

(RE)VISITING DOMINICA'S PAST: (AD)VENTURING INTO HER FUTURE: INTERROGATING IDENTITY FORMATION IN MARIE-ELENA JOHN'S *UNBURNABLE*

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“It was all about where he had come from and where he wanted to go - it had been all about the climb” (John, 1996: 67). Indeed, the journey between one's past and emerging future invariably contributes to one's identity and character, which can sometimes only be crystallised by creating forward and backward linkages through journeying into the past, finding that point of suppression, embracing it, negotiating with it, and moving on beyond it. This climb through time, along the way enforced by concerns of history, culture, gender, sexuality and language, forges the sense of 'self', and the reclamation and preservation of identity - an issue whose chords reverberate throughout Marie-Elena John's novel *Unburnable* - as she weaves a dichotomous tapestry of socio-cultural lore and modernity, and ancestral conservatism with new age sexuality in projecting Dominican sensibilities and survival strategies. Her protagonist, Lillian, engages in conflict resolution as she is determined to revisit her past - and, by extension, Dominica's past - as she attempts to claim that elusive peace within her soul that would allow her to delve into the future. John crafts a potpourri of identity crises in the novel - ancestral, historical, ethnic, sexual, familial, communal, cultural, and personal - leading the reader to develop a holistic sense of Dominican lore, tradition and change. The interface among the descendants of the early Caribs, the West African slaves, the African-American offspring of the transplanted Caribbean man, and the evolving diasporic community in Dominica facilitates movement from a historically plural society into a developing creole society. Underpinning the crafting of such an evolution is John's use of literary devices that merge with the island's cultural landscape as featured in its drumming, song, storytelling, carnival and masquerade. In this novel that in turn celebrates and grieves the lives of women of multiple and mixed ethnicities, three different generations and varying perspectives, the common thread of identity formation weaves its way throughout, binding them together to reflect the true Dominican woman, in spite of inherent and cultural differences. This paper interrogates these multiple identities and

their resultant impact on Dominica as a colonised territory and on the lives of her post-colonial people.

History appears in the novel in various forms and serves to be the basic ingredient in the formation of identity of the characters and the people of Dominica. The combination of the history of the region, island and personal history of characters has a major impact on one's behaviour, attitude, values, lifestyle and expectations. Like many other neighbouring islands, the novel highlights Dominica's incorporation of Carib, African and Lebanese history and, in most instances, a combination of these is juxtaposed to the Caribbean diasporic experience in the United States. The protagonist Lillian serves as testimony to this, being a mixture of Carib and African ancestry whose mother was somewhat influenced by a Lebanese lifestyle. Removed far from Dominica at an early age, Lillian is physically, mentally and emotionally cut off from her history and as such, her real identity and sense of self remain hidden and suppressed, with only glimpses of a gnawing memory being illuminated at infrequent intervals. She is instead forced to forge an identity through her own personal history which is inextricably bound with the history of Dominica. And it is this history that comes to the fore as she attempts to reclaim self in an ironic twist of fate that sees instead Teddy – former college mate turned lover and African-American scholar and activist – asserting his identity in a manner that powers his ascent, all the while mirroring Lillian's ultimate physical and psychological descent to the point where she must surrender to Dominica's clarion call for her body, spirit and soul.

In the search for her identity, woman's rights activist and academic Lillian leaves Washington and returns to Dominica – the only place where her life-long history and tight-lipped past are intertwined – a stark contrast to the unaccommodating American cocoon where she is caught between new lifeways and accepting her own. The novel often sees Black history in America as not being clearly defined and it therefore becomes evident that Lillian's "voice" cannot be found in a place where her roots are not buried, being in exile from her own culture. John crafts the dichotomy between Black West Indian sensibilities and the African-American's perpetual, antagonistic attitude toward understanding self as pivotal to the conflict that the educated West Indian diasporic community experiences. Lillian is twenty-three years haunted by memories of her past and stories circulating about her mother, Iris, the bottle-raped, insane prostitute, and her grandmother, Matilda, the murdering Obeah woman who is presented as a customary African female chief. In her burial of all Dominican ties and the conscious manipulation of shifting memories, Lillian has in fact suppressed her own identity, a phenomenon that she is forced to accept must be addressed if there is to be any hope of her embracing a future, initially for herself, and secondarily with Teddy. Replete with the thematic concerns of history and oppression, religion and

