

**‘BETWEEN THE SPECTERS’:  
CARIBBEAN NEO-SLAVE NOVELS BY CANADIAN WOMEN**

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*Bola dipped her head into the water and came up. She had to come out now, light a fire, make some food. It was becoming breezy. A spray of sand along the beach obscured the children for a moment. She could hear their voices in surprise, the laughter and astonishment. She swam back to shore to hear their complaints and have them hover at her dress tail for the rest of the day. Her dress lost its sail, it clung to her hips as she came out of the water and the crowd of them clutched her wet body. ... “Boto bayena mama ...” “Why do you leave me?” “Quiet!” she sang out above the sea noise. “Or I’ll go back in the sea.”*

–Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon: A Novel*

*Back on the beach in Martinique. The island of her grandmother, the island of flowers, white sand and bending palms, the country of those who return. A child danced at the edge of the water. He splashed and laughed. His voice echoed as he called, Mama! Eleanor took his hand and they entered the water, warm, vast. They swam. ... A voice said, lay it down now, Child. A long sailboat scuttled over the water, leaving a wake like the undulating veil of a bride. Lay it all down” (Jaeckel, 299).*

–Jenny Jaeckel, *House of Rougeaux: A Novel*

By pairing Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon: A Novel* with Jenny Jaeckel’s *House of Rougeaux: A Novel*, I aim to create a literary space, a ‘between the specters,’ if you will, and in doing so I re-interpret well-established, and typically male-dominated, “root theory” in the Caribbean from a postcolonial feminist perspective. In the first part of this paper, I argue that this postcolonial feminist rootedness contests and transforms traditional male- and colonial-dominated master narratives and discourses by the centralizing of Afro-maternal genealogies, voices, and figures in both novels. In the second part of this paper, I claim that

Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, published in 1999, and Jenny Jaeckel's *House of Rougeaux*, published in 2018, constitute Canada's important contributions to the woman's neo-slave historical novel. To date, Brand's and Jaeckel's novels provide the only portraits of slavery during nineteenth-century Caribbean plantation life and the lives of slave descendants in the contemporary Canadian diaspora; these recent re-imaginings of the history and legacy of slavery in the Caribbean by Canadian women writers ought also to be read as effectively rewriting Canada's history, including its relation to the slave past. Therefore, these texts move not only forwards from the Caribbean slave past to a contemporary Canadian diaspora but also backwards from a haunted Canadian diaspora to the roots of its Caribbean slave past.

### **I. Rootedness and Maternal Genealogy**

While writer-scholars such as Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, and Patrick Chamoiseau all support a notion of *Créolité* or Caribbeanness that recognizes the region's paradoxical heterogeneity as well as its shared history, they do not take into account the notion's gender dimensions. One of the goals of my research is to show how gendered root theories are employed in Jaeckel's and Brand's feminist novels, thereby expanding upon and developing traditional root theory. Brathwaite asserts that Caribbean "unity is submarine" (64) and there is a belief in a "common Caribbean history" (*Caribbean Discourse* 62), characterized by "subterranean convergence" (66), "transversality" (66), and "submarine roots" (67). For Glissant, however, root theory is best reconceived as rhizomatic, that is as "an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root" (*Poetics* 11). In *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in*

*the Family Tree*, Jarrod Hayes concurs that “Glissant’s notion of the rhizomatic root ... not only is attached to a specific geocultural context—the Caribbean—but also allows for an identity rooted in that place. ... [H]e keeps rootedness” (11). This paper on Canadian women’s fictions of the Caribbean likewise conveys a sense of rootedness but emphasizes diasporic mother-child relationships, Afro-maternal genealogies, and the importance of the maternal to any theory of the Caribbean, rhizomatic or otherwise.

Caribbean peoples whose ancestors were slaves converge in both novels. Brand’s novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* begins in 1824 in Trinidad with Marie-Ursule, a slave, poisoning herself and, with their consent, her fellow slaves. However, she saves her daughter Bola from this fate and arranges for another slave to take Bola to a secret refuge. Brand’s polyphonic novel unfolds through several female voices, from Marie-Ursule’s and Bola’s to their descendants in the late twentieth century. One of the most important of these descendants is Eula, who lives in Toronto. Eula gives birth to a daughter in 1982, whom she names Bola, but instead of raising her daughter in Canada, she sends her back to Trinidad.

