

**The Ontology of *Kont*: A New Epistemology of Temporal Aesthetics in Afro-Caribbean
Speculative Fiction**

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To Bebes, Irene Z., Janet, and Irene C. The matrilineal line that empowers and strengthens me.

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Abstract

In order to move away from discussing Caribbean texts in relation to European and American literary movements, this thesis seeks to name and define Afro-Caribbean ontology. I name this ontology *kont* and track the ways alternate relationships to reality, planes of existence, and the inability to rely on stable boundaries radically transform how Afro-Caribbean people understand the world. My definition of *kont* is built by synthesizing African theory, trauma theory, and applying an indigenous lens to Caribbean history and art forms. I investigate the impact the Middle Passage and hybridity have on the current Afro-Caribbean world view and create an epistemological framework for identifying how that worldview shapes works of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. This framework is grounded in my exploration of the relationship between the West African trickster as defined by Robert Pelton and *kont*. This exploration reveals the role of narrative structure in constructing a type of realism that I call *kontist* realism. As opposed to western realism, *kontist* realism relies on literalizing the internal experience of characters as they navigate rapid change and trauma. After defining *kont* and introducing the concept of *kontist* realism, I apply these ideas to Wilson Harris' *The Palace of The Peacock* and Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* and track the threads of *kont* in these two works of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. This analysis explores the centrality of the trickster, spatial distortion, and temporal distortion in each author's constructed reality, and argues for analyzing these texts through a Caribbean centered lens: *kont*.

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I. Introduction

Legba, the trickster figure of the Fon, has long held significance in the Caribbean as the center of Vodun traditions. Broad studies of West African trickster narratives suggest that tricksters break apart and recreate order in their cosmologies. As slippery figures, they play on the way destruction creates life and mediate the chaos of the world to both break structure—because they exist outside of it—and bring order. The trickster’s role as a mediator of chaos—born from it, and able to create order within it—makes it a figure that more easily translates across the Middle Passage. Studies like Joanne Chassot’s *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, and Identity* suggest that out of the slave ship came new systems of relation based on the trauma of the Middle Passage. Looking at hybrid Afro-Caribbean culture through this lens suggests that the trickster figures’ continued presence in African-diaspora cultures is linked to the trickster’s common mastery of metamorphosis, existence in the margins, and power over language. These qualities make the trickster figure adaptable to the new circumstance of slavery, particularly as it existed in the Caribbean. My analysis of trickster narrative forms in Black speculative fiction reveals the ontology at the heart of hybridized Afro-Caribbean cultures.

Black diasporic speculative fiction often reimagines the traumatic history of Trans-Atlantic slavery in fantastic ways to empower the African diaspora and redress the historical loss of cultural grounding. For example, in a collection of essays exploring the nature of Black women’s speculative fiction traditions, Gina Wisker points out that “the aim is to write a future which explores and expresses particular moments in history” (76) and “rewrites history and the present, reviews, and reinscribes” (74). Chiji Akoma also points out that “realism to the African Caribbean is both material and transcendent. From the ‘ordinariness’ of everyday existence to the scars of a traumatic historical experience, the community weaves narratives that validate and

give life to that existence, as well as establish themselves as the totem for group identity and destiny” (85). Here we see two seemingly opposite traditions—realism and speculative fiction—evoked to describe a similar aspect of Caribbean fiction: its desire to mend a history of cultural loss. I suggest that through an analysis of how West-African trickster narratives impact the construction of reality in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction, we can identify the ways that much of Caribbean Literature is shaped by the ontology of *kont*. This ontology is based on an understanding of reality that accepts it as inherently slippery and unstable; accepts the real and unreal as intertwined; and that accepts that at any moment one can experience both the real and unreal and create truth from those experiences.

My exploration of *kont*’s relationship to slavery, West African culture, and the broad goals of speculative fiction will form the basis of my argument wherein I will discuss *kont*’s place as a general ontology and how it can be applied to analyzing literature. I will analyze *Palace of the Peacock* from Wilson Harris’ *Guyana Quartet* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber*, two works of Caribbean speculative fiction, in order to show how understanding *kont* as an ontology opens up the texts’ construction of the real/unreal boundary as fluid. I will then reinterpret the texts and their genre classification with the epistemology established by my exploration of *kont*. My discussion of Earl Lovelace’s *Salt* will take a turn after this and examine the ways *kont* shapes a text that is not strictly a work of speculative fiction. This discussion will lead into the conclusion of my argument which will argue for further exploration of Afro-Caribbean ontologies in order to better examine the region’s literary traditions.

I have chosen the name *kont* to signify the Afro-Caribbean concept of reality because it is a creole word used to signify both the contradiction at the heart of this ontology and the French Creole oral story telling traditions of several countries like Haiti, St Lucia, and Dominica. Robert

Chaudenson links the term *kont* with the Haitian tradition of riddles. He lists a few types of stories including: “*tiré kont* [which] means ‘to tell stories, propose riddles’” (Chaudenson 281), and references Jules Faine’s exploration of storytelling traditions that list “*Conte longue*: an ordinary story... involving all sorts of subjects: fairy tales, humor” and “*Tit conte, devinette*: a sung story whose narrative is embellished with sometimes very beautiful songs. These stories are usually of the fairy-tale genre” as related definitions (qtd in Chaudenson 282). However, a St. Lucian Creole dictionary more directly conveys how *kont* captures the ontological acceptance of the slippery nature of reality. Lawrence Carrington lists three definitions for *kont*, first “prep., against, contrary to,” second “account, statement, report,” and third “story, tale, fib, fairy tale” (124). The word *kont* then circulates in discussions about resistance, business accounts, and fairy tales, taking on completely different and contradictory meanings in each different use of the term. This definition of it as an “account, statement, report” is even cited in *Essential 25000 English-Haitian Creole Law Dictionary* by Nam H Nguyen. *Kont* as a word thus signifies the slipperiness of meaning while also being at the center of serious things like formal business proceedings in Haiti.

Kont also retains its saliency as a signifier for French Creole oral story telling traditions because Chaudenson links it to the *krik krak* call and response format for stories (281). This link is significant because in the short story collection *Whispers from Cotton Tree Root*, which Hopkinson suggests forms a “Caribbean worldview, that disorienting sense of when events take you to a place that dips into archetype and otherworldliness” (*Whispers* xiii), there are a series of epigraphs that try to capture the major aesthetic qualities and traditions that link Caribbean speculative fiction. One of these epigraphs in the fifth section is titled “crick-crack” in which Hopkinson points out that “the storyteller spins her tale, getting ever more outrageous with each

weave of the web. Every so often she asks her audience, ‘Crick?’ If they’re still with her, still caught up in the threads, they reply ‘Crack’” (*Whispers* 196). The link between *kont*, this oral story telling tradition, and what Hopkinson calls a Caribbean world view is symbolic of the cyclical relationship I see between *kont* as an ontology, trickster narrative elements in speculative fiction, the aesthetic traditions that spring out of these narrative traditions, and the way Caribbean realism is ultimately influenced by this ontology.

Moreover, a new definition is called for in this discussion because “the issue of what constitutes human experience is ontological, for it concerns a community’s notion of being and its relation to the world” (Akoma 83). The salience of *kont* at the heart of business in Haiti and in storytelling while containing these contradictions parallels the way I will argue reality and stories blend in Afro-Caribbean senses of the world. This blending suggests that at every level trickster traditions shape Afro-Caribbean world views. I will demonstrate the ways *kont* is a salient structural feature of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction through my exploration of Barbara Webb’s discussion of the overlap of myth and history in the Caribbean. This exploration will help establish the roots of *kont* in the novels. I will then use Robert Pelton’s *The Trickster in West Africa* to form the basis for my discussion of the similarities between the ontology signified by tricksters in West African cultures and the way trickster structures in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction signify *kont*. I will put these findings in conversation with Soyinka’s discussion of “primal realities” and “the hinterland of transition” from *Myth, Literature and The African World* to discuss the influence of West African ontologies on *kont*. I will then discuss the indigenous influence by applying Shona N Jackson’s findings from *Creole Indigeneity* about how indigenous identity is appropriated and folded into Afro-Caribbean thought and sense of self. Building on this scholarly foundation I will explore the relationship between *kont* as

ontology and the trickster features of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. Once I have established this relationship I will trace the influence of this ontology across time and genres by discussing *Palace of the Peacock*, an early Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction work, *Midnight Robber*, a contemporary Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction work, and *Salt*, a work of fiction that makes fun of superstition while still including traces of *kont* in its construction of reality.

Discussions about these elements that I attribute to West African trickster narratives are most often discussed in terms of mythic time and cultural reconstruction in the fantastic (Webb). This is where Wilson Harris and other speculative fiction writers of his generation are most often discussed. Webb also discusses the way myth and history are not mutually exclusive, a discussion that ties into Pelton's description of different trickster functions in different cultures. Pelton notes that the Fon differentiate between history as a record of deeds and names and mythic history but see them as parts of a full picture of history. *Kont* is thus a way to interact with the "drama of consciousness" through a clearer analytical framework (Webb 5). Webb discusses the problems that come up when discussing Caribbean histories and cosmologies under the umbrella of myth (5). Similarly, when discussing Roy Heath's *A Man Come Home* and his essay "The Function of Myth" Chiji Akoma points out that "Heath's narratives make a strong case that the African-Caribbean apprehension of reality subsists on an intricate network of the several strands of experience that make up the society's cultural consciousness" (95), which is strikingly similar to the way Pelton discusses West African trickster narratives.

Both Hopkinson and Harris construct their narratives as strands of experience that allow the reader to experience this sense of reality and the fantastic simultaneously and side by side. Hopkinson primarily does this by weaving in Anansi stories as vignettes into *Midnight Robber*. This choice means the reader gets to experience the emotional and cultural context of Tan-tan's

processing of her trauma as reality just like the harsh realism of her trauma. Both the narrative description and the Anansi stories work to give us a full sense of Tan-tan's experience of guilt, fear, and her journey to healing. The non-linear nature of the vignettes and their inscription of the trauma before it happens also highlight the way that her memory and long-term experiences of the trauma are shaped by her age and the violence. Similarly, Harris constructs strands of experience by having the reader experience the deaths of the crew as dreams that blend with and depart from reality in *Palace of the Peacock*. The shifting perspectives and the way the reader's experience is shaped, warped, and filled out by the repeated incident allows Harris to reinscribe a moment with meaning by blending reality and the fantastic nature of experience to create truth.

Harris' and Hopkinson's constructions of truth resemble the ways Senghor suggests that language and truth function in "African and Negro Aesthetics." Senghor points out that "in Black Africa it is an explanation and knowledge of the world, that is to say, a sensitive participation in the reality that sustains the universe, in the surreality, or, to be more precise, in the vital forces that animate the universe" (30) and "African-Negro imagery is therefore not imagery-equation but imagery-analogy, surrealist imagery" (31) because "the listeners are endowed with double vision" (32). He discusses the relationship between surrealism, signification, and double meanings throughout his discussion of a pan-African aesthetic. This discussion is significant because it alludes at several points to what I will make clear is *kont*, a sense of reality that is more nuanced than the real/unreal binary.

My discussion of Hopkinson and Harris' constructions makes it clear how *kont* differs from magical realism—since magical realism addresses this by letting the two exist side by side, but Afro-Caribbean fiction slips between the real and the unreal do not presume these two states coexist side by side but instead consider the real and unreal intertwined rivers that weave in and

out of the characters' paths. Akoma suggests that "Harris' 'mystery of reality,' like Soyinka's 'hinterland of transition,' supplants the European mechanistic polarization of what is reality and what is not" (Akoma 84). This supplanting is significant for my discussion because it is clear that critical conversations about Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction, from both critics and the authors themselves, are constantly grappling with the way this nonbinary sense of reality and the fantastic shape the way Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction needs to be discussed. Through my examination of works like *Midnight Robber*, *Palace of the Peacock*, and *Salt* I will demonstrate the way this ontology and the trickster narrative elements are defining characteristics of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction in a way that opens these works up to a more productive critical conversation about Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction as a whole.

Like Bakhtin's rejection of the normalizing of generic novel features, this analysis rejects the current homogenizing of all Black diasporic ontologies. To this end my analysis focuses on exploring the relationship between ontologies and the structures and aesthetic choices of specifically Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. More than just an extension of sci-fi futurist and speculative traditions present ideas that are steeped in epistemologies that stemmed from the intergenerational trauma created by the legacy of slavery. Once I delve into these epistemologies and compare them to Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction's aesthetic elements, it becomes clear why the taxonomy for Black speculative fiction traditions is so inaccurate. Rather than the current trend of focusing on the geographical region to distinguish between trends, I argue that each cultural group has a unique aesthetic that reflects their unique approach to mending this historical and cultural chasm left by the Middle Passage and the legacy of colonialism. This shift in perspective means that each Black speculative tradition should be classified in ways that reflect their specific ontological traditions more than their geographical location. Thus, despite

being a Black writer in Canada, Hopkinson still belongs to the tradition of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction.

Pelton uses a similar methodology when he discusses the way that we must understand the trickster in relation to the cosmology and social context of the culture it is in to fully appreciate the function of its contradictory nature. My argument thus rests on the idea that Black Caribbean speculative fiction traditions deploy West-African and Indigenous trickster story-telling traditions because it seeks to address the simultaneously hybrid and marginal state of the Caribbean as the center hub and simultaneously liminal space in the slave trade. The constant push and pull from the European, African, and American narratives and ontologies create a situation where the Caribbean is both culturally hybrid—in that it contains and synthesizes all these elements into a unique culture—and marginal—because it is described in the colonial narrative as derivative, an inferior copy of these cultures rather than its own living culture.

Trickster story-telling traditions often focus on disrupting order to create it once again. Each trickster figure enters the center with explosive disorder but returns to marginal spaces to inscribe the same order they just undermined. Pelton discusses these disruptions when he explains that “[Ananse] is the image of the openness of the passage-way to transformation—an openness that again and again brings into relationship center and boundary, source and resource, and one sort of potency with another, and thus enables human life to be made and remade” (Pelton 67). This element of trickster narratives is central to the purpose they serve in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. The trickster narrative elements allow writers to explore the contradictory ways Caribbean traditions and cultures are perceived and reinscribe the liminal space of the Caribbean with a new kind of order. This reinscription is related to the futurist tradition wherein an author “rewrites history and the present, reviews, and reinscribes” (Wisker

74). When I put this reinscription in conversation with the trickster story-telling tradition, it will reflect the ontology of *kont*. To establish the ways these elements work within my analysis, I will draw comparisons between *kont* and what these authors have said about their own works and in critical discussions about Black speculative fiction. I will explore the relationship between *kont*, as it influences these works, and the trickster narrative elements that show up in each text.

In chapter one I will put Pelton, Soyinka, Senghor, Bakhtin, and Jackson in conversation to establish the basis for identifying this ontology. In chapter two I will examine “History, Fable and Myth in The Caribbean and Guianas,” by Wilson Harris in order to draw connections between his discussion of West Indian folk consciousness and my definition of *kont*. These connections will form the basis for my textual analysis of *Palace of the Peacock* wherein I will discuss Harris’ construction of reality. In chapter three I will discuss interviews Hopkinson has done about her place in the science fiction genre and use that to inform my analysis of her use of Anansi stories both structurally and thematically in *Midnight Robber*.

In my conclusion, I will discuss Lovelace’s *Salt*. This discussion will follow a different structure as I briefly read *kont* in a text that is not strictly Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. I will analyze scenes in which the character or the novel itself criticize and dismiss the superstitions of other characters in order to illuminate some of the tension between the narrator’s ambivalence to of the ontology of *kont* and the characters’ own investment in and experience of the fantastic in the world around them. Following this brief analysis, I will argue that the overarching connection between these works is a nod to the fluid border between the real/unreal that creates a completely different sense of what qualifies as real or unreal. The trickster narratives and the centrality of these traditions to the creation of reality in each text will ultimately connect my analyses of West African tricksters in the novels and the presence of *kont*.

