, losing first her community, then her siblings, and finally her grandmother. For Denver, as *misery baby* to come of age, she must have an understanding of how the past determines her present.

Because Denver has no understanding of the past, and no connection to the community, she has no means to empower herself, no way to come of age. Sethe's need to silence her own past prevents the kind of understanding that Denver needs to form her own identity. Sethe "and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries" (58). As a Black woman in post-emancipation America, Denver is suffering the effects of slavery without understanding how it created the conditions of her present. Denver is exiled from the community because she cannot understand her mother's "misery."

Denver's only company is the ghost of "crawling already?" baby. But, as a tenuous connection to the experience of slavery, the haunt of 124 allows only an intangible friendship. The arrival of Paul D, and all the memories that he stirs up, disturbs this friendship, while also creating the possibility of a new one. Paul D challenges Sethe's ability to keep Denver "from the past that was still waiting for her" (42). And because of this challenge, Denver interprets Paul D as a threat. Eventually, however, Denver realizes, that Paul D provides her with a connection to Sethe's past.

Denver's gradual ability to identify with the larger Black community experience becomes embodied in the developing friendship she has with Beloved. Beloved asks Sethe to tell stories, and so Denver begins to learn of Sethe's past; she hears the stories of Sweet Home and begins to understand the experience of slavery. This knowledge of the



past helps give Denver a context for understanding her life. However, as with Sethe, this (re)union with the past is necessarily problematic.

Denver recognizes, before Sethe, that Beloved is an incarnation of Sethe's past. Seeing Beloved choke their mother, Denver realizes that Sethe has become a slave to her past, and that it threatens to kill her:

“You did it, I saw you,” said Denver

“What?”

“I saw your face. You made her choke.”

“I didn't do it.”

“You told me you loved her.”

“I fixed it, didn't I? Didn't I fix her neck?”

“After. After you choked her neck.”

“I kissed her neck. I didn't choke it. The circle of iron choked it.”

“I saw you.” Denver grabbed Beloved's arm.

Denver wants to warn her mother, to save her from her past, but Denver is also worried that she will lose Beloved, her only connection to history, and a tool for her coming of age.

Sethe completely gives herself over to Beloved. Beloved takes her strength, and Sethe surrenders her life to this piece of her past. And with Sethe's growing obsession, Denver is alone again. But this time, with an understanding of the past, Denver has the strength to save herself. “Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (243). It is remembering that gives Denver the courage to leave 124. Recalling conversations

about the past “and her grandmother’s last and final words,” Denver goes into the community and asks for help. Denver understands that the past and the present are not distinct periods. She recognizes that Sethe’s act of killing “crawling already?” baby exists ironically in both the past and the present. Thus, Denver realizes that to free her mother and herself she must actively address her ghost. Gaining strength, Denver goes out in search of work. She realizes that “somebody had to be saved, but unless [she] got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a *self* to look out for and preserve” (my emphasis, 252). Only with an understanding of the past – both her own and the collective past of the community – can Denver develop her own identity. Despite the fact that she was born free, Denver, as *misery baby*, recognizes that she shares the history of slavery. Beloved, a child of these two worlds has allowed her access to the silenced history of her mother. Armed with irony as a strategy, Denver can exorcise the evil of the past without dismissing its memory. In contrast to Sethe who exists only in the past or the present, Denver uses irony to remember the past without letting it destroy her future.

The climax of the novel replays the scene of Sethe’s “misery,” but this time Sethe has help freeing herself from the evil that is consuming her. With all the women of the community chanting in unison, Beloved is exorcised from 124. As Sethe has been growing thin and weak, Beloved has grown big and strong, her round belly swelling with pregnancy. Her pregnant body becomes a symbol of a genealogy of *misery baby*: if Sethe cannot come to a new understanding of her past, one that resists the easy binaries of guilt and forgiveness, then the misery of Beloved will be reproduced, as Sethe’s misery was reproduced in Beloved in Denver. Confronting her past, literally reliving her

actions, allows Sethe to come to terms with Beloved's death. Sethe cannot save "crawling already?" baby through active "rememory" of the incident, but she can save herself. Thus, Sethe's "rememory" frees 124: Beloved's absence represents a new relationship between Sethe and the shadow of her past. This moment in the text also marks Beloved's coming of age. By embracing irony, Beloved's exorcism marks an understanding of Sethe's act that exists outside the binary construction of right and wrong: she is understood, but not forgiven. It is the active "rememory" of Sethe's act, and not a judgment of it, that frees 124 from the shadow of the decolonial imaginary.