In *House of Rougeaux*, Jenny Jaeckel continues the work of recuperating an African female centered genealogy begun by Brand. The genealogy begins in the late eighteenth century with Iya the slave mother and ends with her descendants living in the late twentieth century in Martinique and Canada. Like Brand’s Eula, who sends her Canadian daughter Bola to live in Trinidad in the 1990s, the chapter on Eleanor, which concludes the novel, describes the century before. In 1890, she travels from her home in Québec to Martinique where her illegitimate son Gerard lives. In the passage quoted in the epigraph of this paper, Eleanor takes her son’s hand in hers as they enter the water together (unlike Bola, who in 1821 stands on a Trinidadian shore threatening to return to the sea if her children do not stop pestering her). Eleanor tells us that

Martinique is the island of her grandmother, born into slavery and forced to emigrate to Québec with her white mistresses. Martinique is also the symbolic island of Afro-Caribbean grandmothers like Jaeckel's Iya and Brand's Marie Ursule, former slaves: it is through these foremothers that these daughterly figures speak their stories.

Caroline Rody contends that a "Caribbean romance with maternal history" (109) characterizes this kind of women's writing. The submarine realm or the sea itself, as the leading writers and the passages I began this essay with emphasize, is often viewed as the Caribbean's mother or its birthplace; Walcott, for example, ventriloquizing the colonizer and the colonized in a call-and-response technique typical of the Caribbean, writes in his poem "The Sea is History:"

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that grey vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History." (1-4)

Walcott directly questions colonizing "Sirs" who have denied History to others: indigenous peoples, slaves, indentured servants, or immigrants. How the sea functions as a (counter)archive in relation to gender and in particular the mother, however, is not a priority in Walcott's work, but it certainly is for Brand and Jaeckel: as feminist Caribbean scholars Verena Theile and Marie Drews argue, this sea, this "archive tells ... the multiple stories ... of women rooted in the ... precarious past and troublesome present, stories that have been shrouded in silence and eras[ures]" (viii).

Maternal history, i.e. what has been constituted as non-history, and conceptions of cyclic roots—subterranean and submarine—are transformed into a lunar song in Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of Moon* and into the ancestral mother's song in Jaeckel's *House of Rougeaux*.

“Creating and revising H/history” therefore “connotes infinite cyclic renewal, diversity and protean change, as opposed to the ‘falsifying’ concept of History as being linear and symmetrical” (O’Reilly Herrera 91). According to Glissant, “[t]he implosion of Caribbean history (of the converging histories of our peoples) relieves us of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course” (*Discourse* 66). He writes that “History with a capital H ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together” (64). This non-history is further defined by Glissant as “ruptures ... that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade ... in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces” (61). I suggest that this non-history or missing history characterizes Canadian-Caribbean feminist interventions when it comes to neo-slave discourses. Between the specters of the flow of lunar maternal history and maternal song, the crystalline shell of History can be broken and a feminine imaginary can be envisioned. The historical novelist’s commitment to resurfacing these “submerged mothers,” to use Brathwaite’s term (17), therefore demonstrates the importance of the Afro-maternal roots in relation to History.

A leading authority on women’s historical novel, Diana Wallace, likewise contends that historical fiction, a literary genre which blends fact with fiction, is a most suitable medium for women writers because “women have been violently excluded both from ‘history’ (the events of the past) and from ‘History’ (written accounts of the past)” (“Letters” 25). Traditionally, women’s history has been denigrated because women’s lives and voices have been characterized as romantic, private, unhistorical or ahistorical, fantastical, anti-nationalist, even escapist (Wallace, *Woman’s* 15). Despite the popularity of the historical novel genre with Canadian writers and readers, the fact that Brand’s book remained the singular novel by a Canadian writer taking up the subject of Caribbean slavery until Jaekel’s publication is somewhat surprising, if not

perplexing. Is it because in Canada there is a “reliance on heterosexual eroticism and masculinist images of culture and history” that, as Heather Smyth argues, also exists in the Caribbean (2)? Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory suggest that the Caribbean woman writer has “been historically silenced in the various ‘master discourses’” such as History (1). Why does this seem to still hold true for Canadian writers? Do the same masculinist tendencies apply?