Through my analysis of the ways these novels either deconstruct binaries or let the slippage occur, I will demonstrate the salience of *kont* as an ontology and its relationship to the continued significance of tricksters in Afro-Caribbean cultures and cosmologies.

II. Chapter One Decolonizing Ontologies: Trauma, The West African Trickster and Afro-Caribbean Realities

In order to better understand Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction, we must first uncover and challenge colonially based assumptions about categories like realism and the fantastic. While the language from magical realist discussions and other discussions of the fantastic is often used to describe figures from and the techniques used in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction, *kont* will be the basis of a Caribbean centered epistemology for analyzing these works. In the introduction, I laid out my general description of the ontology: that *kont* describes a conception of reality that accepts reality as inherently slippery and unstable; that accepts the real and unreal are intertwined; and that at any moment one can experience both the real and unreal and create truth from those experiences. This definition comes out of an anti-colonial rather than post-colonial hybrid tradition wherein African trickster ontologies, and African terrestrial ontologies absorb and redefine Western ontologies. Continuing in the vein of indigenous scholars like Walter D. Mignolo, whose work “Delinking” provides a valuable and in-depth argument about the importance of decolonizing scholarly discussions, I put forth *kont* as a de-colonized framework for interpreting Afro-Caribbean literature. In this chapter I will discuss why *kont* is an anti-colonial ontology and explore the significance of its epistemology in anti-colonial discussions of Black speculative fiction and Caribbean centered discussions of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. The deep relationship between abstract concepts and the physical world in African ontologies is a boundary that I suggest is both created and erased in the Afro-Caribbean space.

Kont in the broadest sense refers to an alternate relationship between the physical world and abstract concepts. I base my definition of this alternate relationship on Garuba’s animist materialism and the African-Negro ontology Senghor discusses in “African Negro Aesthetics.”

The lack of binarisms that Garuba focuses on when defining animist materialism and animist realism is a key concept in my definition of *kont*. *Kont* specifically refers to an acceptance of and a belief in the abstract world, surreality, and western concepts of realism as simultaneous and overlapping experiences. The Caribbean, as a liminal space shaped by people who were traumatized and fundamentally rebuilt by the liminality of the Middle Passage, breeds an ontology that recognizes the everyday as liminal in which anyone can slip across the planes of existence. This liminality shapes the ways Western and African ontologies interact so much that it appears impossible to define *kont* and the power it derives from the margins without discussing Robert Pelton's *The Trickster in West Africa*.

Throughout this text, I will use the terms anti-colonial, de-colonial, and post-colonial to discuss the various dimensions of *kont*'s impact on larger literary discussions. My focus on the importance of discussing Caribbean texts through the lens of a Caribbean centered epistemology will involve using these terms to describe different valences of *kont*, so I will explain what I mean by each one. First, when I discuss anti-colonial ideas and elements of *kont*, I am referring to the aspects of the ontology that necessarily stem from resistance efforts in the Caribbean. These resistance efforts directly shape what elements of European ontologies are integrated, and how they are integrated. Second, when I discuss de-colonial ideas and elements of *kont*, I am referring to the elements of the ontology that are better understood outside of norms set by Western ontologies. These elements include aspects of *kont* that account for reality as it exists outside the real/unreal binary set up by Western ontologies. Third, when I discuss post-colonial ideas and elements of *kont*, I am referring to the elements of the ontology that are related to the Caribbean's status as a place recovering from the trauma of colonialism. These elements are

mostly related to the way the Middle Passage impacts the formation of *kont* and the significance of spatial and temporal distortion in *kont*.

The de-colonial potential of *kont* is best understood by examining how it meets the demands of Walter D. Mignolo's concept of pluri-versatility. When Mignolo argues for pluri-versatility as a replacement for universality, he points out the relationship between universal ideas and colonial systems. He suggests that escaping colonial epistemologies necessitates abandoning universal truths and ideals in favor of something adjacent to cultural relativism. He specifically points out that pluri-versatility is the only way to meaningfully understand and discuss each exploited population's "language, memory, ethics, political theory, and political economy...all of which are also marked by traces of the local in the relations of domination and exploitation within Western knowledge" (Mignolo 497). This rejection of universality is at the heart of my desire to name and define *kont*. While black diaspora populations are responding to similar oppressive forces and casting overlapping possibilities into the future, the variety of possibilities and realities contained within black speculative fiction are marked by the same variety Mignolo suggests can only be adequately understood through pluri-versatility. The shift he proposes to decolonize epistemologies then, is the basis of my exploration of *kont* in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. The specificity of this lens, paired with the larger connections that exist between Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction and Black American speculative fiction traditions, will make *kont* not only a rooted epistemology, but a tool for better understanding the importance of applying pluri-versatility to black diasporic studies.

This rooted epistemology is informed by the same ideas that Thiong'o considered when he defined *globalectics*. When Thiong'o defined *globalectics* in "A Globalectic Imagination" he focuses on the importance of the imagination in the creation and expression of most things in the

human world. He specifically contends that *globalectics* is a useful lens because it “assumes the interconnectedness of time and space in the area of human thought and action” (Thiong’o 41). Much like his focus on the imagination and the play of time and space in human thought, I suggest that *kont* derives its usefulness from its ability to account for and investigate the impact of spatial and temporal distortion on Afro-Caribbean concepts of reality. When Thiong’o suggests rethinking literature as a means of transporting the reader from one temporal and spatial context to another, in order to depict and communicate a set of ideas, he foregrounds the importance of recognizing the impact of social and ontological forces on the way an idea is communicated. The importance of these forces, these contexts, makes it clear that reading global literatures should go beyond simple new historicism and consider global communities and their literary traditions in more comprehensive and imaginative contexts.

Kont is also shaped by forces Brathwaite named *tidalectics* in order to describe an alternative relationship to synthesis and history that departs from Hegelian dialectics. It is informed by Brathwaite’s *tidalectics*, a model for understanding island history and culture, because both *tidalectics* and *kont* examine the varying roles of complicated and contradictory forces in shaping Caribbean identities. When Brathwaite explores *tidalectics*, he suggests that the Caribbean—arguably because it is such a liminal space in the modern global context—is best understood through a dynamic geographic model that accounts for the constantly increasing and decreasing impact of diasporic and indigenous identity, the routes of trade and the roots of the Caribbean’s hybrid populations, and the physically shifting sea and land. I describe the contradictory elements of Afro-Caribbean history and ontology, and the way various planes of existence weave in and out of daily life in the Caribbean similarly to how Brathwaite accounts for the push and pull of the forces he discusses when exploring the full implications of

tidalectics. By building on Indigenous, African, and Caribbean centered decolonial frameworks, I put forth *kont* as a specific tool for applying these concepts to understanding and situating Afro-Caribbean speculative traditions.

In my introduction I mention that Pelton's work was instrumental in framing my argument that trickster narrative structures in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction incited my need to investigate, define, and create an epistemology from *kont*. His work illuminates the connection I see between *kont* and anti-colonialism by allowing me to reframe the hybridity of Caribbean ontologies. When he first discusses the overall significance of tricksters, he points out that "the trickster is a symbol of the liminal state itself and of its permanent accessibility as a source of recreative power" (Pelton 35). This direct relationship to liminality and the trickster's power is significant because it suggests the trickster could derive power from the chaotic, timeless, liminal space that the Caribbean became following the Middle Passage. Pelton goes on to say that "[the trickster] does not act from noble motives or by a rational, straightforward method, but by following faithfully his own way of making connections—by shattering the accepted boundaries of language, action, and even modes of being" (50). The comfortable and long-standing relationship between tricksters, chaos, and transgression can easily be read as something that would allow disparate enslaved African peoples to process the trauma in parallel cultural veins. In fact, Pelton points out that the trickster's deepest role is "the unveiling of the imaginative process that is able to marry disorder and transform social order, foolishness and wisdom, history and timelessness" (227). To establish the trickster's role in West African societies he explores and describes three different West African tricksters to trace their relationship to the borders between planes of existence. His discussion of these relationships extends to examine their role in transformation and focuses on the significance of their shared features.

Pelton's analysis focused on specific West African tricksters in order to determine how to accept the trickster's ambiguity and incorporate that ambiguity into our understanding of the function of tricksters in world cultures at large. He first discusses Ananse, the Ashanti trickster. Ananse's cultural significance for the Ashanti is not easy to categorize and Pelton's analysis grounds itself by discussing Ananse's constant oscillation between the center and the margin. This movement back and forth puts Anansi in a constant cycle of finding order, creating chaos, and then recreating order and reinforcing societal structures. Pelton points out that he "does not act from noble motives or by a rational, straightforward method, but by following faithfully his own way of making connections—by shattering the accepted boundaries of language, action, and even modes of being" (50). His ability to shatter "modes of being" ties Ananse directly to the destruction and recreation of social order and the rules of the physical and metaphysical world. Pelton suggests that this destruction and recreation is significant because "the trickster depicts man as a sort of inspired handyman, tacking together bits and pieces of experience until they become what they are—a web of many-layered being" (4). Ultimately, Pelton's analysis of Ananse in Ashanti culture notes that "the collection bearing his name witnesses unmistakably to his significance, for the stories give word, eloquently and delightfully to an Ashanti understanding of human life" (61). The significance of this trickster figure in relation to ontologies and Pelton's analysis indicates the potential for Anansi, in the Caribbean, to be more than just a cultural symbol—it indicates that he could signify Afro-Caribbean ontology as well.

Legba carries an equal if not greater weight in my discussion because of his significance to Vodun traditions. Pelton describes Legba as a being that, "not only lies open to the visible world, but acts upon it, acts in concert with it, or is acted upon by it. Legba, then, as an ontological master of sleight-of-form, is a prime agent of Fon magic" (Pelton 82). His

relationship to Fon magic creates one of the strongest roots of *kont* I see in West African ontologies because Pelton points out that “Fon magic is a reality neither univocal nor metaphorical, but many-faceted, even sacramental” (83). Because of the many-faceted nature of Legba’s metaphysical power, he signifies complex social and religious structures that are tied to realism very concretely. He also interacts with the border between realities and “protects those passing outside or into that structure. By inventing magic, he draws into the open the power of all boundaries, opens passageways to new life, and makes transformation possible even as he stimulates conflict” (Pelton 84). His cultural significance as a guide of those moving “to new life” and ability to “make transformation possible” mean that his significance in the Caribbean can indicate the need for an epistemology that extends beyond his religious significance as a Vodun deity.

Eshu and Ogun are also significant figures that show up in several Afro-Caribbean works, including works outside speculative fiction. Pelton describes Eshu’s cultural significance as rooted in the fact that “Eshu can keep peace in the market and watch over the passageway and transition points in Yoruba life because his proper place is at the transcendent center of that life” (128). This place at the transcendent center makes him “a mediator specializing in ‘exchanges’—a perpetually open passageway” (225). Pelton suggests that Eshu, Legba and Ananse “transform because they touch all forms and all times simultaneously” (226) making them powerful signifiers for reconceptualizing time and reality following the trauma of the Middle Passage. If we accept the trickster as both a mode of seizure and a means of synthesizing contradiction, then it becomes clear that the trickster’s legends and mythology would have given enslaved African peoples an epistemology for absorbing Western ontologies into their West African ontologies. This process created what I believe is a modern Afro-Caribbean ontology—*kont*.

My overall argument rests on the idea that *kont* was born from West African ontologies as discussed by Harry Garuba and Léopold Senghor, filtered through the trauma of the Middle Passage, and reborn into a trickster ontology. Similarly to the way Garuba suggests modernity is filtered through “the matrices of myth and magic” (270), I suggest *kont* represents a synthesis of anti-terrestrialism’s concern with the abstract world and West African concern with the physical representation of those concepts, through the fluid and contradictory matrix of trickster narratives. When Garuba discussed animist materialism, he emphasized that “its assimilative reach admits of no binarisms and therefore no contradictions in our usual sense of the words” (Garuba 276)¹. Senghor discusses a similar concept in “African Negro Aesthetics” when he says “we have seen that the spirit of African-Negro civilization has embodied itself in the most current of daily reality. But this reality always transcends in order to express the meaning of the world” (Senghor 38). He goes on to say, “the story and the fable are interwoven with the events of the day because African-Negro ontology is existential” (Senghor 32). The interwoven nature of story, fable, and daily events greatly shapes my argument that scholars should interact with Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. *Kont* represents an attempt to narrow the existential ontology that Senghor discusses to describe it as it exists in the Afro-Caribbean space.

The trickster narrative becomes a matrix for filtering West African ontologies through the Middle Passage because the liminality of both the passage and the destination make it almost inevitable. Pelton points out that “the trickster is a symbol of the liminal state itself and of its permanent accessibility as a source of recreative power” (Pelton 35). Considering the breadth of

¹ This distinction that Garuba makes responds to a long tradition of what Wole Soyinka identified as anti-terrestrialism popularized by Buddhism and Judeo-Christianity (4). The wide-reaching effects of anti-terrestrialism created a need for Garuba to coin “the term animist realism to describe this predominant cultural practice of according a physical, often animate material aspect to what others may consider an abstract idea” (Garuba 274).

discussions of hybridity in other aspects of Caribbean culture, defining *kont* as a synthesis of terrestrial ontologies and anti-terrestrialism, while it sounds contradictory, fits within the well-established sense of the Caribbean as, at a fundamental level, hybrid. The recreative power that tricksters have in the liminal state empowers the Caribbean space to hold both the anti-terrestrial ontologies forced upon the region by colonialism, and preserve the terrestrial ontologies discussed by Soyinka and Garuba. Pelton emphasized that “[Ananse, Eshu and Legba] transform because they touch all forms and all times simultaneously” (226). This ability to simultaneously touch various forms and times simultaneously is the central aspect of the trickster that *kont* relies on to successfully account for and synthesize contradictory ontologies. My discussions of the fluidity of the real/unreal boundary are built on this suggestion that *kont* is both a terrestrial and anti-terrestrial ontology that sees various planes of existence winding in and out of the present. The trickster is central to this suggestion because “each society knows that its trickster-figure, whether nonchalantly, implacably, or rebelliously, has brought forth its visible form as he deals on every plane of being and juggles every manner of relationship” (Pelton 227). Thus, much like Bakhtin who built a more specific framework for identifying the novel as it emerges in various cultures, *kont* is as a narrowed tool built from previous scholarship to identify the aspects of reality as it is conceived of in Afro-Caribbean culture which shape Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction’s use of the trickster and mythic time.

This ontology is central to my reading of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction because, much like Senghor, I hope to discuss the way it can function as an epistemology and give us a means of reading these texts on their own terms. When Senghor discusses African Negro aesthetics, he suggests that in African Negro ontologies an image “creates over and beyond the world of appearances. The more an image is unreal, surreal, the more it expresses” and “facts are

imagery” (Senghor 32, 33). Through his discussion of the existential ontology of the negro and the direct relationship between this existentialism and the process of naming and describing things (Soyinka 31), he demands the reader reexamine surreal descriptions and their function as devices of realism. Similarly, to establish a more responsive and rooted epistemology, I will use ontology of *kont* to create an epistemology for understanding of the way the trauma of the Middle Passage shaped the way realism is conceptualized by the Afro-diaspora and sketch the relationship between this sense of realism and the use of time and trickster motifs in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction.