As *misery baby*, Beloved represents both pain and promise. She is both a negative and a positive force in the lives of Sethe and Denver. And though she brings the possibility of destruction for Sethe, it is only out of this situation that Denver, the other *misery baby* of the text has the opportunity to escape. Beloved emphasizes the ironic connection between slavery and freedom. For U.S. Blacks, complete freedom necessitates a "rememory" of slavery. Like Sethe and Denver, the U.S. must remove the temporal boundary between the past and present to understand the ways in which we stand in the shadow of the "decolonial imaginary." By helping Sethe and Denver both to remember and forget, Beloved as *misery baby* enables a future that acknowledges the past, but does not stay there. So too, the U.S. must acknowledge that the past and the present exist ironically in order to deal with the ghost of slavery. Beloved's role as *misery baby* demonstrates that the past, the present, and the future are inextricably tied together and that the development of one necessitates the development of the others.

The role of Beloved as *misery baby* in this novel has important ramifications for U.S. race relations and nation-building in that it underlines the need for everyone in the

U.S., not just U.S. Blacks, to understand and acknowledge the nation's history of slavery. It involves all everyone in the U.S. inasmuch as the text proves the difficulty of community building or nation-building in isolation. In her personal narrative in the text, Beloved makes explicit her ties to all enslaved Africans. They have a shared history that unites them and provides the possibility of potent coalitions.

It is the role of *misery baby* to interrogate the borders of identity, to redefine both self and nation. Beloved does this by bringing the past into the present in her concept of "rememory." She forces Sethe and Denver to find balance between these previously opposing forces, to move memory from a static noun to an active and ever-present verb. By the end of the text Sethe is stronger, she has reconciled with Paul D, and she has a new sense of self. She has found peace with her "misery" in the netherworld between "right" and "wrong," and though it cannot breed complete forgiveness, the understanding is therapeutic. Sethe's final words in the text evidence her moment of transition, and a possible rebirth. Paul D. tells her "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." Sethe asks, "Me? Me?" (273).

Beloved also enables a new kind of freedom for Denver as *misery baby*. Denver understands that although she did not live her mother's past, it is a history that they both share. Armed with this acknowledgement of collective ties and a redefinition of community, Denver becomes a symbol of the future. When Sethe kills Beloved she ensures that her family will not return to slavery. Inasmuch as Sethe's actions maintain Denver's physical freedom, when Denver goes out in search of help from the community she sets off the chain of events that will free Sethe from Beloved.

Beloved too finds her freedom in the redemption of this climactic moment. Forcing Sethe to deal with her past, Beloved achieves a sort of freedom that allows her to transcend the physical world which had imprisoned her. She no longer haunts 124 in spirit or flesh. This moment marks her own transition, her own coming of age and her own freedom. In danger of reproducing (both literally and figuratively) the evil that terrorizes Sethe, her exorcism gives Sethe new life, but it also marks the new life of their community. If Beloved can be said to represent the history of U.S. slavery, then we can identify the force of this past in shaping both the present and the future. Thus, like the other *misery babies*, Beloved is a child of two worlds. Beloved is a mediator between her sister and her mother, who represent the extremes of Sethe/past and Denver/future in the text. Further, the meanings the text makes around Sethe's act of killing Beloved can posit the importance of understanding and acknowledgement, and mark these as distinct from forgiveness. Beloved's successful coming of age brings about an ironic understanding of Sethe's past – neither forgiving her actions, nor letting herself be consumed by them.