Both Brand and Jaeckel support Glissant’s view that the writer be “capable of an imaginative reconstruction of the past in the void left by History, and that the Caribbean in general suffers from the phenomenon of nonhistory” (Dash xxxii). Glissant writes that “[b]ecause the Caribbean consciousness was broken up by sterile barriers, the writer must be able to give expression to all those occasions when these barriers were partially broken. Because the Caribbean notion of time was fixed in the void of an imposed nonhistory, the writer must contribute to reconstituting its tormented chronology” (*Discourse* 65). Asserting such an act of resistance, both Brand and Jaeckel turn to history and reposition their genealogies around a strong slave woman. Brand writes in her acknowledgements that after reading V.S. Naipaul’s *The Loss of El Dorado: A History*, she “found the story of Thisbe who in 1802 was hanged, mutilated and burnt, her head spiked on a pole, for the mass deaths by poisoning on an estate. At her hanging she was reported to have said, ‘This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered.’ She became my character Marie Ursule” (302). The historical Marie Ursule is reimagined by Brand as a resilient rebel figure who sacrifices herself and poisons her fellow slaves in 1824 in order to end their suffering and potentially improve future black lives.

Brand’s and Jaeckel’s feminist revisions of Caribbean and Canadian history provide glimpses between the specters of a maternal non-history defined by the hidden moon, roots, and the sea. Despite their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, neither novel centralizes wars

or the “political events and the deeds of ‘great men’” (Von Dirke 417), the classic hallmarks of historical fiction—instead, they offer portraits of brave slave women and their descendants. By prioritizing “women’s lives and loves, their families and their feelings,” these novels “give the concerns of the so-called private sphere the status and interest of history” (Light 59).

Furthermore, Riva Berlant-Schiller and William M. Maurer convincingly argue that in Caribbean societies, generally speaking, the “overlapping of domestic and community spheres renders such a dichotomy” between “public (male) and private (female) useless for understanding sex roles and ideologies” (qtd. in López Springfield xv). *At the Full and Change of the Moon* and *House of Rougeaux* effectively pre-empt concerns voiced by scholars like Melissa Walker: that in Afro-Caribbean historical novels, a “focus on home and family implies that public history in the novel is ‘something that happens to white people,’ whereas black people seem to live only in the private domain and are thus effectively placed outside of history” (Walker qtd. in Lauret 97–98). The Canadian version of the Caribbean woman’s historical novel thus does important work in undoing many long-held beliefs about historical fiction, including the separation of private and public along gendered lines.

Both Brand’s and Jaeckel’s novels also advance complex understandings of the interconnectedness between the maternal, slavery, and history. Each novel opens with a family tree, which concentrates on the African-Caribbean slave woman. More than a handy resource to keep track of characters, the family tree serves multiple functions such as 1) highlighting “the erasure of matrilineage” (Wallace, *Woman’s* 98) in official history and thereby calling into question the historical records’ system of and criteria for valuation, 2) suggesting a notion of *esprit Caribbean* that dissolves national and linguistic borders and extends beyond the region to the diaspora and 3) disclosing both authors’ critical postcolonial feminist frameworks of root

theory for their novels. In doing so, both novels support Luce Irigaray's definition of the maternal genealogy:

There is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mother's side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters. Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (44)

These texts strongly suggest that rewriting not only Caribbean history but also Canadian history can be sustained only through recognizing the intersection of race and gender, e.g. by re-centering the African-Caribbean mother figure.

Gil Zeheva Hochberg too sees an important relation between history, memory and the maternal: "By assigning mother ... the role of a 'medium' an alternative narrative emerges as a direct confrontation with history, 'woman' (as mother) is aligned with memory as an alternative to *history*" (2). This is evident, even at first glance, when the reader learns that African-born Iya, the Yoruban word for mother, begins the eponymous house of Rougeaux in Jaeckel's work, and Marie Ursule, originally from Guadeloupe, founds her line of several generations in Trinidad.

Because maternal history has often been designated as non-history, the commitment to maternal history and the legacy of slavery is demonstrated by both authors' inclusion of a family tree which begins with a slave woman and extends into the Canadian diaspora. Marie Ursule and Iya defy the historical high value of the "slave woman's reproductive capacity" (Davis 6-7).



Both women refuse to bolster the slave economy of the plantation by having few children, and by giving birth to only those conceived out of love. For instance, Iya's daughter's name is Abeje, which corresponds to "we asked to have this one." Abeje emphasizes Iya's maternal agency. Her maternal prayers are answered when she gives birth to her daughter. The catastrophic effects of being both a mother and a slave, however, are also clear. As Angela Y. Davis notes, "Slave women were not seen as mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labour force" (7); thus mothers and children were often separated from each other by being sold or by death. Though fictional, the genealogy that begins with the mother is one important way of re(s)taking this forbidden maternal relationship and lost heritage. By revisiting the traumatic past, it shifts towards healing.