The Middle Passage is one of the most traumatic chapters in Black history that has had a severe and long reaching impact on the Black diaspora’s sense of belonging, identity, and history. Joanne Chassot discusses, in her book *Ghosts of the African Diaspora*, the significance of ghosts and hauntings as literary motifs deployed by twentieth century Caribbean authors in order to represent re-memory. While she examines different novels than I will be, Chassot’s first chapter discusses depictions of the Middle Passage in a way that clearly illuminates the relationship between it and temporal fluidity, dislocation, and the trickster figure. While she is mainly discussing the Middle Passage in terms of life/death boundary, the examples she uses all include a description of temporal chaos that highlights the real/unreal boundary that I suggest trickster figures help Afro-Caribbean people to navigate. As we see shortly, African-derived New World tricksters inhabit the metaphysical world wherein emotions and trauma shape physical reality, and the traditional Western sense of the real world.

Chassot’s discussion of this life/death boundary begins with a discussion of Stephanie E. Smallwood’s *Saltwater Slavery* and focuses on the way the objectification of slaves in the Middle Passage redefines boundaries between life/death and past/future. The traumatic event

both destroys and recreates social order by alienating slaves from their cultures and binding them through the trauma of captivity. African diasporic practices then emerge “from a need and capacity to adapt [African cultural] tools to meet the demands of their new (geographical, social, ethnic) environment, but [Smallwood] also contends that some cultural practices were born on, or from, the Middle Passage itself”(49). This trauma is binding specifically because “the conditions in which the Africans endured the voyage disrupted all familiar notions of space and time” and “they found themselves confined on a ship that was always in motion and yet always appeared to be in the same place on the infinite sea, suspended in a time that seemed to stand still and could not be measured in any habitual way” (46). Dominick LaCapra’s exploration of foundational trauma suggest ways of examining the implications of Chassot’s scholarship by considering the extent to which the blurring of the boundary between life and death functions as a historical loss or creates a historical absence. LaCapra explains that

Historical losses can conceivably be avoided or, when they occur, at least in part compensated for, worked through, and even to some extent overcome. Absence, along with the anxiety it brings, could be worked through only in the sense that one may learn better to live with it and not convert it into a loss or lack that one believes could be made good, notably through the elimination or victimization of those whom blame is imputed.

(65)

If we consider Chassot’s suggestion that the boundary between life and death is blurred beyond recognition in the Middle Passage, it creates a situation that LaCapra pushes back against wherein absence and loss are both rhetorically salient. He suggests that “when loss is converted into...absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia” (46), and “in converting absence into loss, one assumes there was (or at

least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined” (58). Both situations he suggests make rhetorically blurring the distinctions between the two dangerous for processing trauma.

Rather than suggest that Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction authors are trapped in “impossible mourning” or mistakenly assume there was “original unity” that has been tainted, I suggest that the Afro-Caribbean experience of absence and loss as overlapping traumas is explainable by *kont*’s transformation of time and social order. LaCapra suggests that in order for mourning to be rhetorically salient to absence—without conflating it with loss—it “would have to be in some unheard-of, radically unfamiliar sense that does not simply foster an indiscriminate, unmodulated rhetoric...or fold back into interminable (even originary or constitutive) melancholy or quasi-transcendental grieving” (69). He also cautions that “it is misleading to situate loss on a transhistorical level” (LaCapra 49). However, Chassot’s description of the extent to which the Middle Passage impacted slaves who were alienated, objectified, and bonded by an experience of existing at the threshold between life and death with no sense of time or place, arguably suggests that the difference between rhetorics of absence and loss must be blurred to accurately account for this type of trauma.

Accepting, then, that the Middle Passage calls for the use of the rhetorics and processing methods of both absence and loss at once necessitates an understanding of the “unheard-of, radically unfamiliar sense” developed from this traumatic situation, it makes sense to name a new ontology that describes and accounts for these changes. *Kont* then as an ontology names the sense of the real that emerges from this traumatic nexus. I have, in the introduction, established the significance of the name *kont*, since it circulates in discussions about resistance, business accounts, and fairy tales. Its ability to represent completely different and contradictory meanings

and the fact that it is a signifier of French Creole oral story telling forms gives it a unique salience for describing this uniquely Afro-Caribbean epistemology. As an ontology it specifically draws upon the influence of the West African trickster's duality, power over language, and ability to derive power from the margins to describe the way natural forces such as time and space work within the Caribbean and describes the ways superstitions, folklore, and the fantastic occupy a space on the reality/magic border, a border that blurs as a result of the blurring of life/death and past/present that Chassot describes. Nalo Hopkinson describes this concept in her introduction to *Whispers from Cotton Tree Root* when she says it is "best instead to find ways to incorporate both the logical and illogical into one's approach to the world, because you never know when life will just drop you down in that hole, into a cieba space where none of the rules you know operate" (xiii). The similarity between Hopkinson's description of how the fantastic operates and how Chassot describes the effects of the Middle Passage on formerly stable boundaries reflects the overlap I see between West-African trickster narrative structures in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction and cultural adaptations made in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade.

If we consider the Middle Passage as a foundational trauma, then attempts to process it become cyclical and are plagued by a desire to remain loyal to those who did not survive. Yet, Hopkinson's discussion suggests that processing in the Caribbean is best accomplished when one finds "ways to incorporate the logical and illogical into one's approach to the world" (*Whispers* xiii). This is reflected in the prevalence of creole words that hold contradictory meanings. Many cultural structures repeat this duality centered on contradictory concepts co-existing in a way that interestingly parallels Pelton's discussion of the West African trickster. He specifically says, "the trickster is a symbol of the liminal state itself and of its permanent accessibility as a source of

recreative power” (Pelton 35). When we consider this characteristic of the trickster in conversation with Chassot’s suggestion that the Middle Passage forced the enslaved to exist in a place “that was always in motion and yet always appeared to be in the same place on the infinite sea, suspended in a time that seemed to stand still and could not be measured in any habitual way” (46), we see that the trickster represents the ability to remain in control of destabilized boundaries of space and time. The significance of the trickster is clear since Ananse—the Ashanti trickster—and Legba—the Fon trickster—carry cultural significance in Vodun and Afro-Caribbean story-telling traditions.

If we carry this understanding of *kont* and its relationship to the trauma of the Middle Passage, we can see the ways magical realism as a genre fails to account for the specific context of Black diaspora fiction. Wendy Faris, in her book *Ordinary Enchantments*, situates the magical realist tradition in terms of post colonialism. Her exploration of the tradition as a global phenomenon relies on linking the binary of magical/realism with hybridity so that magical realism as a response to realism becomes a hybrid synthesis of the fantastic and realism. This allows us to focus on the ways the movement is an attempt to insert marginalized narratives into the center, just like the post-colonial is an attempt to center identities marginalized by the colonial. This connection allows her to discuss “its power as a postcolonial narrative style by describing the characteristics that define, the techniques that enable, and the cultural issues that traverse it” (Faris 4). I discuss her exploration specifically because she condenses many of the problems I see with applying a magical realist lens to Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. Primarily, her exploration reads magical realist devices in terms of their pushback against Western traditions. This reading means devices like temporal displacement and reconstruction of

reality are flattened into responsive forces. This leads into her discussion of magical realism as tool of decolonization in chapter 4.

In this discussion of decolonization, Faris interestingly uses language that links magical realist devices with appropriation. While she discusses the decolonizing potential of magical realism by linking it specifically with the revolutionary context in which many of the novels were written—as responses to oppressive dictators—the discussion also extends the link between magical realism and the entire postcolonial movement by highlighting its connection to revolution (141). However, as Jackson argued, many of these revolutions still involved an investment in the settler colonial state. Similarly, I argue that magical realism, especially as defined by Faris, continues this tradition of creating value and understanding speculative traditions in terms of European ontologies and understandings. Faris runs into this issue when she tries to suggest that magical realist texts create their own ontology. She says “ontologically, within the texts, it integrates the magical and the material. Generically, it combines realism and the fantastic” (21) which ultimately she admits means “a study of its cultural assumptions and narrative practices reveals that it is also a living record of the difficulties and failures of that attempt, because it cannot help being caught in the very appropriation it seeks to destroy” suggesting magical realism is a reactionary movement against European realism. This admission gets at the heart of how magical realism gets caught in Foucauldian power vortexes.

I recognize this discussion of magical realism’s broad application is not new; in fact I would like to build on Ato Quayson’s “Magical realism and the African novel.” In this chapter, he explores the ways oral traditions—defined as the “embrace [of] a notion of generalized concepts, symbols, rhetorical capacities, and even unarticulated assumptions whose inspiration is the totality of oral culture” (159)—form the ontological basis for the African approach to

including supernatural elements in fiction. He points out that “myths, legends, and chronicles are normally considered as true in their various contexts, while trickster tales and other more ‘leisure’ -oriented genres are taken as fictional” (159). This basis then allows us to read the mobilization of figures and elements from legends and myths as different from the use of the magical in Latin America. Quayson agrees that most definitions of magical realism define a paradigm “in which a binary opposition is suggested between more traditional forms of knowledge on the one hand and the Western traditions of representation and philosophy on the other” (160). He addresses this concept of differing relationships between magic and reality in his modification of the term, so that it can be applied to African literature, and cites Harry Garuba’s discussion of “animist realism” and “animist materialism” (qtd. in Quayson 160). These terms reveal an ontologically different understanding of magical elements. Beyond moving past an epistemology rooted in the reactionary concept of magical realism, an analysis of the different attempts to resituate Afro-Caribbean fiction in relation to other speculative fiction genres reveal allusions to this epistemology. I believe naming and articulating the underlying principles I see linking Garuba’s animism, Harris’ drama of consciousness, Hopkinson’s fabulist fiction, and Lovelace’s bacchanal aesthetics will be a step in the right direction of reading Black speculative fiction on its own terms.

While the parameters of the magical realist movement as set forth by Angel Flores—who is credited with naming and defining the magical realist movement—have been useful for analyzing South American speculative fiction, there are also problems with his definition. Mainly he describes the magical elements of magical realism as “an exciting note of wonderment and exoticism” (189) and the “transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and unreal” (190). In a different vein, Garuba groups magical elements under the umbrellas of

animist materialism which is “a practice of appropriation of the instruments of modernity for the process of re-traditionalization and re-enchantment,” that includes “literary representation of the sense that the world of objects and phenomena is inherently populated by spirits” (161). While Garuba is an African theorist his concept is helpful for recognizing *kont* in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction because animist materialism is a broad category for non-western re-enchantment of modernity. He points out that “animist logic subverts this binarism and destabilizes the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic” (Garuba 270). This concept is central to my discussion of *kont* and the blurring of borders between reality and the fantastic.

Wole Soyinka is also significant as an entry point for discussing the precedent for *kont* in African ontologies. In *Myth, Literature and The African World* he discusses the relationship between the inner and outer world that shapes certain aspects of African myth and spirituality. He points out that “what we call the mythic inner world is both the psychic sub-structure and temporal subsidence, the cumulative history and empirical observations of the community” (Soyinka 35). The terrestrialism he discusses, and the role of the mythic inner world, suggest that *kont*, much like other creolized forms in the Caribbean, stems from and reflects African traditions. Soyinka specifically mentions that defining “inner world as a ‘fantasy’ betrays Eurocentric conditioning or alienation. We describe it as the primal reality, the hinterland of transition” (Soyinka 33). The distinction between this sense of the metaphysical and the physical being processed through similar epistemologies primes enslaved Africans to foreground the presence of the metaphysical in future epistemologies developed following the Middle Passage. This adds new depth to my argument that *kont* represents the blurring of previously stable boundaries. If we consider that both the inner and outer worlds are treated as equally real, in the

European sense of the word, then the blurring of the boundaries between the inner and the outer world will create a new sense of reality that considers the physical and the metaphysical as coexisting real conditions of the human experience. Therefore, while his concept of the hinterland of transition has been widely discussed, it bears a specific relevance to this discussion because it is a space in which “consciousness is stretched to embrace another primal reality” (Soyinka 33). This space, which is often ascribed to temporal and narrative play in speculative fiction broadly, begins the conversation that *kont* joins as a narrower epistemology for discussing Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction on its own terms. We can then read the temporal and narrative play that occurs in Afro-speculative fiction as an attempt to negotiate and express this new reality through the flexibility afforded by West African trickster traditions.

The precedent set by African and pan-African thinkers begins a long tradition of renegotiating and renaming Black modes of thought and being across the post-colonial world. Wilson Harris, in his early critical writings, wades into the discussion and describes a literary tradition that is rooted in *kont*. In one of his major theoretical works, “History, Fable and Myth in The Caribbean and Guianas,” Wilson Harris sets forth his goals to create a radical and Caribbean centered understanding of the place of the fantastic in Caribbean life. He argues that current criticism of Caribbean speculative fiction ignores the ways “these myths which reflect an African link in the Caribbean are also part and parcel of a native West Indian imagination” and they are “in curious rapport with vestiges of- Amerindian fable and legend” (“History, Myth, and Fable” 10). This rapport between African myths and Indigenous fable and legend is integral to understanding the relationship between *kont* and Harris’ theories. In addition to absorbing Western Christian ontology, despite how it contradicts West African ontologies, *kont* is also born

from the complicated relationship that Afro-Caribbean people have to indigeneity and the Indigenous populations in the Caribbean.

In her book *Creole Indigeneity*, Shona Jackson critiques how various populations in Guyana, while also oppressed, inadvertently perpetuate the settler-colonial state and settler-colonial attempts to indigenize. She acknowledges that they do this to access power and points out “Guyanese and other Caribbean peoples came to belong to the land to which so few people could be considered ‘indigenous’ by tacitly accepting the shared culture created while relying on fragments to assert a historical right to belong that could provide legitimacy for contemporary claims to power” (xii). Her assertion that settler colonial indigenization relies on fragments is significant in my discussion of indigeneity and *kont* because of the role fragments play in the trickster ontological aspects of *kont*. Both the historical and temporal displacement caused by the Middle Passage, and the constant historical distortions created by colonialism and the liminality of the Caribbean, have made fragmentation central to analyses of the Caribbean. This fragmentation, which Jackson suggests is leveraged to indigenize various aspects of the settler-colonial state, can be read as a political extension of how contradictory senses of being and belonging are in the Caribbean. Jackson herself points out “Creoles and Indigenous Peoples within the postcolonial state came to be subject to different narratives of belonging and forms of citizenship and sovereignty” (Jackson 2). While Jackson is primarily researching how different narratives impact citizenship and sovereignty in the post-colonial world, her observations allude to several aspects of Afro-Caribbean ontology that I group under *kont*.

The most direct connection between Jackson’s observations about Creole identity’s relationship to indigenization and *kont* is the impact that Black people’s relationship to labor has on their relationship to land. Earlier, I suggested that enslaved Africans were displaced

Indigenous peoples—rather than settlers—which ultimately shaped their sense of identity and belonging. Jackson instead foregrounds the ways Afro-Caribbean discourse lays claim to belonging and sovereignty based on the labor performed while they were enslaved. These become competing senses of being and belonging that require the ontological flexibility I suggest necessitates *kont*. When Harris suggests that his concept of the West Indian novel would open gateways “between racial possessions and dispossessions” (“History, Fable and Myth” 22), he plays on this complex relationship to indigeneity to suggest the West Indian novel would need to aesthetically and thematically reflect these complex relationships. This is the very suggestion that Jackson challenges suggesting the discursive place of Indigenous peoples others them and prevents them from accessing these gateways that would bridge “racial possessions and dispossessions” (“History, Fable and Myth” 22). However, the resistance that she agrees is central to Creole identity is directly linked to Afro-Caribbean relationships with Indigenous populations. A central figure of Caribbean resistance is the maroons, Africans who escaped slavery and formed communities with the Indigenous populations in dense jungle often located in the center of islands. The Creole identity that is indigenized then, is not simply a hybrid of Black, Indian and European beliefs, ontologies, and cultures, but directly shaped by Indigenous beliefs, ontologies, and cultures.