ritual, motherhood and selfhood, and identity formation and crises, John uses this novel to evoke the reader's response to the quintessential West Indian literary concerns with alienation and 'unaccommodation' depicted in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Like Naipaul's protagonist Biswas, Lillian is forced to accept her reality of being alien in an environment that continuously reminds her that she does not belong, that there is "the need for unaccommodated man to carve a place of belonging." (Morgan, 2002: 12)

In attempting to find such a place, Lillian travels to Dominica to ease her guilt of being a curse to society, being the granddaughter of the "evil" Matilda. From a young age, she has never been able to accept her history, failing in her attempt to commit suicide, destined to spend much of her formative years in therapy. Her return to Dominica is symbolic of her intention to reclaim that 'self' that she never allowed to flourish – that development stunted by traumatic experiences of her own history. As Bader (2006) posits, "the psychological damage caused by not knowing one's personal history comes center stage" (p. 78). Psychoanalytic theory supports the idea of trauma stunting the development of an identity and suggests "it is not the experience itself that produces traumatic effect, but rather the remembrance of it... trauma links past to present through representations and imagination [which] can lead to distorted identity-formation" (Caruth, 1995: 17). John certainly saturates her story with a plethora of techniques that generate remembrance of Lillian's traumatic past through the use of voice, flashbacks and flash-forwards, stream of consciousness, as well as of Dominican cultural lore in song and music. The use of song and storytelling in the novel highlights its importance to cultural identity in Dominica. The novel itself is three tales, lives, and generations intertwined and three songs that tell of the most talked about occurrences in the island. The *chante mas* give life to the three women – three different identities that embody the cultural victimisation of Dominica. For the people Up There, the beating of the drum gives life to ancestral identities, while their battle against the policemen is transformed into a war dance.

Juxtaposed to *chante mas* are the critical and emphatic devices of masking and masquerading that depict the importance of West African origins playing an integral role in forming identity in Dominican history, as witnessed in the spectacle of the *bandes mauvais* on a dark *j'ouvert* morning. West African culture transplanted itself on the island generations ago, but has remained largely untouched and unstudied in terms of its significance and power. Though much of Dominican society has remained ignorant of their culture, the maroons and their traditions have forged an integral part of the overarching Dominican identity. The truth about the West African maroon communities, over which Matilda was chief is only unearthed at the end of the novel, finally shedding light on the distorted identity the maroons were forced to live with.

Owing to this silence of the maroons, the identity and history of the West African descendants remains stifled in silence within her, and she pays the consequences later on in life.

Dominican society sees Matilda as an Obeahwoman, which she denies, but to them, “this denial was expected, Obeah being illegal and clandestinely practiced.” (John, 2006: 11) Moreover, it takes a visiting British colonialist to explain the significance of Matilda and the people of Up There donning West African war masks, worn to channel the spirits of their ancestors. Had they known that Matilda wore the mask of the chief, they would have understood her authority and power to dance in fury around Iris’ former lover, and that it was his resulting heart attack, rather than the so-called evil associated with Matilda and her traditions, that killed him. The masks that Matilda and the people of Up There donned were merely cast aside as “ugly masks like old-time people used to do” (p. 138) not knowing that the wearers “had become transformed, that they were now possessed by spirits that represented their masks and headdresses” (p. 139). Some not worn for over twenty years, these masks are yet dancing the “same dance of fury. The same drumming, relentless...imbued with the most authority and power” (p. 143). Similarly, the idea of the ancestral identity in a person is seen when Lillian gives Teddy a mask “that had once been worn, a mask that had once been danced, that had once represented a spirit” (p. 7). As years go by she muses that as he grows older, “the resemblance gets stronger.” As such, it is possible for persons to assume a whole new identity – one that belongs to a spirit of the past – one with power and authority where history revives itself in the present and the future, thus explaining Matilda’s willingness to die and become an ancestor.