## IR/RESOLUTION

“WE KNOW PEOPLE BY THEIR STORIES ... VALUE YOURSELF”<sup>7</sup>

*I have crossed an ocean  
I have lost my tongue  
from the root of the old  
one  
a new one has sprung*

-- “Epilogue,” Grace Nichols

I suggest that women’s fiction in the Caribbean has presented us with a model for the production of theory – one that has decidedly decentered the individual and has focused more on dialogue – call and response. This model, just like the Krik and the Krak of Haitian storytelling, gives an active role to both the storyteller and the hearer; but, perhaps more importantly, it also suggests that story telling, or even “theory telling” is a two-way process, a back and forth that is always grounded in community enterprise. In the final section of *Krik? Krak!*, “Epilogue: Women Like Us,” Danticat uses braiding hair as a metaphor for writing. She says, “When you write, it’s like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them into unity” (220). Similarly, I have sought to bring together the differing voices of Edwidge Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison, like the three strands of a braid, allowing each to keep her distinct voice, but weaving them into a stronger unity. Individually, each of these stories tells a history of women in a specific context; taken together, the stories

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<sup>7</sup> Danticat, “Caroline’s Wedding” p. 185.

begin to merge into one history, a stronger history of postcolonial women in the African-diaspora.

I want to posit *misery baby* as a theory of postcolonial women specifically because these women are almost never granted the status of theorist, but also because I feel that the unique subjectivities of these women allow for a new and different kind of theory production that both recognizes theorizing as a community enterprise and allows for the possibility of fiction to theorize. In talking about “Epilogue: Women Like Us,” Danticat says:

I feel like growing up during the dictatorship I think there was a lot of silence forced on both men and women, but particularly on women. The Epilogue was really to talk about what it means to write out of silence. To write at a time when it was really a punishable act to write. Because a lot of writers at that time were exiled from Haiti because of their writing. And others were put in prison. And so it works to discuss first what it really means to first write out of a political context out of silence and second what it means to be a woman writing. And I definitely think things are somewhat easier now, but I think because of literacy being somewhat lower among women from where I come from, it makes it harder for women to be writers.

Danticat recognizes the social constraints of gender, race, class and nation that allow only some to write. I would add to her statement that the ability to theorize is even more restricted. And thus I think it is important to recognize the trope of *misery baby* as a site of theory production both because it allows debates of postcolonialism, globalization, and nation to incorporate the voices of women often absent from the official dialogue, and

because this example of theory-production might open up the locations of theory, allowing for a more democratic and inclusive space for thinkers to voice their ideas and make social change.

In “Epilogue,” Danticat writes that women who both “cook and write” are “kitchen poets,” who “slip phrases into their stew and wrap meaning around their pork before frying it.” But at the same time Danticat cautions that writing is not accepted for women, especially poor women, for whom the leisure to write is a luxury. She says, “Women like you don’t write.” And I would add, “women like you don’t theorize” – certainly not about issues of postcolonialism, globalization, and nation. The vanguard of these emerging fields is mostly male, rendering women absent from important debates, even though women in the third world are often the most affected by “development” programs. While redefining the structures which restrict women from these vanguard positions is important, we can also listen to the conversations women are having around these issues by allowing for the possibility of fiction to theorize about these issues.

In her essay “Challenges of the Struggle for Sovereignty: Changing the World Versus Writing Stories,” Merle Hodge posits the power of fiction to make social change. She says:

The potential of Caribbean literature for positively affecting the development of the Caribbean is an untapped resource. Caribbean fiction can help to strengthen our self-image, our resistance to foreign domination, our sense of the oneness of the Caribbean and our willingness to put our energies into the building of *the Caribbean nation*. (emphasis mine, 203)



It is in support of this argument that I offer *misery baby* as a trope designed to create conversation and understanding not only within the Caribbean, but also in the larger African diaspora. And so it is my argument that the body of work that has emerged from women writing in the Americas already represents a kind of amorphous theory in “the struggle for sovereignty.” The character of *misery baby*, I argue, presents one model for this process, a process that posits a politics of both remembering and forgetting as well as an ironical concept of nation and citizenship that transgresses boundaries of both geography and identity.

*And over the years when you have needed us, you have always cried “Krik?” and  
we have answered “Kraak!” and it has shown that you have not forgotten us.*

*-- Edwidge Danticat, Krik? Krak!*

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