The complex and contradictory nature of Afro-Caribbean people’s relationship to indigeneity impacts not only the way myths and fables are in conversation—as Harris points out—but also is yet another aspect of Afro-Caribbean history that necessitates *kontist* deployments of the trickster. Jackson notes that “relations among subalterns should be viewed in terms of the avenues through which they seek to satisfy the material and ontological requirements of being and belonging” (33). These ontological requirements of being and

belonging show up in *Palace of the Peacock* and directly shape the way other characters interact with the Arawak woman, and shapes her role in the story. While she is given almost no dialogue, she is discussed in relation to the river that signifies time in the text. When she first awakens on the voyage, the narrator notes “the river was familiar ground to her, it was plain” (*Palace of the Peacock* 82). When she guides them, “[Vigilance] saw into the depths of the deathless stream where the Arawak woman pointed” (*Palace of the Peacock* 82). The link between her, time, and the river mirrors the culturally complex forces impacting her place in the crew. Her experience and relationship to time is similar to Jackson’s point that the “displacement and objectification of Indigenous Peoples is a complex part of the new material and ontological relationship that blacks and Indians developed to the land under colonialism” (Jackson 3). This relationship to the land, when read into Harris’ text reveals *kontist* negotiations of the placement and displacement of Black and traditionally Indigenous indigeneity within the Caribbean space. These negotiations are reflective of *kont* because the narrative structure relies on overlapping, and often competing experiences of death and location. The Arawak woman then, someone who is affected by but not lodged within these structures, when described as familiar with “the deathless stream” is connected to the distortions in time and the death caused by those distortions. This association she has with the river then allows us to read her relationship to time as existing outside of and inside the *kontist* construction of time and space that exists along the river.

I spend so much time mapping out the relationship between Indigenous culture, Creole culture, and the role of *kont* in the Caribbean because as I suggested several times, Black diaspora constantly navigate contradictory modes of belonging. Jackson notes: “[Creole Indigeneity] cannot strictly be understood through the terms of white settler colonial paradigms such as those of North America” (Jackson 3). Ultimately, she notes that the post-colonial modes

of being and belonging, that both Black and Indian people in the Caribbean must rely on to access rights and sovereignty, can only stem from relationships to labor that necessarily other Indigenous peoples to indigenize themselves. This relationship between sovereignty, labor, and the othering of Indigenous peoples stems from the European settler colonial state apparatus demanding all modes of belonging be based on it. Her discussion is helpful for understanding the political and discursive place of Indigenous peoples in the new world, and while it seems to contradict Harris' claims about the ability of West Indian identity and cultural products to bridge cultural divides, it acknowledges the significance of creolization as a cultural indigenizing process marked by resistance to European ontologies. This is similar to Harris' suggestion that Limbo "implies, I believe, a profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes...and to invoke at the same time a curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods" ("History, Fable and Myth" 30). These concerns with belonging and dispossession indicate the salience of *kont* because its ontological flexibility allows us to unpack relationships to land and belonging as they appear in aesthetic choices in Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction.

Examining how *kont* functions as an ontology, in addition to decolonizing the literary frameworks used to analyze Afro-Caribbean fiction, also reveals the distance between Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous-Caribbean resistance modes and recasting of history. While *kont* directly links to specific West African ontologies, the more ambiguous relationship between Afro-Caribbean ontologies and Indigenous-Caribbean ontologies—as explored by Jackson—further exemplifies how differently populations are shaped by colonial and neo-colonial forces. Similarly to the way Mignolo argues for pluri-versatility, by pointing out that unique cultural backgrounds and interactions with oppressive forces generate unique resistance and modern

populations, I argue that *kont* is severely limited in its capacity to account for Indigenous-Caribbean influences. By extension, *kont* is shaped by and not shaped by Indigenous-Caribbean ontologies, in ways that parallel *kont's* relationship to Indigenous-Caribbean ontologies, and the complex socio-political realities discussed by Jackson. It becomes clear that just as *kont* is directly shaped by and thus reveals something about the oppressive relationship between European ideologies and African ideologies, *kont* is also shaped by the settler-colonial state and recreates the erasure and distortion of Indigenous-Caribbean ideologies.

Harris' major focus is articulating and accounting for the relationship between Afro-Caribbean myths and legends, and Indigenous myths and legends, and discussing how that shapes Caribbean realism into a completely different aesthetic than Western realism. He wrestles with and suggests "limbo was rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures" (History, Myth, and Fable 12). His use of the term limbo has been discussed by people like Toliver who focus on the term's relationship to Haitian Vodun and Harris' wider discussions of Vodun traditions (177). However, Harris deploys limbo to trace a direct relationship between Vodun and the trickster. He traces limbo's relationship to Ananse—the Ashanti trickster—and to Legba—the Fon trickster. His main discussion focuses on the significance of trickster imagery in Caribbean traditions to trace the connection between the arts of the imagination and history. In many ways his work suggests that only the surreal and the arts of the imagination have the ability to accurately represent Caribbean history. These arts of the imagination inevitably marry Indigenous, Black, and several other traditions that have entered the Caribbean space, and this hybridity that is so often discussed in studies of the Caribbean, renders standard historical narratives useless as far as Harris is concerned. His discussion of limbo focuses on the incredible

ontological flexibility required to “translate and accommodate” competing and contradictory ontologies. When he introduces Legba, he gestures at the centrality of the trickster in the West Indian construction and understanding of history and culture.

Robert Pelton’s discussion of the West African trickster’s relationship to time emphasizes the spiral nature of their dislocations from and reconnections to the present. This circular relationship with time, and the origin of a people allows “the unveiling of the imaginative process that is able to marry disorder and transform social order, foolishness and wisdom, history and timelessness” (Pelton 227). When we read the origin of Afro-Caribbean peoples as the void of history that Harris so often alludes to, the violent and traumatic Middle Passage, it becomes clear that the circular movements tricksters make to the origin point would undergo adjustments. I suggest that *kont* is the basis for a concept of time that addresses this by having tricksters weave in and out of the physical and metaphysical planes. This sheds a new light on Harris decision to overlap the crews’ repeated deaths because we can read Caribbean *kontist* trickster negotiations of time as intertwining rather than circular. This specific adjustment is possible only through *kont* because as a trickster ontology it leans into the ways that each “trickster-figure, whether nonchalantly, implacably, or rebelliously, has brought forth its visible form as he deals on every plane of being and juggles every manner of relationship” (Pelton 227). Thus, *kont* allows the human concept of and experience of time to juggle multiple planes of being in which the physical and metaphysical experiences have the same type of and equally direct effects on daily life.

These complex relationships to time and land that *kont* must account for allow *Palace of the Peacock* to be read through a new lens of realism. Wilson Harris’s definition of West Indian folk consciousness is also critical to my argument that his critical claims are rooted in *kont*. He

begins by discussing previous historical traditions in the Caribbean and says “the historical stasis which afflicts the West Indian sensibility and which may only be breached in complex creative perspectives for which the historical convention would appear to possess no criteria” (History, Myth, and Fable 9). This is primarily because he argues Caribbean art is “an extraordinary drama of consciousness whose figurative meaning lies beyond its de facto historical climate” and that it “is anathema to the materialist or conventional realist,” (Myth and Fable 32). By concentrating on tracing the relationship between the Middle Passage as a foundational trauma and this consciousness that lies beyond conventional realism, the epistemology that stems from *kont* reformulates the philosophical points raised by Harris into a tool for literary criticism. He points out his finding indicates “that in the absence of a historical correlative to the arts of dispossessed some kind of new critical writing in depth needs to emerge” (Myths and Fable 16). He suggests a need for a discussion of the relationship between the traumatic history of the Black diaspora and the art created in Black diasporic spaces.

Nalo Hopkinson alludes to *kont* in similar ways in her brief introduction to the anthology *Whispers from The Cotton Tree Root*. She begins the collection by discussing the complex problem of describing a literary tradition that “conveys, from a Caribbean worldview, that disorienting sense of when events take you to a place that dips into archetype and otherworldliness” (xiii). When trying to articulate what the works in her anthology convey, Hopkinson says “I realized that in compiling this anthology I was essentially trying to marry two traditions of writing that have different priorities and protocols” (xiii). She uses the image of the cotton tree root—the home of spirits and a place where one can slip into another dimension—to capture the sense of closeness with which Caribbean people live to the fantastic. She notes that this proximity to the fantastic inspires most people “to find ways to incorporate both the logical

and illogical into one's approach to the world, because you never know when life will just drop you down in that hole, into a cieba space where none of the rules you know operate". Twentieth century authors like Paula Marshall have captured this intimate relationship with the metaphysical, yet these choices are considered and analyzed as fantastic narrative elements. If we consider the implications of *kont* as an ontology, we can reconceptualize these elements as part of realism within the Caribbean canon. Much like Hopkinson suggests people incorporate both the logical and illogical into their approach to the world, so literary criticism, by recognizing *kont* and the impact this ontology has on the epistemology and cultural context of these works, can incorporate both the logical and illogical into its sense of qualities of realism in the Caribbean.

Earl Lovelace is not as strong a critical voice as Harris, but a collection of his speeches, *Growing in the Dark*, captures a glimpse into his perspective on his works, Caribbean culture, and reveals *kont*. In the introduction Funso Aiyejina coins the term bacchanal aesthetics which describes "the vibrant cultural practices developed by the underprivileged as ways of affirming their humanity and personhood" (xv). Lovelace says of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean: "theirs was a struggle not for economic well-being or really for political power, theirs was a struggle for the soul" (26). This struggle for the soul boils down to, in many of his speeches, attempts to suffocate the religious and cultural practices of enslaved Africans in addition to brutal economic and physical subjugation. Lovelace links these practices to the soul because "these ideas, handed down in our art and culture, have given us our attitude to life and to each other. These I call our traditions. And they are important because they express the meanings behind our behaviour and attitudes" (33). This parallels the link between *kont* as a framework for literature and the broader social implications it represents. When Lovelace discusses "the

meanings behind our behaviour and attitudes,” he returns again and again to ritualized spiritual practices that have a transformative effect. One could argue that these are simply the central point of any culture, but the rituals he discusses being demonized are directly linked with practices outlined in Robert Pelton’s *The West African Trickster*. These practices in which the mediator of chaos and order is invoked represent in many ways the reenactment of the collapse of the border between life and death and the real and unreal that *kont* refers to.

The epistemological framework based on *kont*, then, gives new significance to the way time is dislocated and progresses while trapped in circular narrative structures and the role of duality in speech and characters to create meaning. This framework will give us a clearer understanding of aspects of Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction that are not the fantastic and instead represent an Afro-Caribbean realism. I have alluded to trickster narrative structures as a space that is flexible enough and capable of capturing contradictory meanings to create order from chaos as crucial to the link between *kont* and Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction. This epistemology primarily relies on Robert Pelton’s *The Trickster in West Africa* as a critical cornerstone for understanding the roots of the tricksters that remain culturally relevant in Afro-Caribbean spaces. Pelton outlines his argument primarily around a desire to determine the social, religious, and cultural function of tricksters by examining them in specific West African contexts, the Ashanti, The Fon, The Yoruba and The Dogon. His discussions of the Ashanti trickster Ananse and The Fon trickster Legba form the basis of my discussion. Ananse holds a special significance because of his prevalence in children’s stories and folk tales in the Caribbean. In the Ashanti’s cultural context Pelton points out “somehow, [Ananse’s] slipperiness fulfills the nation’s need for healthy commerce between what is above and what is below, between male and female, between apparent and hidden order” (2). His role in creating “healthy

commerce” indicates his potential as a mediator. This potential means Ananse already occupies a transitory space—like any trickster—which is related to his cultural viability and presence as a cultural anchor point still in the Caribbean today.

Articulating the ontological thread that shapes Afro-Caribbean fiction gives us the opportunity to reinterpret several texts by using *kont* as a lens for understanding the way the ‘supernatural’ works in Black speculative fiction largely. Naming the ontology of *kont* and building an epistemology from that is useful for linking these ideas and productively moving forward Black speculative fiction conversations rather than coming up with new names for traditions within genre. When Bakhtin proposed a new epistemology for understanding and identifying the novel, he focused on the form’s use of time as it differed from other literary genres. Similarly, I suggest using *kont* as an ontological framework will give us an epistemology that will answer Toni Morrison’s call in *Rootedness* for critical discussions that approach Black speculative fiction on its own terms and link fabulist fiction, the drama of consciousness and bacchanal aesthetics (Aiyejina). The significance of concepts of time in genre classification in Bakhtin’s work extends to my concept of *kont* as an essential ontology for creating a responsible epistemology rooted in Black diasporic culture.

III. Chapter Two In The Beginning: *Kont* in Magical Realist Texts

Wilson Harris combines theory and aesthetic to explode the boundaries of fiction and redefine the novel and the epic in order to define new dimensions of the West Indian novel. Scholars primarily discuss his fiction and Harris' enigmatic ability to construct reality and history, by pushing temporal boundaries. His work is often studied in relation to ancient epics, European romanticism, Vodun possession, and Caribbean tricksters. While I will also discuss his use of temporal chaos, my analysis engages with his theoretical works and maps trickster narrative forms in Harris's work. *Kont* is a clear undercurrent in Harris's construction of reality, and I show that it informs the ways he depicts trauma. While *Palace of the Peacock* largely rewrites a Conradian journey into the darkness of the jungle, there are *kontist* undercurrents in the ways Harris rewrites this journey. The use of temporal and spatial chaos in "Palace and the Peacock" focuses this rewriting to explore the way Middle Passage style temporal and spatial distortions destroy and rebuild the crew, their ability to locate themselves in planes of existence, and their perception of themselves. By exploring Harris' representation of hybridity, mimicry, tricksters, and time, I will demonstrate the role *kont* plays in the way these concepts shape both the themes and narrative structure of *Palace of the Peacock*.

Even though Harris constructed his own theoretical paradigms—in the critical works discussed in chapter one—his works are mainly discussed in relation to Western conventions. Harris specifically pushes back against understanding the Caribbean in relation to Western conventions. When discussing previous historical traditions he says "the duel which [historians] fought is nevertheless a very instructive one in pointing [out] the historical stasis which afflicts the West Indian sensibility and which may only be breached in complex creative perspectives for

which the historical convention would appear to possess no criteria” (“History, Myth and Fable” 9). His critique of Western conventions and epistemologies extends into literature, yet scholars often focus on how his radical texts relate to Western literary traditions. Gregory Shaw suggests that even though Harris’s works “derived from a source other than Anglo-Saxon empiricism” (158), his aesthetics branch from romanticism because of his deployment of myth and ritual broadly. Other scholars like Erin Fehsken argue that “the epic hero is exemplary of his cultural milieu and uses that exceptional position to mediate between his world and its others, particularly at key transitional moments” (19). These attempts to link Harris’ narrative experiments to established Western conventions indicate an attempt to find an epistemological framework from which Harris’ narrative innovation can be understood and analyzed.

Other scholars, who acknowledge the radical roots of Harris’ work, focus on the relationship between his fiction and his desire to challenge the idea of the Caribbean as a place with no history. Even though scholars like Paul Sharrad center his ideals, they narrowly focus on situating Harris in the late twentieth century Caribbean tradition. Sharrad primarily suggests that “the art of memory operating as redemptive historical witness” is the central impetus for Harris rejection of chronological narrative time (102). In a similar vein Joyce Hayes Forbes also discusses Harris’s temporal play, suggesting that “the rhythm of movement through time and space, and the building of bridges between differing times and within varying spaces are strategies that have a metaphoric impact upon the novel as narrative” (Forbes 202). The intersection between the metaphorical narrative and Harris’ goal to write Caribbean history into “the void of history” is the main concern of this analysis. I will take previous analyses a step further and explore the ontological implications of his choices when defining the West Indian

novel. Rather than exploring the relationship between Harris and established literary traditions² or discussing Harris' radical narrative style in relation to Caribbean history, this analysis will discuss the ways this revolutionary author is the literary nexus of a speculative fiction tradition rooted in *kont*.