Prior to the mass suicide, Marie Ursule, as already mentioned, allows for one conceit: she saves her young daughter, Bola. The girl's biological father is excluded from the family tree. He remains unnamed and unknown. Not even an empty dash marks his presence. A possible reason for this willful exclusion could be that the father's child is Marie Ursule's owner and master, M. de Lambert, and that this violent history is too painful or difficult to remember. Most likely, however, is that the father is another slave named Kamena because he is included in the genealogy, though he is not directly linked as Bola's father. Brand's placement of Marie Ursule at the beginning of her long line of descendants refuses to forget her and by doing so arguably even apotheosizes her. Rivalling the traditional, singular, paternal Christian monotheistic deity, Marie Ursule, a black woman, mother, and slave, is attributed impressive power—so much so that her existence haunts the present and future of those in Trinidad and in the Canadian diaspora. This permits one to read Marie Ursule's pregnancy and Bola's birth as a kind of parthenogenesis,

a literal and metaphorical virgin creation that centralizes and mythologizes the maternal African slave figure within Caribbean history and fiction.

According to Hochberg, “[w]ith the absence of the symbolic patriarchal figure ... ‘the monstrosity’ of a strong maternal figure (‘with the capacity to name’) offers a radical identity position for ... women and an alternative narrative of female empowerment, based on the specific (destruction of) the ... family during slavery” (2). Indeed, men play minor roles in both novels. In Jaeckel’s work, for instance, Iya, a black woman, mother, and slave like Marie Ursule, is named as the singular progenitor of the house of Rougeaux. Though the father is briefly referred to later in the text as having been kidnapped and sold into slavery, he remains nameless and it is curious that Jaeckel omits him from the tree.

The erasure of the father throws into sharp relief the violent exclusion the African mother has traditionally suffered. But the omission of paternal names also clues the reader into the fictionalization of the mother’s name. Iya is not a name but rather the generic term for mother; arguably, she has no identity as a woman, but is defined by her maternal function. Likewise, Marie Ursule’s name is not her own. Despite not knowing whence the mother has come, the reader is given brief glimpses into Marie Ursule’s past, learning that prior to being brought to Trinidad by Ursuline nuns, she was owned and sold by M. Rochard in Guadeloupe. Brand writes that, in Guadeloupe, “[h]er ears’ tips had been cut for rebellion there ... and many charges laid against her for insolence” (10). Purchased by persecuted Ursuline nuns, they “move from place to place, from Guadeloupe to Martinique and then to, Trinidad” (9). One might surmise that Marie Ursule is her baptized name, as Brand explains that the Ursuline nuns “baptized all their slaves, hoping for obedience, but they could not depend on baptism strictly. The lash was handy” (11). Given that the nuns are of the Ursuline Order, Marie Ursule’s name indicates that she is

their property. Marie Ursule's existence, her history, is defined only in relation to her slavers, in this case Christian nuns but Her "true-true name," to quote from Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (21), is unknown and unknowable. A name, however, is a source of power and authority, as Marie Ursule proves when she takes responsibility for the deaths of her fellow plantation slaves, confessing "gladly to her own name alone" (21). Marie Ursule subverts the master's power to name and the control over her or any slave's life when she proudly reclaims that very same name.

Complicating my claim that Marie Ursule is her baptized name, Lucy Evans states:

Marie Ursule's name closely resembles that of a goddess from the Haitian Vodoo pantheon, Erzulie. This mythical figure ... fought in the Haitian slave rebellion in the late eighteenth century. Erzulie could thus be seen as a precursor for the fictional character Marie Ursule, who organises a collective mass suicide on a plantation in Trinidad in the early nineteenth century. Melanie Otto describes Erzulie as "an independent childbearing woman, who offers the possibility of having a child without a man," and in doing so "also offers an alternative family structure" which reflects the all-female households characteristic of many Caribbean societies. (6)

Considering Marie Ursule as a composite of Caribbean memory and historical record is productive, given that writers like Jaeckel, who are resurrecting the Afro-Caribbean maternal past, rely on similar textual strategies.