In my introduction I suggested that *kont* is similar to West Indian folk consciousness that Harris discusses, but is more directly related to the way the trickster influences have shaped West Indian consciousness. I specifically referenced the void of history and drama of consciousness that Harris suggests are vital to understanding realism in the context of the Caribbean rather than focusing on conventional realism. This overlaps with Robert Pelton's discussion of the power that tricksters derive specifically from their ambiguity. The fluidity of reality and the trickster figure heavily in Harris's narrative style in *Palace of the Peacock*. This relationship between fluid reality, the ambiguity of the trickster, and Harris' narrative style are, when analyzed through an epistemological framework based on *kont*, characteristic of *kontist* realism. This realism relies primarily on representing the abstract's relationship to the physical world. The overlapping deaths of the crew come to construct a complex web of narrative that asks the reader to experience and understand multiple planes of being while the characters navigate those planes.

Palace of the Peacock deploys hybridity as a motif at several points in the text, most pointedly when the crew's shattered reality overlaps so they share a death. In these moments of shared death, Harris describes the hybridity as both creative and destructive. Early in the text we learn that "the whole crew was one spiritual family living and dying together in a common grave out of which they had sprung again from the same soul and womb as it were" (*Palace of the*

² Wilson Harris' work is most often discussed in terms of the way he deconstructs language and narrative structure to communicate truths about the history of the land, how it holds trauma, and how indigenous peoples fit into that discussion,

Peacock 39). The description of the ship and river as womb and grave early in the text calls to mind Joanne Chassot's observations about the mental and existential impact of the Middle Passage. As I mentioned in chapter one, she notes that enslaved Africans who survived the Middle Passage had their sense of time and space radically altered as "they found themselves confined on a ship that was always in motion and yet always appeared to be in the same place on the infinite sea, suspended in a time that seemed to stand still and could not be measured in any habitual way" (46). As both a place of destruction and creation, the ship and the crew's increasingly complicated relationship with it become *kontist* realist elements that force the reader to confront the violence involved in creating a hybrid identity. Thus, rather than the deterioration of civilized man, Harris' rewrites the Conradian journey into the jungle and focuses on the horror involved in the creation of hybrid identity, acknowledging both its constructive and destructive elements. This dual nature of hybridity as presented in this text reflects Harris' discussion of reconciliation in "History, Fable, and Myth." Since the text focuses heavily on this dual nature of hybrid identity, this exploration of the spatial and temporal displacement required to create a hybrid identity can easily be read as an exploration of the very reconciliation Harris suggests in "History, Fable, and Myth."

The intertwined nature of creation and destruction in the text leaves the characters uncertain about their relationship to planes of existence. When the narrator directly discusses hybridity he notes that "indeed it looked the utmost inextricable confusion to determine where they were and what they were, whether they had made any step whatever towards a better relationship—amongst themselves and within themselves—or whether it was all a fantastic chimera" (*Palace of the Peacock* 84). This description of their spatial and temporal dislocation as a "fantastic chimera" links both their horror and their survival to the transformation they

undergo during one of their shared deaths. The experience can be read as hybrid since it is a “chimera” of their relationships to themselves that have been thrown into question and their relationships to each other that have solidified as their shared trauma brings them closer and closer together. Each crew member’s transformed sense of self is also characterized as hybrid since it includes both a shared concept and an individual experience. The hybridity is then present even at an existential level following their shared death, literalizing the way the trauma of spatial and temporal distortion radically alters every aspect of an individual. The Dreamer, the narrator, experiencing all the deaths overlapping and separately says, “I was caught in a principle of never-ending anxiety and fear, and it was impossible to turn back” (*Palace of the Peacock* 49). The dread associated with the permanent changes in the crew’s sense of themselves as individuals and as a group casts the hybridity as negative because of its destruction of their senses of self. However, the hybrid structure of the narrative allows their overlapping and hybrid experiences of individual and shared deaths to become anchor points as they experience more extreme spatial and temporal distortions.

The structure of the story then asks us to consider the deaths of the crew as fluid, overlapping and departing to form a spider’s web network of experience. In the midst of their shared deaths they are also individualized in their interactions with various planes of death. The dislocation despite their shared trauma allows “Jennings [to remain] powerful, thrusting, the air of a primitive republican boxer upon him, and Cameron stood, heavy and bundled like rock, animal-wise, conscious of a rootless superstition and shifting mastery he had once worshipped in himself and now felt crumbling and lost” (*Palace of the Peacock* 79). The spider imagery becomes the center of both horror and salvation, and one of the crew members is described as reaching up “like fingers clinging to the spokes and spider of a wheel” (*Palace of the Peacock*

81). The fluidity of their experiences and the violence they experience when their deaths overlap presents the hybridity as both central to the destructive nature of these distortions, and the only saving grace that allows the crew to make sense of their experiences. Reading this narrative structure as a spider's web of various planes of being allows us to see the *kontist* elements of realism that demand the reader hold physical depictions of abstract forces at the same level of seriousness and reality as other physical aspects of the environment. The earlier establishment that planes of being are fluid and overlapping through the overlapping deaths of the crew and contact with the carpenter then allows this image of flesh and bone as everything and anything on earth to signify the seizure of meaning and identity from enslaved Africans while also signifying the reforming of connections to land and other that occurs as a result.

Harris depicts the impact mimicry has on the sense of self and the ability to locate oneself in space and time in *Palace of the Peacock*. This physical representation of Bhabha's transparency and Said's flexible positional superiority becomes a scene of abject horror for both Donne and the reader. Looking at Donne's interaction with the carpenter through the lens of mimicry reveals elements of *kontist* realism. The characters directly reference losing the ability to locate themselves: "[Donne] felt too that it was he who stood within the room and it was the carpenter who stood reflected without. This was a fantasy, this change of places, and he hammered loud again" (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). The significance of place and time in Donne's crisis relates to the scene's depictions of repeated cultural loss and oppression. *Kontist* realism shapes this representation because *Palace of the Peacock* includes several instances of animist realism as defined by Garuba. This realism wherein a culture ascribes "a physical, often animate material aspect to what others may consider an abstract idea" (Garuba 274), is central to Harris' construction of reality and *kontist* realism. Rather than simple analogy, these scenes enact

a literalization of the dislocation and loss experienced by people in the Caribbean. The dislocation of both Donne and the carpenter inscribes the impact of colonization on both colonizer and colonized identity. This literalization becomes *kontist* realism because beyond metaphor, both the characters and the readers experience the very dislocation that is represented since the dislocation in space and time is represented both physically and narratively. This allows the text to represent trauma in a way that allows the reader to experience the trauma, its effects, and *kont* sheds new light on why Harris deploys various elements of orality to accomplish this.

The idea that Donne's switching places with the carpenter was both a fantasy and his physical experience also literalizes mimic men as described by Homi Bhabha. The carpenter is coded as European several times in the text: the world around him "quietly resisted," and he is characterized by his unexplainable difference from Donne. When read through the lens of Bhabha's mimic men, Donne's fantasy of switching places and the ways his voice is quieted and swallowed up indicates a clear link between the carpenter and imperialism. The depiction links the creation and destruction caused by dislocation and spatial distortion to the relationship between Donne and the carpenter. Donne's silence becomes significant as a marker of distorted spatial barriers. He only realizes there is a spatial distortion once he tries to yell at the carpenter and receives no reaction. He is confused and thinks "there was no earthly excuse why he could not reach [the carpenter]" (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). The text, in making Bhabha's transparency a physical barrier, forces Donne and the reader to confront the existential horror created by its presence. The scene and the image of the transparency then allows us to see *kontist* realism's role in both literalizing the metaphysical and inscribing the trauma into the reader's consciousness without simply retelling the events.

Harris extends this inscription of trauma when he links the carpenter with the image of death. Donne is confronted with “the image of death in the carpenter” which “stared through him, the eyelids flickered with lightning at last in the midst of the waterfall” (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). The relationship between death, the carpenter, gaze, and Donne then links Donne’s silence in the room with the violent rootlessness he experiences in this death. Initially we find out that “he felt these implements of vision operating upon him, and still he had no hand to hold anything tangible and no voice loud enough to address anyone invisible” (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). When Donne breaks free of this vision, he finds himself “like a dead branch whose roots were reset on their living edge” (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). The image of dislocation that springs from Donne’s conflict with the carpenter again literalizes the traumatic fracturing of identity that those involved in and victimized by the colonizing process are subject to. The carpenter then is coded as both the bringer of death and the breaker of the binary that locks them together. The disruption of the barrier between them happens as a direct result of the carpenter who “raised his hammer and struck the blow that broke every spell” (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). These contradictory roles that the carpenter plays and the contradictory relationship the carpenter has with Donne are *kontist* elements in Harris’ deployment of mimicry.

These mimicry elements continue to serve a contradictory role because at several points these elements strip and rebuild the crew. At one point the crew survives “this horrifying exchange of soul and this identification of themselves with each other” just to experience “a partial return and renewal of confidence, a neighbourly wishful fulfilment and a basking in each other’s degradation and misery that they had always loved and respected” (*Palace of the Peacock* 80). This first description of their shared death links the hybrid experience to their ruin and existential dread. Their misery is multiplied by the overlapping nature of their experience. Later,

on that same page, their shared death is characterized as “a partial rehabilitation of themselves, the partial rehabilitation of a tradition of empty names and dead letters, dead as the buttons on their shirt” (*Palace of the Peacock* 80). The place of the shared death as the center of both their increased misery and their rehabilitation functions as a direct commentary on and literalizing of the experience of Caribbean identity. By forcing the crew to confront both the loss and creation that stem from overlapping and hybrid experiences of death, Harris recasts the Conradian horror as the existential chaos that envelopes colonizer and colonized alike. The horror then stems not from the jungle itself or the ‘darkness’ of the colonial world, rather it stems from the way transparency is rendered unstable and collapses on itself in the face of hybridity. As the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical world collapse and arise at arbitrary points, the confusion the crew experiences literalizes the confusion colonial subjects experience as they try to mimic, yet are always othered by, the colonizer. By presenting this confusion and these rapidly changing boundaries in the physical world, Harris asks the reader to confront the impact transparency has on the colonized.

These changes they experience become part of an extended relationship between imperialism, mimicry, and the collapse of time. In collapsing space and time to create images of imperialism, Harris’s text deploys *kontist* realism by traumatizing the characters with literalized effects of the imperialist project. When he collapses time, this continues the deployment of *kontist* realism because it forces the crew and the reader to confront the warped and overlapping experience of time that results from the trauma they have/are continuing to experience in the text. Donne even explicitly states “time had no meaning” (*Palace of the Peacock* 103). By the end of this section “millions of years had passed he knew until now he felt bruised and wounded beyond words and his limbs had crawled and still flew. He had slept in a cradle of branches and in a cave

overlooking the chasm of time” (*Palace of the Peacock* 92). This collapsing of time—the constant extension and compression of traumatic experiences—when read as part of a *kontist* reality allows the reader to experience the trauma of cultural and identity loss that various peoples in the Caribbean experience as both instantaneous and gruelingly slow. In this way, *kont* allows us to read the text’s trickster structure as a necessary element of its realistic depiction of the cultural loss that Harris is concerned with depicting.

Critics like Paul Sharrad and Joyce Hayes Forbes, as mentioned earlier, focus on Harris’ attempts to recapture and reconcile massive gaps in history and cultural experience, and *kontist* realism is essential to this recapturing. At several points the structure of the text demands the reader and the crew experience time and memory as they functioned during the Middle Passage. Much like the tricksters Robert Pelton discusses in *The Trickster in West Africa*, Harris uses the destruction of time and narrative as we experience it to renegotiate boundaries. These boundaries the text both surpasses and recreates are the boundaries between past/present/future and the self/other. The renegotiation Harris does in this text includes several allusions to the Middle Passage—since the dislocation from space and time occurs on a boat and heavily features the water. The renegotiation also relies explicitly on spider images as both anchor and guide to help the crew survive. These motifs are central to Harris’ transformation of temporal chaos into *kontist* realism that literalizes the traumatic effects of colonialism.

The horror and peril invoked to describe the scenes in which the crew was dislocated in space and time while experiencing repeated and overlapping death makes the connection to the Middle Passage clear. Despite surviving their traumatic shared death, “the crew were downcast and dejected. They had forgotten the miraculous escape they had had and recalled only fear and anxiety and horror and peril” (*Palace of the Peacock* 84). While they have survived, their

relationship to time and their place in the physical space of the jungle is permanently altered. The way this horror and peril is linked to their changed relationship to time and space adds to the text's inscription of trauma into temporal and spatial distortions. This permanent alteration leaves characters like Vigilance unable "to convey across the span and gulf of dead and dying ages and myth the endless pursuit on which Donne was engaged" (*Palace of the Peacock* 83). The allusions to the Middle Passage continue when "Vigilance winced a little and rubbed his eyes where he climbed and clung to the cliff wondering at the childish repetitive boat and prison of life" (*Palace of the Peacock* 83). The characters' experience of the boat and life as a prison, and description of the bodies of water around them as "the gulf of dead and dying ages," link their temporal dislocation and trauma to the Middle Passage. This connection between their trauma and the Middle Passage allows me to read the allusions and the temporal dislocation as elements of *kontist* realism in the text. These aspects of the narrative working together to evoke the horror the crew experiences allow both the characters and the reader to confront the effects of this journey on Caribbean consciousness.

Their dislocation in space also forces the characters to confront a void. At one point, Donne "focused his blind eye with all penitent might on this pinpoint star and reflection as one looking into the void of oneself upon the far greater love and self-protection that have made the universe" (*Palace of the Peacock* 107). By this point in the text Donne begins to try and actively reclaim his sense of self. He rebels against the shifting planes of reality and continuously tries to locate himself in the physical plane. Donne's look into the void, with his "blind eye," forces him and the reader to confront the inadequacy of the crew's regular senses in this world. This builds on the *kontist* depiction of trauma because the crew must face the material effects of their sense of self and reality being radically altered. These material effects leave their senses unable to

process or guide them through the plane of existence they find themselves in. By the end of the text the Dreamer “felt the faces before me begin to fade and part company from me and from themselves as if our need of one another was now fulfilled, and our distance from each other was the distance of sacrament, the sacrament and embrace we knew in one muse and one undying soul” (*Palace of the Peacock* 117). When the Dreamer links the distance, the crew, and sacrament, the reader is confronted with the role time and trickster manipulations of space and perception play in the reconciliation Harris writes. This reconciliation, of self and other, of their contradictory experiences of death, of their traumas requires both distance and them having “one undying soul” (*Palace of the Peacock* 117). The contradictory nature of this resolution, and the Dreamer’s reflection on the contradictory nature of their hybrid experience suggests the journey while linking the crew, does not provide a peaceful resolution or reconciliation. This barrier between them and their previous senses of individual identity then forces the reader to confront how fundamentally the crew is changed by their overlapping deaths.

The text also seems to enact the connection I see between the trickster’s significance in the Caribbean and the trauma of the Middle Passage. At several points the trickster imagery breaks barriers and momentarily un-blurs time for the crew. It is continuously appearing in relation to sun imagery and seems to occupy an increasingly central role in the crew’s ability to locate themselves. Vigilance “no longer felt himself in the land of the living though the traumatic spider of the sun crawled up and down his arms and his neck and punctured his sides of rock” (*Palace of the Peacock* 83). While the trickster is explicitly linked to the existential horror that the crew is experiencing—especially when Vigilance “rubbed his eyes since he felt he saw what no human mind should see, a spider skeleton crawling into the sky” (*Palace of the Peacock* 82)—the trickster also becomes an anchor that allows the crew to reconceptualize reality, space, and

time. The characters still feel “drawn again into the endless flight that had laid siege to the ambivalent wall of heaven and every spidery mis-step...turned into an intricate horror of space and a falling coincidence and wing” (*Palace of the Peacock* 85-6). However, “the crew were all there save Wishrop’s spider and transubstantiation: wheel and web, sunlight, starlight, all wishful substance violating and altering and annihilating shape and matter and invoking eternity only and space and musical filament and design” (*Palace of the Peacock* 83). In each instance the spider appears to usher in transformation that in many ways ends the temporal horror by ushering the crew into a different moment. Each time they are once again confronted with new dislocations, but the spiders that appear in the text all become anchor points and pivoting points for the crew during their repeated deaths.

The spider imagery in the text is most prevalent in “Book Three: The Second Death” and the spiders signify more than just the breaking of temporal boundaries and reintroduction of temporal order. At several points the steering parts of the ship are likened to spiders. The relationship between the ship and spiders takes on much more significance when we consider the implications of the spider as crosser of temporal boundaries and guide through temporal chaos. By the end of one of their shared deaths they are “steering with spider arm and engine” (*Palace of the Peacock* 85). This wheel is earlier linked to salvation because Vigilance finds himself pinned to and at the mercy of the “spider and wheel of baptism” (*Palace of the Peacock* 84). Yet his terror ends while he is on this wheel. The sun comes up, and the crew once again attempts to complete their journey. The number of spiders present in “The Second Death,” and the spider’s continued association with the sun allows the spider to signify both death and resurrection. As both the guide and the usher of death, the spidery wheel that guides the ship extends this contradictory relationship the crew has with the material world around them.

This contradictory relationship with the material world complicates their reaction to their overlapping deaths. When they are confronted with and try to escape a shared death, the ship “had lost its vulgar mechanical fervour and its enthusiasm was dwindling into an indefatigable revolving spider, hopeless and persistent” (*Palace of the Peacock* 81). The personification of the ship and the spider’s association with the loss of control of the ship and their reality foregrounds the chaotic elements of this trickster symbol. It revolves uncontrollably and ushers in their next death. In response, they experience desperation and give up on Wishrop whose hands were “aloft two times quickly after his immersion for all the world like fingers clinging to the spokes and spider of a wheel” (*Palace of the Peacock* 81). However, the spidery aspects of the boat become their saving grace. When they become resigned “the boat still crawled, driven by the naked spider of spirit” (*Palace of the Peacock* 81). Ultimately, they are saved by the role the spider images play in their experience of the ship.

The text then indicates the parallels between the structure of the dreams and spiders—a clear allusion to the Ashanti trickster Ananse. At one point Vigilance “felt himself drawn again into the endless flight that had laid siege to the ambivalent wall of heaven and every spidery mist-step he made turned into an intricate horror of space and a failing coincidence and wing” (*Palace of the Peacock* 86). The relationship between the spider and the overlapping deaths that characterize their reality is a direct connection between trickster structures, of slipperiness and contradiction, and the narrative structure of the text. This narrative structure leaves the crew and the reader at many times faced with “the resurrection of an incalculable devouring principle” (*Palace of the Peacock* 79). These descriptions of the lack of control that the crew experiences while the reader seamlessly flows in and out of competing narratives creates precisely this *kontist*

realism in which Harris deploys the arts of the imagination to compliment and deepen the reader's interaction with elements of history.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the trickster's relationship to Harris' deconstruction of time and the ontological complications created by displacement and the Black relationship to settler colonialism. However, Harris' work has trickster elements that directly shape the themes and structure of *Palace of the Peacock*. These elements flesh out the way *kont* impacts aesthetics in the Caribbean. The bodies of water in the text continuously signal a dislocation in time. At one point "they saw and heard only the boiling stream and furnace of an endless life without beginning and end. And the terror of this naked self-governing reality made them feel unreal and unwanted for ever in dreaming themselves up alive" (*Palace of the Peacock* 80). The endless nature of the water, and the constant references to timelessness, while the boat is constantly linked with spider imagery, definitively locates the crew in a trickster space. The boat is specifically described as having "lost its vulgar mechanical fervour and its enthusiasm was swindling into an indefatigable revolving spider, hopeless and persistent" (*Palace of the Peacock* 81). These descriptions locate the crew in an undeniably *kontist* reality that relies on trickster structures to distort time and place in order to fold multiple planes of being into one narrative.

As a major voice who tried to define the West Indian novel, explode literary boundaries, and draw a connection between history and art, Wilson Harris puts in conversation the cultural elements that gave birth to *kont*. His use of *kontist* realism—in this distorted reinvented colonial journey and in his discussions of Caribbean history—suggests the deep ontological relationship between cultural and historical distortions. Examining his works in this light illuminates the ways his body of work continuously explores and presents Caribbean's unique relationship to realism as necessarily extending to and influencing fiction. Situating *kontist* realism in Harris'

reinvention of historical narratives makes it much easier to read these same elements in a futurist novel. Since futurism is a similar reclamation of history that projects the cultural context of the present into the future, the thread of *kont* seems inescapable.

IV. Chapter Three Defining Uniquely Caribbean Pasts and Futures in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

Nalo Hopkinson's works like *Midnight Robber* create an authentically Caribbean voice by marrying various Black diasporic story-telling traditions. Her deft weaving of these traditions allows her texts to engage with Black diaspora histories and issues. One of the best windows into Hopkinson's place in speculative fiction genres is a short story collection she edited called *Whispers from Cotton Tree Root*. Critics have described the distinct relationship with the fantastic espoused in *Whispers from Cotton Tree Root* as "refutation of more conventional versions of postcolonial writing" or "fantasy Gothic horror writers, who produce a hybrid form, transformed into the speculative to suggest that life might be imagined otherwise" (Wisker 1, 2). In her introduction to the collection Hopkinson grapples with the complex problem of describing a literary tradition that "conveys, from a Caribbean worldview, that disorienting sense of when events take you to a place that dips into archetype and otherworldliness" (*Whispers* xiii). Even when trying to articulate what the works in the anthology convey, she says "I realized that in compiling this anthology I was essentially trying to marry two traditions of writing that have different priorities and protocols" (*Whispers* xiii). While Hopkinson has pointed out in interviews that she does not focus on situating her writing in literary movements, and instead writes speculative fiction that she wants to read, her texts offer a look into the nexus between Caribbean speculative fiction and Afro-futurism.

Hopkinson's resistance to and negotiations of the binary tropes associated with science fiction and speculative fiction as a whole has been the focus of most discussions of her second novel, *Midnight Robber*. Scholars have focused on dub—the way it signifies duality, orality, and recalls Du Bois' idea of the double consciousness of African Americans—and used cyber theory

to discuss the role of dub in the text. Sorenson, in his article, focuses on dub to discuss the aesthetic and narrative role of dub, as defined by the Reggae movement, across Hopkinson's works. He points out that "like a dub listener, Hopkinson's reader chases the narrative" (Sorenson 269). Sorenson specifically discusses the valences afforded to the text because of dub aesthetics and how they transform the standard past/present dialectic of science fiction and fantasy. Ultimately, he argues that Hopkinson's narrative relies on the narrator's ability to see multiple times and multiple perspectives at once to create a coherent story. He highlights this aspect of the narration to discuss the importance of the trickster narrator's ability to see beyond the borders of the novel's present at all times. The centrality of Hopkinson's use of trickster narrative styles to Sorenson's discussion points to the direct relationship between trickster narrative structures and the narrative of *Midnight Robber*.

Other discussions of the narrative structure of the text focus on the role of materiality and immateriality in *Midnight Robber*. Boyle specifically explores the use of decorporealisation in the text. She notes that "decorporealisation can also signal a symbolic reclamation of agency within these magic realist narratives, involving the protagonist's healing return to a 'folk' self-governed by tropes of tricksterism and storytelling" (Boyle 178-9). She ultimately argues that decorporealisation generates agency for the characters in *Midnight Robber* when Tan-Tan reconnects with the Grand Nansi web and "other West African and Caribbean ancestor/goddess figures, as well as to the deconstructed models of racial identity and linguistic playfulness that underpin such figures, investing the site of the penal colony with singular agency" (Boyle 186). Other scholars like Feshkins connect the materiality in the novel with embodiment to discuss how they complicate the text's utopian and feminist aspects. She focuses on the way future technology is tied to invading bodily autonomy and circumventing it by reducing the materiality

of labor while the text asserts bodily autonomy and materiality throughout the narrative. The centrality of both materiality and immateriality to the *Midnight Robber* 's exploration of Black womanhood highlights the contradictory elements present in this trickster narrative both thematically and structurally. These contradictory elements produce a vast array of readings of Hopkinson's text that eventually come to the same conclusion, that the text ultimately empowers Tan-Tan and vastly contradictory thematic and structural elements are all essential to her healing. My focus on trickster narrative structures in the text then, probes deeper into the spaces for resistance and healing created by the presence of these contradictions in the text.

Discussions of Hopkinson's complex relationship with genre generally focus on situating her among other Black diaspora writers. Perillo, for example, focuses on the way Hopkinson transcends and plays between Caribbean and North American concepts of movements. She notes that "binary distinctions that underlie notions of utopia and dystopia cannot account for Hopkinson's futuristic world" (Perillo 8). Her argument explores the way Hopkinson's construction of the future, in being so authentically Caribbean, presents the reader with future worlds rooted in Caribbean modes of optimism and looking forward. Ultimately she argues that the rewriting of Tan-Tan's rape that occurs in the final scene is Glissantian and notes that "this admittedly coercive act also "calls forth disorder," as Granny Nanny ruptures the dimensional veil in a way that might allow inhabitants of Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree to more readily enter into a dynamic system of Relation" (Perillo 13). The relationship between Caribbean concepts of futurity and a trickster-like deployment of chaos to create a new system of relation—as new system of order—again makes clear the centrality of trickster narrative structures in the text.

My reading of *Midnight Robber* is not the only one to suggest the text's surreal elements add up to and represent a type of realism. Moynagh discusses how applying Žižek's *mis-en-sene*³ allows us to read the true potential of Hopkinson and other Black speculative fiction writers' works for rewriting, renegotiating, and accurately representing the marginalization of the African diaspora experience at a global and interpersonal level. She suggests this critical lens "nonetheless offers us a way of thinking more specifically about how the speculative combines with realism in these works, especially when 'realism' seems absent or at least suspended" (Moynagh 215). She focuses on the ways Black speculative fiction writers have deployed and used folk legends and trickster and oral story-telling traditions to confront the reader with the complicated structural and spiritual forces affecting Black life. She most notably points out that *Midnight Robber* "is a *mise-en-scène* of current (and historic) human relations with technological systems, including the technologies for extending narrative across distance and time like the letter, the book, the Internet and the database" (Moynagh 218). In order to explore this realism, and the forces it depicts, I argue that naming *kont* and focusing on the role of the vignettes in discussing Tan-Tan's recovery from trauma will reveal the salience of these narrative forms for translating the complicated journey toward healing from historical and interpersonal trauma.

The narrative structure of *Midnight Robber* can be characterized as a trickster narrative not only because it is narrated by a trickster figure—Eshu—but because it includes several Anansi stories that retell events in the novel and are the central depiction of the main character's emotional journey. The text features three vignettes that mythologize Tan-Tan's experience of trauma and healing. Each vignette comes before the emotional experience that it foreshadows,

³ "*mise-en-scène* refers to the ways in which a literary form reproduces or enacts the ideological *practice* rather than the ideological *belief*" (Moynagh 214).

giving the reader insight into and an experience of the emotional journey Tan-Tan goes on through Anansi stories. They specifically explore the role of trauma in Tan-Tan's guilt and the role of guilt in Tan-Tan's inability to process her trauma, allowing the reader to experience the emotional weight of Tan-Tan's experiences and see the transformation of her psyche play out. The narrator contextualizes these vignettes by explaining they are stories Tan-Tan overhears about herself and attempts to draw power from: "[Tan-Tan] kept trying to discern truths about herself in the Tan-Tan tales, she couldn't help it. People loved them so, there must be something to them, ain't? Something hard, solid thing other people could see in her; something she could hear and know about herself and hold in her heart" (*Midnight Robber* 299). The vignettes then empower Tan-Tan both because they transform the way readers view her, and because they directly transform the way Tan-Tan sees herself. The Anansi stories serve an intertextual and metatextual function in Tan-Tan's emotional journey.

The slippery position of and function of the vignettes is the core of the text's trickster narrative structure and is central to my analysis. Reading the vignettes as "a next side" to the traumatic experiences Tan-Tan goes through and the overwhelming emotions she must navigate to heal, brings to the forefront the depth afforded to the character specifically through the trickster narrative structure. The metatextual power of these vignettes, then, is the role they play in the narrator's simultaneous closeness to Tan-Tan's present and distance from her trauma. This simultaneous closeness and distance allows the narrator to present the reader with the visceral impact in the moment of Tan-Tan's trauma and the perspective gained during the healing process. Intertextually, the vignettes render the non-linear and constantly interrupted process of healing from trauma. Tan-Tan's main narrative, her singular march toward healing and the birth of her son is constantly shifted and reinterpreted by her through her hearing the Anansi stories.

These shifts and reinterpretations allow the narrator, after showing us this “next side,” to expose new valences in Tan-Tan’s journey toward healing. Jumping back and forth between moments when Tan-Tan seems to have escaped her trauma and the very moments when it changes her life emphasizes the cyclical nature of healing.

The trickster narrative form relies on this type of cyclical progression in order to exert power after sowing discord. Pelton points out that for the Dogon knowledge systems “are connected, not like the floors of a house, but like the curves of a spiral. The movement creating each curve and the entire spiral is the movement of life itself” (166). By considering the spiral nature of Dogon knowledge with the widely accepted slipper nature of the trickster, Pelton’s reading allows us to read the elusive nature of the trickster as functioning within parallel nearly cyclical patterns of growth and deepening knowledge. The spiral, elusive nature of the trickster then allows us to see the parallels between Tan-Tan’s interrupted and disjointed journey to healing, and the trickster narrative structure. Eshu’s place at the gateway between all worlds, and the narration’s parallel spirals into the depth of Tan-Tan’s psyche and movement toward healing all work to portray her post-traumatic stress within a Caribbean metonymy and ontology.

The first vignette, “How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief,” presents a creation myth that fictionalizes Tan-Tan’s journey to the planet of New Half-Way Tree and reverses Tan-Tan’s abduction to reframe her position in this trauma as not simply victim but also an actor. She exerts resistance throughout the story and while the Edenic creation myth is tinged with foreshadowing of the incestuous rape to come later in the text, it gives her more agency in the Anansi story than she had in real life, allowing the trickster tale to as the narrator says, to “shake it out and turn it over *swips!* And maybe you see it have a next side to the tale” (*Midnight Robber* 3). It begins with a reversal of Tan-Tan’s abduction to New Half-Way Tree since in the Anansi story it is

Tan-Tan who convinces her father to leave their home and go to a foreign planet. When she convinces her father to go to New Half-Way Tree it is not to avoid accountability but to create the world. When they find themselves stranded, she is the one who finds the food Kabo Tano has left for them and learns to communicate with him. Her final act of rebellion against Kabo Tano leads to New Half-Way Tree being transformed into a vibrant lush planet. Empowering Tan-Tan, even though she is trapped on the planet, and centering her as the creator of the world rather than Antonio subtly takes the creation of her son Tubman—conceived as a result of her incestuous rape—away from the rape and instead primes the reader to view him as Tan-Tan’s own creation. Although the planet is desolate, the reason they are trapped, and full of creatures who attempted to prevent Tan-Tan from surviving, she creates and cares for the world in this Anansi story. By the end of the text, when Tan-Tan gives birth to Tubman, the reader has been presented with Anansi stories that rewrite her traumas specifically to empower her and center that empowerment. Like the planet of New Half-Way Tree in “How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief,” Tubman becomes Tan-Tan’s creation and something she cares for and watches over.