The relation between the Haitian goddess, Marie Ursule, and Christianity is strengthened when she is sold by her master Rochard to the Ursuline nuns. Marie Ursule whispers to her new masters in the only French phrase included in the novel, "*Pain c'est viande beque, vin c'est sang*

*beque, nous va mange pain beque nous va boir sang beque*” (11). Brand translates this as “[b]read is the flesh of the white man, wine is the blood of the white man, we will eat the white man’s flesh, we will drink the white man’s blood” (11). That the name “Marie” multifariously means “wished-for child,” “bitter,” and “rebellion” and is a variation of Mary, the proclaimed virgin mother of Jesus (Campbell), strengthens reading Marie Ursule as a counter-Mary: she is a black female slave virgin mother whose daughter Bola represents a Christ-like figure. Unlike the Christian God, who sacrifices his only son, Marie-Ursule sacrifices herself and saves her only daughter. One can also interpret Marie Ursule’s cannibalistic threats as a direct confrontation with the institution of slavery and, by association, Christianity. Her threatening words refer to Catholicism’s transubstantiation—the symbolic gesture of eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus Christ during communion.

Any definitive knowledge of Marie Ursule’s date of birth or her parents, however, is omitted. Whether Marie Ursule has been born in Africa or the Caribbean is unclear too—which highlights not only omissions in the historical record but also Brand’s refusal to separate the Caribbean from the African mother figure. Iya and Marie Ursule, the Caribbean slaves in these texts, are simultaneously African daughter-mothers, Caribbean daughter-mothers, and Canadian-Caribbean daughter-mothers; all three represent maternal non-history.

## II. Neo-slave Novels and Canada

Brand’s fictional writing on the historical maternal, like Jaeckel’s, delves into genealogy, root theory, and memory as a means to disrupt the vicious repetition of the slave’s existence: it is likewise not a coincidence that early in each novel, both mothers are murdered by their masters and their later Canadian daughters are estranged from their Caribbean heritage. The morning that Marie Ursule murders her fellow slaves and in turn is murdered by her master, Marie Ursule

clairvoyantly sees her future generations. In one particular example, she perceives a post/neo-slavery world, entailing drugs, deportation, migration, poverty, and mothers separated from their children: “The lives of her great-great-grandchildren, their lives would spill all over floors and glass cases and the verandas and streets in the new world coming. Their hearts would burst” (20). She foresees her relatives living scattered, separated from their maternal ancestry and maternal homeland, Trinidad. Marie Ursule reveals a version of an untold African-Caribbean past, but her words also foreshadow the lives of her descendants—her survivors, all of whom are haunted, even if unwittingly, by slavery (see Caruth 4).

Typically, the genre of the neo-slave novel is associated with antebellum American novels like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or with novels set entirely in the Caribbean, such as those by Maryse Condé, Marlon James, or Andrea Levy, to name a few. Within Canada’s literary and historiographic discourses, slavery is often cast as something that happened elsewhere, committed by someone else, in some other time. Yet, there is a growing body of literature engaging with slavery’s role in the Canadian past, for instance *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill, George Elliot Clarke’s *Beatrice Chancy*, and Afua Cooper’s *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal*. And while it is true that Brand’s novel does not offer any insight specifically into Canada’s slave past, Jaeckel’s does. Jaeckel describes how Iya’s granddaughter Hetty, born a slave in 1815, is forced to accompany her two sugar estate heiresses to Quebec City. In Quebec City she eventually meets Dax Rougeaux, whom Jaeckel depicts as “the product of an alliance between a Frenchman and an enslaved African woman. Because of the Code Noir, wherein the child followed the condition of the mother, he was born enslaved, but he was manumitted by his father when he turned thirteen. His father had arranged for his apprenticeship with a saddler” (166). Dax falls in

love with Hetty and upon asking her to marry him tells her: “I will purchase your freedom, ... I will work without stopping” (167); Jaeckel further informs the reader “the next year, 1833, brought as Dax put it, *divine happenstance* when the king of England abolished slavery in the Canadas. Dax and Hetty were married and went away to Montreal” (168). In Montreal, the couple becomes actively involved in advocating for abolitionism in the United States and begins a family. At this point in the novel, Martinique’s past is still somewhat vivid: “Hetty named her children for her forbears” (169), including her aunt Abeje, the famed healer and Iya’s daughter; yet within a few generations, this history will become non-history.