The vignette also includes a literal trickster since Kabo Tano and Eshu are mirror figures. In “How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief” Kabo Tano, like Eshu in the main narrative gives Tan-Tan life, solace, guidance. Kabo Tano also loses the ability to speak to her when she lands on New Half-Way Tree, and only speaks to her again when she encounters the halfway tree: “As he watch the strange procession to the half-way tree, Kabo Tano realize that the wild pig deceive he. He get vex, you see? But him couldn’t speak to Tan-Tan to advise she until she find the tree and eat from it. She had was to help sheself” (*Midnight Robber* 86). At the end of the novel it is revealed that the narrator Eshu also lost the ability to speak to Tan-Tan when she came to New-Halfway Tree. Like the food in her system in the Anansi story, Eshu cannot speak to Tan-Tan

because the nanomites required for communication were no longer working in her system. When the nanomites migrate into Tubman, the parallels between the literal half-way tree and Tubman extend the relationship between Tan-Tan as creator of the planet and her as creator of Tubman. The parallel between the Half-Way Tree as a bridge between Tan-Tan and Kabo Tano, and Tubman's role as the bridge between Eshu and the Granny Nani AI, creates a positive and empowered association between Tubman and Tan-Tan. Thus rather than focusing on his relationship to the rape—as Tan-Tan does earlier in the text—by the end of the story when she gives birth to him, both she and the reader are aware of his role as a bridge between who she is at the end and the community that harmed her. She even calls him “Tubman: the human bridge” (*Midnight Robber* 329). While she connects this to Harriet Tubman's significance as the bridge from slavery to freedom, the Anansi stories add a layer to this ending that reminds us of Tubman's significance as signifier of both a bridge between Good and Bad Tan-Tan, and a bridge between Tan-Tan and the wider forces that seek to protect her—Kabo Tano and The Grand Nansi Web.

The vignette thus rewrites her discovery of the healing point as halfway between Good and Bad Tan-Tan and makes it a fable, creating a space to empower Tan-Tan. We can read Tubman as halfway between running away to douen home and living with her father forever. We are also explicitly told that the tree that gives her the food in “How Tan-Tan Learn to Thief” that allows her to talk to Kabo Tano is “halfway between the mountain them did climb and the river where them did drink” (*Midnight Robber* 84). Tan-Tan is halfway between herself and the Robber Queen. The narrator of the Anansi story tells the listeners and the reader that Kabo Tano made this choice because “them would have to find it. That is why it name the half-way tree” (*Midnight Robber* 84). The connection between Tan-Tan's journey to healing and the naming of

the planet on which her journey takes place makes the parallel between the fable retelling of her journey and her journey in the main narrative clear. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the text is telling us that the community Tan-Tan lived in—the site of her central trauma—would never allow Tan-Tan to heal because “him woulda make the tree grow on the mountain top where Tan-Tan and Antonio was, but it was too high for good plants to grow” (83). Like the mountain top, Tan-Tan must leave the physical site of her trauma—the village—and the emotional place that causes her to think of herself as good/bad Tan-Tan in order to communicate with Eshu again, communicate with the Nansi web, and reintegrate into her community.

This vignette also parallels the traumatic climax of the novel where Tan-Tan murders her father in self-defense after years of sexual abuse. It ends by telling the reader and the listeners that “forever after, the beasts in the bush would run and hide whenever they see Tan-Tan coming, for they know she to be the greatest thief of all, the one who could steal them life away before their time come. She turn Robber Queen for true. Is Tan-Tan make it so” (90). When Tan-Tan is described as shortening lives after she hunts the two animals that prevented her from eating, the text foreshadows Tan-Tan’s guilt about the murder of her father. While both the hunting and the murder are justified in the interest of Tan-Tan’s safety, the hyper-focus on her role in those deaths frames Tan-Tan’s guilt as both related to her sexual trauma and survivor’s guilt. The reminder of her role in the death and the reference to the Robber Queen immediately following her survival at the end of the story indicate that for Tan-Tan, her survival is inexplicably linked with death. This link foreshadows guilt as a recurring theme in her thoughts and the Anansi stories.

The next vignette, “Tan-Tan and Dry Bone,” relies even more on the Anansi story format to relate Tan-Tan’s trauma to the reader. This vignette features two major motifs that relate to

Tan-Tan's next tale of survival and healing in the main narrative. In this Anansi story both guilt and hunger are personified foregrounding the various ways they impact and relate to Tan-Tan's trauma. Throughout the story patriarchy is linked to burden that Tan-Tan carries when she calls Dry Bone Daddy (*Midnight Robber* 200), Pappy (*Midnight Robber* 200) and Master (*Midnight Robber* 209). Dry Bone is then linked to her guilt, and through his physicality, forces the reader to confront the constant and grueling task Tan-Tan faces in dealing with this trauma. When she finds him in the market, she notices that when "she pick up the old man, and is like she pick up all the cares of the world" (*Midnight Robber* 201). Each time she interacts with Dry Bone "she feel the weight of all the burdens she carrying: alone, stranded on New Half-Way Tree with a curse on she head, a spiteful woman so ungrateful she kill she own daddy" (*Midnight Robber* 201). The emphasis on weight centralizes two aspects of Tan-Tan's relationship with her guilt: the physical impact it has on her, and the complexity of her relationship to it. During her first days in the Daddy Tree Tan-Tan's experience is marred by physical traumas and physical reminders of her trauma. These color her relationship with both her body and the emotions she has surrounding the rapes and the death of her father. Simultaneously the main narrative foregrounds Tan-Tan's loss of sleep, and the constant reminders that harken back to the moment of trauma despite how much Tan-Tan tries to avoid it. Reading "Tan-Tan and Dry Bone" then puts the literalizing of this experience and the more common western realist depiction of the experience side by side in a way that foregrounds the role of *kontist* realism in the trickster text and highlights its salience in the text's exploration of trauma.

The weight of Dry Bone paired with his unassuming presence foregrounds the sudden presence of guilt and how unprepared Tan-Tan is to deal with it. His link with hunger foregrounds the rapid way guilt consumes her life and all her energy during the day. When she

cooks for Dry Bone all day and loses rest because he is never full, the Anansi story explores and foregrounds the valences of guilt and the ways it consumes Tan-Tan's life. The slipperiness and sneakiness of guilt is central to descriptions of Dry Bone since the other residents also know that "In Duppy Dead Town them will tell you how it ain't have no way to get away from Dry Bone the skin-and-bone man, for even if you lock you door on him, him body thin so like the hope of salvation, so fine him could slide through the crack and all to pass inside your house" (*Midnight Robber* 198). Just as the focus on his heaviness uses *kontist* realism to literalize the way trauma shapes her and her reality, the focus on Dry Bone's sneakiness literalizes the post-traumatic stress element of Tan-Tan's experience. Literalizing this element of Tan-Tan's journey then adds to this vignette's role as a "next side" of examining Tan-Tan's intrusive thoughts and how they factor into her healing process. At several points she confronts people who experience major physical trauma much like her, and her experience in Duppy Dead Town gives context for and a means of reading her interactions with other traumatized people who all recognize the role of Dry Bone/guilt/post-traumatic stress in their day-to-day functioning.

We are also confronted with the inescapable nature of her trauma when she tries to run away from its manifestation. Tan-Tan thinks "maybe she could run away now?" but immediately "four bony fingers grab she round she arm and start to squeeze. 'You can't run away, Tan-Tan. I go follow you. You have to deal with me'" (*Midnight Robber* 205). This demand that she "deal with" Dry Bone and the swiftness with which he catches her highlights the ways running to the douen community is not sufficient for Tan-Tan to heal. Just as she cannot run away from Dry Bone, she cannot run away from the physical damage done by the years of rape or the emotional damage done by the patriarchal social code—which cause her to feel enormous guilt over the death of her father. Confronting its impact directly through her Robber speech at the end of the

text releases the hold the guilt has on her much like Master John Crow releases the hold Dry Bone has on Tan-Tan. This gives the reader context for her increasing ventures deeper and deeper into the human community where she circles as an outsider—the Robber Queen—and eventually reintegrates into the center as Tan-Tan. Her constant and flagrant violation of social boundaries and the gender norms of New-Halfway Tree paired with her location on the literal outside of the community cast her as an outsider—much like the trickster who violates social order. Her use of Robber Talk and bravado extend the relationship between her Robber Queen persona and the trickster as she bluffs and uses word play to turn social norms on their heads. The way her return to the community is structured then has Tan-Tan mirror the journey of a trickster as laid out by Pelton. Just like Ananse who “has passed beyond that structure only to recreate it” (Pelton 43), Tan-Tan moves out of the community and tests the boundaries of societal norms as she imposes her justice on people. However, by the end of the text she integrates back into the community, baring her trauma, and using community tools—deploying robber speech in the accepted forum of carnival—to impose justice rather than violence from the margins. In this way Tan-Tan herself draws power not just from the way the trickster narrative empowers her, but from the way her healing journey is shaped by trickster structures.

The Anansi story reminds us that the vignettes are directly tied to the Tan-Tan of the real world. After she talks to John Crow he tells her, “like Dry Bone not the only monkey that a-ride your back, child. You carrying round a bigger burden than he. And me nah want that on there. It ain’t smell dead, but like it did never live” (*Midnight Robber* 206). At the end of the novel, the reader is reminded that Tan-Tan’s healing journey has not ended as she escapes one burden of guilt—Dry Bone—since she continues to deal with and try to process her guilt until the end of the novel. While the removal of Dry Bone parallels her first application of the douen saying, “if

you take one you must give back two” (*Midnight Robber* 174), she still has a long journey toward healing ahead of her. The vignette is bookended with these reminders of Tan-Tan’s relationship to her trauma in the main narrative. When she first enters the market, she is described as “one who can’t see she joy for she sorrow; the favourite meat of the one name Dry Bone” (*Midnight Robber* 199). These reminders of the main narrative highlight the intertextual role of these Anansi stories in the wider trickster narrative of *Midnight Robber*.

The setting of this vignette is also significant because the town is set at the death/life boundary. The vignette opens by pointing out that “Duppy Dead people have one foot in the world and the next one already crossing the threshold to where real duppy-them living” (*Midnight Robber* 198). This link between Duppy Dead Town and the threshold opens the text by linking the setting to historical and structurally significant elements of Hopkinson’s text. Reading the town as a liminal space—a town between life and death—and considering it in the wider context of the other references to transatlantic slavery in the text, makes Chassot’s discussions of the Middle Passage relevant. These aspects of the text are reminiscent of Chassot’s observation that some of the more successful depictions of the Middle Passage “visually conveys a reality that the captives had to face during the Atlantic crossing: the omnipresence of death” (44) and is reminiscent of an observation she discusses made by Smallwood that death during transatlantic slavery was “much more problematic and indefinite notion than suggested in even the most detailed account books registering mortality” (45). The focus on the ever present, looming nature of death during slavery further⁴ contextualizes the

⁴ Here I am complicating my reading of Duppy Dead Town by going beyond simply reading of Duppy themselves as liminal to extend what Duppy Dead Town can signify as a kontist realist element. More than just the town existing between life and death necessarily because the Duppy is a presence, an impression that exists between life and death, my *kontist* reading focuses on the extra valences the town has when read in the context of spatial and temporal distortions that stem specifically from the Middle Passage.

place of Duppy Dead Town as a liminal space—a space between life and death—and also extends the relationship between Tan-Tan’s worldview and Afro-Caribbean history. The figures in the town are also described as people who arrive there after “life boof them,” after “hope left them and happiness cut she eye ‘pon them and strut away” (*Midnight Robber* 198). This combined with their familiarity with the inescapable nature of Dry Bone indicates that the town’s liminality is also related to its place between succumbing to trauma and completely healing from it. The structural significance of this overlap between Duppy Dead Town and previous literary representations of the Middle Passage is also linked to the town’s location at the life/death boundary. By setting the trickster narrative—the Anansi story—in a liminal slippery setting, the vignette foregrounds the liminal space these stories speak from and also highlights the importance of this liminality in creating space for Tan-Tan to process her trauma.

Both the curse and the Robber Queen empower Tan-Tan in her Anansi stories, and by the last section of main narrative, in the main narrative as well. When she first consciously uses the Robber Queen to confront someone, she recalls the moment and thinks “She remembered the voice that had come from her, it must have been her. She all by herself; she’d taught that woman a lesson, and she’d spoken her mind with confidence, and she (yes, this is how she would tell it to Abitefa), she had ruled a mob of people who could easy have pelted her with rockstones if they had had a mind to. She didn’t even self feel like the same Tan-Tan. And for once, Bad Tan-Tan was quiet” (246). The decreasing presence of Bad Tan-Tan, or Tan-Tan’s guilt following her defeat of Dry Bone in the Anansi story and after she cares for the rolling calf indicates that both the freedom from social codes—that allows her to let go of her guilt—and the decision to resist through nurturing are essential to her full healing. The douen curse—and its demand for restorative rather than retributive justice—in addition to Chichibud reminding her that she is -

absolved of guilt by Papa Bois become a two-pronged tool for helping Tan-Tan recover from years of abuse and trauma. Her empowerment thus comes from the way these stories map a sense of self for Tan-Tan that exists outside societal boundaries, so she has the freedom to reconstruct and rewrite them like any trickster.

As her confidence grows in the final section of main narrative the relationship between her healing and the Anansi stories becomes more direct. Her thoughts grow more confident and she describes herself as “The Robber Queen [who] leapt in front of them, held up an imperious hand” (245). This strength highlights the intertextual purpose of the Anansi stories. Not only do they transform concepts of Tan-Tan and her relationship to her trauma, they transform Tan-Tan’s concept of herself as she overhears them. Tan-Tan’s increasing confidence as the Robber Queen, and comfort in that persona become central to her healing in the final act. Abitefa, the douen who journeys with her until the end of the story helps Tan-Tan amplify the healing potential of this moment: “every so often Abitefa would stop and say, **‘Story, Tan-Tan! Tell me again how you frighten them in Chigger Bite.’** And Tan-Tan would tell it all over again. The hectoring inner voice didn’t plague her once. That there night was sweet, seen” (256). The growing distance between Tan-Tan and her intrusive thoughts parallels her ability to defeat figures from Jamaican folklore in the Anansi stories. As she triumphs—and her triumphs become less violent, less focused on revenge, and are centered on her healing and helping others heal—Tan-tan both in the Anansi stories and in the main narrative confront the flaws in Bad Tan-Tan’s power, and integrate Good Tan-Tan into her crusade for justice. Just as the final vignette fades into the last section of the novel, so we see Bad Tan-Tan and her fantastic adventures meld into Good Tan-Tan as she becomes and then lets go of the Robber Queen persona at the end.