It is also important at this point to question why a novel seemingly committed to the Afro-maternal genealogy is named after a French slave owner. Unlike the plantation owner Monsieur Lambert in Brand’s novel, Rougeaux is a slave owner because he owns his own child Dax. Why does Jaeckel call her novel *House of Rougeaux* when Rougeaux is the slave-owning father’s last name? I suggest that this is a missed opportunity for Jaeckel because her novel attempts to restore the singular Afro-Caribbean mother figure but it also falls into the trap of reinforcing the European father and his genealogy as dominant. One could however argue that Dax Rougeaux and his marriage to Hetty mark the family’s freedom; this new couple marks a new beginning, a new space, a new house.

The contemporary neo-slave novel, by definition, revisits the genre of the traditional slave narrative. These autobiographical narratives were often relayed by slaves after having achieved freedom. As scholars recognize, the narrators of these first-person original slave narratives, whose work was usually mediated by a white editor, omitted topics such as rape, which were deemed not only unspeakable but unwriteable. Fellow neo-slave historical novelist Andrea Levy notes, “if history has kept them silent then we must conjure their voices ourselves

and listen to their stories” (as qtd. in Beyer 132). Nicole N. Aljoe explains that “slaves spoke in Creole therefore texts needed translation for British readers” (3), a translation that was often performed by editors who had never set foot in the Caribbean (6). The idea was that the more convincing and authentic a slave narrative would read—after having been compiled and edited—the more it would appeal to liberal-minded Europeans and subsequently lead to abolishing slavery (3). Following the tradition of Afro-Caribbean women’s oral storytelling and of women as repositories of historical and cultural memory, the neo-slave historical novel, unlike its historical counterpart, questions the role of the colonial editor—originally purported as providing, in paternalistic terms, legitimacy, but in fact, as feminist postcolonial writing contends, delegitimizing the Afro-Caribbean voice.

Consider for instance historical slave narratives like Mary Prince’s. Prince’s editor Thomas Pringle pedantically claims that he edited and “pruned it into its present shape ... It is essentially [Mary’s] own, without any material alteration farther than what was required to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors so as to render it clearly intelligible” (qtd. in Aljoe 4). The European editor’s relation to the enslaved tale-teller is one of unequal power, suggesting in both cases that the woman’s “natural” text must be civilized. Rewriting master-texts therefore entails, as Clarisse Zimra claims, “discarding the Logos of the Father for the Silent Song of the Mother” (156). The silent song of the mother is precisely the thread that links the women’s lives in Jaeckel’s work. While each character can hear the ancestral island mother’s voice within herself, it is not perceptible to outsiders, in fact it is not speakable, translateable, or representable in Canada because it remains spectral. Nevertheless, the power of the mother’s voice can still be detected in Martinique. When Eleanor returns to Trinidad in the late nineteenth century, an older woman asks her: “Are you a daughter of the Island?” The woman’s eyes widen

in recognition and surprise and she asks: “Are you a p’tit of Meme Abeje?” (284). The granddaughter of her niece, Eleanor asks: “Do you know that name?” “Everyone knows that name, child” (284), the woman responds. On the island, connected with her maternal heritage for the first time, Eleanor begins to “hear a voice from ages ago murmuring her name, her mother, Mama” (291). The woman tells her: “The island mother has brought you here” (293), which Eleanor realizes is revelatory; “[t]he feeling was raw, but open. She felt new” (293).

The neo-slave historical novel, therefore, draws attention to its status as fiction rather than claiming itself to be fact (though it ironically draws on historical slave narratives and records). Brand’s and Jaeckel’s novels too, suggest that as readers we must be more attentive to and skeptical of the political underpinnings of texts—even slave narratives. Both novels take a relative narrative stance of distance—they are written in the third person and extend beyond the African slave mother—they branch out in various countries over several decades and centuries. By doing so, Brand and Jaeckel draw attention to the fact that every text is comprised of several voices, particularly ghostly ones (Aljoe 4).