These figures that she gains power from, mobilizes, and heals through are all major carnival figures often linked with the very patriarchal structures and behaviors that caused Tan-Tan's initial trauma. Rewriting major carnival and trickster figures as roles for a female character also gives the role of Anansi stories in Tan-Tan's healing process a feminist significance. Both Anansi and the Midnight Robber are traditionally male trickster figures. They both gain their power from their ability to navigate social codes and their sexual prowess. Since she is harmed by patriarchal codes that both victim-blame her and cause her to feel guilt for protecting herself, recasting these traditionally male figures allows Tan-Tan to draw power from the very social structures that harmed her. Tan-Tan in these roles becomes a slippery figure on multiple levels since she is violating and rewriting the social boundaries that indicate these figures as masculine, and as a figure she violates and rewrites the violent and patriarchal codes of New Halfway Tree. Considering she violates social boundaries at two levels—by inhabiting these figures—her use of the douen healing and processing strategies, rather than her own community's can be read from a new perspective. In order to recover from the damage caused by these codes, she must gain independence from and a sense of self separate from those codes. The birth of her son, Tubman, then represents an independent rather than reactive response to her trauma.

The final vignette, "Tan-Tan and the Rolling Calf," is the only one to seamlessly flow into the main narrative. This seamlessness signals both a healing of Tan-Tan's trauma and the healing of the narrative to a steady linear form. When Dori Laub discussed the intersection between witnessing and literature—in his book *Testimony*—he suggested that the creative process often gives victims a means of representing the unrepresentable and creating an internal witness. Considering the centrality of Anansi stories and oral story-telling in both the Caribbean and the fantastic world of New Halfway Tree, it becomes apparent that these stories not only

serve as a retelling that empowers Tan-Tan through their narrative purpose, but also serve to create a witness. While Laub speaks of this as the creation of an internal witness (71), the relationship between orality and community means that Tan-Tan's internal witness brings on an external witnessing of her trauma and the processing she experiences. Both the vignettes and her Robber Speech at the end represent a creative witnessing for the trauma she endured by herself. The growth she experiences and the integration of the final vignette into the main narrative also removes the rape and subsequent self-defense—murder—as the foundational myth and instead allows Tan-Tan to reconceptualize of herself and her beginnings outside of that abuse. Much like LaCapra suggests (698), displacing the trauma as the foundational myth allows her to stop reliving and perpetuating her experience of and relationship to that trauma. The vignettes then represent Tan-Tan's witnessing, and when they blend into the narrative, they illustrate the ways Tan-Tan can define herself in the present outside of the trauma.

This vignette is also significant because it directly reenacts the trauma of the final rape and the murder of her father. When she fights the mother rolling calf she thinks "*Don't tell me I go dead right here tonight, Tan-Tan think*" (293). Then when she kills it "She feel the machete shudder. Rolling calf blood start to spray from the wound, all over she hands, and the beast crash down right on top of she. The blow almost knock she senseless. She couldn't move" (293).

Similarly, during the murder of her father she notices

Something was scraping at her waist. Her hand found it. The scabbard. With the knife inside. A roaring started up in her ears. It couldn't have been she. IT must have been the Robber Queen who pulled the knife. Antonio raised up to shove into the person on the bed again. It must have been the Robber Queen, the outlaw woman, who quick like a

snake got the knife braced at her breastbone just as Antonio slammed his heavy body right onto the blade (168).

As he dies “Antonio jerked like a fish on a hook. He collapsed onto her. His weight drove the knife handle backwards against her breastbone, gouging upwards until it was under her chin. Antonio’s head fell on Tan-Tan’s own. She screamed. His body convulsed, then relaxed. Thick blood gushed out of his mouth. She heard his bowels loose in death. Then she smelt it” (168). Just as she lies under the mother rolling calf until the woman she was travelling with helps her out, “she lay there so under Antonio’s corpse” (168). The connection between her physical experience in the Anansi story and the physical scars of and violence of the final rape re-emphasize the complications involved in Tan-Tan’s recovery from her trauma. Even as she kills the thing attacking her for a second time, she is crushed by the physical and emotional weight of her actions. As she cares for the baby rolling calf and sees it as her duty based on the douen curse, Tan-Tan pre-enacts the birth of and care for her son.

When discussing her writing in an interview, Hopkinson contextualizes many of her artistic choices by explaining her relationship to and respect for Afro-Caribbean story-telling traditions and worldviews. She describes her works as trying “to imagine how Caribbean culture might metonymize technological progress if it was in our hands: in other words, what stories we’d tell ourselves about our technology—what our paradigms for it might be” (Glave 149). These paradigms inevitably reflect *kont* as the technology is a trickster and connects to the people of Toussaint through a trickster figure, Eshu. She admits that “as soon as you start describing a people or peoples, you find yourself talking about their history and their experience in the world” (Glave 153). Representing these experiences then means that, as Perillo points out, “Hopkinson’s ’Nansi Web paradoxically serves both anticolonial and colonial ends” and that

“Caribbean folk traditions are constitutive of, rather than opposed to, the technology Hopkinson imagines” (7,10). The integration of Caribbean folk traditions—as I have discussed in this chapter—foreground *kont* and use *kontist* realism to negotiate and explore the complicated matter of recovering from trauma. The trickster narrative structure is central to both my textual analysis of the ways *kontist* realism aids in the text’s representation of trauma, and the connection between Hopkinson’s futurism and Caribbean folk traditions.

It is this conversation she creates, between Caribbean folk traditions and Afro-futurism that place her, like Wilson Harris, at the nexus of the *kontist* tradition I map out. The relationship between the oral traditions and the Black speculative traditions that Hopkinson mobilizes naturally generate *kontist* realist elements in the text as they explore the historical, intergenerational, and interpersonal trauma afflicting the characters in her text. This relationship illuminates how Hopkinson casts elements of African and indigenous futurist traditions as real and unreal. Both the structural choices she makes in her presentation of trauma and the types of mythical figures and creole she casts as real and historical harken back to the ontological assumptions she alludes to in each epigraph in *Whispers*.

V. Conclusion

The Broader Context and Influence of *Kont*

Both Harris and Hopkinson write in genres that derive their creativity and potency from their ability to reflect and rewrite historical situations. The ties between their works and history and their foregrounding of the magical elements in their realities make their texts helpful for illustrating the ways *kont* shapes Afro-Caribbean fiction. However, since I argue *kont* is an Afro-Caribbean ontology—not just an element of speculative fiction—I am pushing my analysis to include a more difficult work. Lovelace’s *Salt* complicates this discussion of the fantastic since the novel openly questions the validity of the ontological beliefs I am discussing. He includes several references to characters expressing belief in these systems, that I argue feel as real as the common cold, and then being disappointed, or casting the unfulfilled promise as ironic. When he does this, his work plays with the assumptions that underpin *kont*. While this mainly takes place in early sections of the novel, and as the main character becomes an adult and leaves rural Trinidad, Lovelace’s skeptical treatment of these ontologies and his characters presents a valuable casting of the fantastic as just a coping mechanism. However, in these scenes of criticism and dismissal, there is a tension between the narrator’s dismissal of *kont* and the characters’ own investment in and experience of the fantastic in the world around them.

In the collection of essays *Growing in the Dark* Lovelace’s ideals are foregrounded and juxtaposed in interesting ways that reveal *kont* in his will own ideas about Caribbean history and storytelling. While the collection consists of text from speeches Lovelace has given over the years, they shed important light on his personal ideology. The introduction indicates that the texts are in chronological order, and the collection opens with “From De I-Lands” where he points out that “Anancy adopts the roles people are fond of playing amid the contradictions and uncertainties of our evolving society” (*Growing in the Dark* 5). By drawing a connection

between Anansi and the contradictions of everyday life, he already foregrounds the connection between the Caribbean's chaotic history and the centrality of trickster figures. He also points out that he sees "folk culture not as a rural culture conceived in the context of an agrarian society, or as having to do with the nature of the seasons but as resistance" (*Growing in the Dark* 5).

Describing folk culture as a site of resistance allows it to be read beyond its surface literary functions and contextualizes a new reading of its presence in his texts. Viewing folk culture as resistance extends the connection between tricksters, the surreal, and processing the daily contradictions Afro-Caribbean people face.

Lovelace also draws several connections between orality and Caribbean history in ways that cast this aspect of folk culture as central to Caribbean life and history. In "I Never Heading Geeson Sing" he discusses the deeply personal and oral nature of Caribbean history since there were

stickfighters, runners, bongo dancers, cricketers, six hitters, who we never see perform, but whose names come down to us as folklore, related in rumshop conversations, street corner limes, fellows who disappear into old age of the ordinariness of domestic concerns, their talent still intact like a treasured medallion secreted in their bosom at the end of a silver chain, known only to their most intimate friends (*Growing in the Dark* 69).

This discussion of the blending of reality and folklore as protection of history is significant because it establishes this aspect of folk culture as specifically resisting European historical traditions. In highlighting this aspect of Caribbean life, Lovelace foregrounds the specific sites of resistance where folk culture is deployed. By connecting this secret history to specifically Caribbean past-times like stick fighting and intimate community spaces like rum shops, Lovelace foregrounds the deeply personal nature of this resistance. Rather than resistance that is

performative and yields outward results, Lovelace in this instance highlights the intimate community centered modes of resistance created by folk culture.

The relationship Lovelace sees between folk culture and resistance contextualizes his later claims about the voices that shape perceptions of Caribbean identity. In “Earl Warner: Writer and Director” Lovelace quotes C. L. R. James who said “people of the Caribbean, you do not know who you are and nobody will tell you” (qtd in *Growing in The Dark* 80), and he refutes the suggestion by pointing out that “people are telling us; there are writers telling us all the time. The problem is that we have been seeing these writers in terms of their celebrity arty status rather than in terms of what they have to say” (*Growing in The Dark* 80). Lovelace is a notable twentieth century Caribbean voice because he returned to and settled in Trinidad after attending university. By foregrounding the importance of external voices becoming internal narratives in the struggle to define Caribbean identity, he draws attention to the role of art in this struggle. By focusing on the writers who are “telling us all the time” and calling them “arty” Lovelace makes a similar connection between history and art as Harris does (*Growing in The Dark* 80). The similarities between Lovelace—the issues he identifies, and the paths of resistance he focuses on—and both Hopkinson and Harris are the reason he is the final text discussed. His work *Salt* will solidify how *kont* can be used as a tool for reading various works of Afro-Caribbean fiction.

In his novel *Salt*, Lovelace plays with and complicates the very folk culture that he describes in these essays. The novel opens with a myth in which one of Uncle Bango’s ancestors returns to Africa with the help of some unidentified magic. This myth, while not believed by most of the characters, is specifically described as the only thing “separating [Bango] from [the narrator’s] other uncles” because this was the story that “he was ever willing to tell” which the narrator reasons means “it had to be his story” (*Salt* 4). This myth as the opening of the text

foregrounds a few specific *kontist* elements. First, the ambiguity of the magical flight that Guinea John takes allows the text to begin with a chaotic blend of real and surreal. This blending and ambiguity in the family's history sets an important *kontist* realist tone in the text. I have established how *kontist* realism relies on, as Hopkinson notes, characters existing in a narrative in which they "never know when life will just drop [them] down in that hole, into a ceiba space where none of the rules [they] know operate"(Whispers xiii). Considering the opening in this light allows the ambiguity of Guinea John's flight to signify not just a metaphor for the longing for identity that the characters experience, but also a family myth of resistance that empowers the current characters to reckon with the world around them. Guinea John specifically reminds them that "it was their living that would make him an ancestor" (*Salt* 3) and, as he flies away, suggests he must return to in response to the yearning and calling of a specific person in Africa. Although the myth of the flying African is a New World invention, the role of rootedness in the success of Guinea John's flight foregrounds the role of West African culture and the relationship between things on this plane and the more fantastical planes of existence. The novel opens then, by blending familial myth and history with conventional family history to establish this setting as shaped by *kont*.

The novel extends this ambiguity by showing certain folk beliefs to be fallible and demonstrates the uncontrolled nature of magic in *kontist* realism. The magic is not constant, the planes of existence cross and uncross, meaning that we can read Aunt Florence's investment in and failure to get anything from the prophecy she received as evidence of the arbitrary nature of the supernatural in the Caribbean. She waits for nine years to meet her husband on her front porch, and her belief is never shaken, yet as Hopkinson pointed out, many times the slip into the fantastic is just that: a slip. While Aunt Florence is certain her life is being shaped by these larger

forces, the forces impact other aspects of her life while leaving her romantic pursuits untouched. Yet other characters like Dixon who do not believe in and refuse to confront the fantastic, are much more directly shaped by its presence in their life.

The novel includes an immortelle tree that serves as a metaphor for the longstanding harm caused by slavery and apprenticeship in the Caribbean, but the physical harm it causes to the inhabitants of the house reflects *kontist* realism in the text. May's pleas to her husband to cut down the tree because of the damage it does to the house and her joints are significant because they present clearly to the reader Dixon's refusal to accept the role of the tree—and other external forces—in the suffering his family endures. The dampness that plagues the house and May's body foregrounds the physical toll of the metaphysical forces in their life. Thus while the immortelle tree serves as a central image to embody these metaphysical, historical, and cultural forces that wear down Dixon, May, and their family, the fact that the damage is done not by physical labor or injury, but the weight of these forces indicates *kontist* realism at work in the text.

Kont then, as I have shown through my analyses of these texts, shapes Caribbean literature through—what are often simply read as metaphors—and inspires the constant exploration of the relationship between larger historical and cultural forces, and the material conditions of the present day. The trickster—while specifically deployed in speculative fiction—helps foreground the way these forces shape the mental and physical conditions of the characters. When confronting these larger, traumatizing factors, traditional realism continuously falls short. As Joanne Chassot notes, only modernist representations of the temporal and spatial distortions of the Middle Passage accurately translate the forces shaping modern Caribbean identity. Considering *kont* as an ontology born in response to these distortions, and as an ontology that

emerges to help Afro-Caribbean people—in both realist and speculative texts—try to reckon with, define, and explore their identity, allows the use metaphor and other literary devices to take on a new significance. Rather than simply portraying complex forces in the literary world as a translation of real experiences, these metaphors present the literal existence of these forces on multiple planes of existence within the Caribbean space.

This epistemology becomes a shorthand for the way both trauma and West African ontologies shape the way Afro-Caribbean peoples process their day-to-day lives, and the way these forces shape the literature they create. Both LaCapra and Laub's perspectives on the ways trauma, that becomes a point of origin for identity—a foundational trauma—and trauma that has no witness and thus must be processed through creativity and the “acting out” and representation of said trauma, are valuable and often cited perspectives on why Afro-Caribbean literature makes use of so many modernist techniques. Putting this perspective in conversation with the way West African tricksters shape Afro-Caribbean world views, allows us to see that these modernist techniques are a type of realism that portrays chaotic and multi-planed life in the Caribbean. The liminality of the space, the struggle to define itself as unique despite its hybrid nature, and the constant tension between Amerindian indigeneity and post-colonial indigeneity, can now be discussed through the single epistemology of *kont*. Discussing the specific factors that shape Caribbean ontology and the epistemology that stems from this discussion, allows for a clearer and Caribbean-centered discussion of the function of folklore, metaphor, and tricksters in Caribbean texts. Re-orienting analyses of Afro-Caribbean texts by centering them on Afro-Caribbean ontologies rather than situating them in relation to only European ontologies and the European artistic movement of modernism will add further clarity and depth to readings of Afro-Caribbean texts.

This departure from western canons and artistic movements will continue the work started by these authors in their fiction, of resisting the marginalization that comes from the Caribbean's liminality and attempting to define the region on its own terms. I suggest naming *kont* begins the work of defining the Caribbean's artistic movements as influenced by but not versions of Western movements in scholarly circles. This work then continues in the vein of Walter D. Mignolo and other indigenous efforts to decolonize scholarship about the post-colonial world. The radical beliefs each author holds, and the context that puts their work in, suggests that decolonizing the scholarship used to discuss them is imperative to exploring their works. Thus rather than spending time situating their words in a myriad of Western and post-colonial traditions, scholarship can use *kont* to situate Caribbean texts in relation to each other and the major historical and cultural contexts that shaped them.

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