The need to voice this non-history reflects the importance of root theory. While on the one hand root theory entails, as Glissant claims, “[s]ubmarine roots: that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches” (*Discourse* 67), it longs for stability on the other hand—it is this tension that dominates both works. In Brand’s novel, Eula, a mother based in Toronto, articulates this tension: “I would like one single line of ancestry Mama. One line from you to me and farther back, but a line that I can trace. I want a village and a seashore and a rock out in the ocean and the certainty that when the moon is full the sea will rise and for that whole time I will be watching what all of my ancestry have watched for, for all ages” (234). This paradoxical



notion of the root as both rhizomatic and singular is supported by the neo-slave conditions and migration patterns of the families in both novels. For example, Eula, now in Canada, imagines writing her dead mother in Trinidad a letter in which she contemplates the “gulf between us, the distance of water and lives” (217). This sentiment echoes the language of the past when slaves were forced to cross Atlantic. Eula further reflects about her need to find her own way in Toronto, the result of which means she cannot keep her daughter. Eula sends Bola back to Trinidad to live with her grandmother and realizes that “it was as if I had left her completely and left this family” (221).

Young Bola, estranged from her Canadian mother Eula, is portrayed as going mad after her grandmother dies. Still living and experiencing the trauma of her slave ancestors in the late twentieth century, young Bola begins to live with her grandmother’s ghost and, consequently, is perceived by those around her as a lunatic. This suggests that the present continues to separate mothers from daughters and that the refuge of the past, complete with maternal ghosts, is preferable to a patriarchal postcolonial society which deliberately forgets them. Unable to function in this world, Bola delves deeper and deeper into the past until she is imprisoned and buried in it.

In her mind, Young Bola envisions her dead grandmother and sees her appear at several key times in the novel. Most importantly, however, is that Marie Ursule also appears: “[A] lady ... came limping to our house as if one foot was sore. ... She had a heavy ring around her ankle and a rope around her throat. I loosened the rope, I fanned her as I had fanned our mother when the sun was too hot” (285). That Marie Ursule is depicted with the ring around her ankle (her punishment for a failed rebellion in 1819) speaks to the enduring physicality of slavery. In the novel’s first chapter, a few years after Marie Ursule has been relinquished of her ring, she

recounts the memory of her pain: “But the memory of that ring of iron hung on, even after it was removed. A ghost of pain around her ankle” (4). In a sense, Marie Ursule is a ghost of pain through which “slavery can be looked upon as a system which has permanently altered the black body to the point that not even Marie Ursule’s phantom can be free of the fetters of her earthly bondage” (Dhar 40). Furthermore, Nandini Dhar claims that “the ring embodie[s] slavery itself” (41) and functions as an undeniable historical artifact. From the beginning to the end of their lives, the characters in both novels invoke the past, a personal history inextricably connected to the lost mother. There is a poignant similarity to the way both novels begin and conclude: two dead Afro-Caribbean slave mothers and two daughters-mothers poised on the cusp of the future; they stand on the Caribbean beach of their maternal heritage surrounded by the sea and articulating the need to remember, in Jaeckel’s words, to “lay it all down” (299)—this simultaneous future/past mimics the style of each novel as well. In these contemporary Canadian-Caribbean women’s historical novels, the past indeed begets the present and the present begets the past, evident in reiterations of lunar, submarine, and subterranean maternal genealogies and non-history.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Marie Ursule and Iya know full well that their lives as slaves do not end with them: the trauma of slavery will persist for generations to come. A willful forgetting of the maternal, and denying her a role in history, i.e. relegating her to the realm of non-history and to haunting the margins, makes moving on impossible. Yet, Iya or Marie Ursule, like few female black slaves, cannot simply be inserted into the grand master narrative of History. Until the African-Caribbean slave woman’s past has been properly acknowledged, a deliberate forgetting, a letting go of the colonial past (Dhar 30), is neither possible nor desirable. The legal abolition of slavery,

the novels contend, is not enough to disrupt the detrimental impact (psychological and physical) the past has had and continues to have on the lives of generations. Recalling the maternal African-Caribbean female slave is therefore necessary for healing to begin. As Brand's Eula asserts in her letter to her dead mother:

History opens and closes, Mama. I was reading a book the other day about the nineteenth century and it seemed like reading about now. I think we forget who we were. Nothing is changing, it is just that we are forgetting. All the centuries past may be one long sleep. We are either put to sleep or we choose to sleep. Nothing is changing, we are just forgetting. ... I remembered what you said about Marie Ursule with her iron ring, limping through forests. I saw her caught in vines and tangle. I thought I heard her ring on wood and stone until I opened my eyes.  
(234-36)

By recuperating the genealogies of slave mothers, maternal history, and non-history, Canadian women's novels thus emerge as a powerful form of literature that is ready to confront its specters.

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