The metaphor of masking is pivotal to the clash manifested between the *bande mauvais* and “Flying Masquerade” on that fateful day when Iris’ former lover, John Baptiste, lost his life, and is perhaps the author’s most critical singular use of apposition to depict the potent force of the masked African warrior ancestor vis-à-vis the modern West Indian who pays no homage to things ancestral, spiritual or sacred. John’s wife, Cecile, looks down at her husband’s performance of the West Indian *badjohn* caricature during *j’ouvert*, heaping silent contempt upon the man who betrayed their wedding vows. It is indeed a performance for Baptiste as he wishes he were anywhere else instead of being in the stifling, heated costume that he dons in an effort to project himself as a patriarchal man ordained to be in power, control and authority over others. But his weak performance is directly proportional to the power of Matilda’s alleged Flying Masquerade that he eventually succumbs to in fear as “the band with the wooden masks” (p. 135) advances in a steady manner to clash with the Roseau *mauvais bande* of *j’ouvert* festivities.

Baptiste's death is foreshadowed as Cecile offers one word: *Clash!* which then resonates throughout as Cecile fingers her rosary, rolls "bead after bead between thumb and forefinger, and found that she was not reciting the entire prayer, that she kept repeating only the very end: *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death*" (p. 136). The sheer power of the approaching African masked band is manifested in movements that are precise, measured and declarative, juxtaposed to the ineptitude of a superficial Baptiste who, upon seeing the encroaching masqueraders and hearing their hallowed drums, simply cries and pees and froths. It is a moment of frisson when the reader becomes aware that the clash itself is beyond a merely historical or thrilling phenomenon (Bryce, 2009). Rather, "the center of this scene irrevocably affects the lives of Iris, Matilda and the unborn Lillian" (Doig, 2006) as the stage is set for Lillian to be born into a society that is now emotionally charged with the superstition that her Obeahwoman grandmother had exacted revenge on Baptiste for the sexual objectification and ultimate discard of her daughter, Iris. Inevitably, the unborn Lillian's future is cast in stone as a cloud of fear, mistrust and ostracism forms and awaits her.

For this reason, Matilda's identity and that of her people remain warped as one associated with malevolence and the supernatural. A better understanding of history of the West African maroon communities would reveal that Obeah practices were part of religious traditions; war masks invoked warrior spirits of the past, channelling them into Matilda, giving her a new identity and the authority to pass judgment on those who posed a threat to her people. Instead, Matilda is later condemned to death for mass murder and the last maroon village in Dominican history is burnt to ashes. In penning her work, John undoubtedly challenges the still prevailing view of polite Caribbean society that Obeah is wicked (David, 2009). Yet in so doing, she attempts to nullify its power via an awkward intrusion of religion and Roman Catholicism.

The reader remains critical of an almost condescending account of the transplanted white American nun, Mary-Alice, who has renounced her vows as she marries the Dominican known as Bird, and her collusion with a Colihaut Obeahman to re-enact the christening ceremony of Lillian who was never blessed with this sacrament in spite of her ardent preparation of it. Had the episode not been one of believed life or death importance, it certainly would have appeared as a comedy of errors. Notwithstanding this, at best John achieves the status of parody as she portrays a now fully pregnant Mary-Alice, complete in habit and wimple, together with her Obeahman friend attempting to perform a sacred ritual in the midst of night in Roseau's famed Catholic church.

What is of note is Mary-Alice's conscious selection of the Obeahman that "she knew to be a harmless charlatan" who seems to have "no more than a theatrical stance, unlike the authentically sinister looks of the other Obeah practitioners in the area – and he was clean, fresh-smelling, without the rankness that enveloped the others" (p. 202). John's deliberate romanticizing of the "non-Obeah" Obeahman reeks of an authorial voice that belittles the practice of Obeah in Dominican lore, as Mary-Alice then enters into complicity with him to "just recite some gibberish, and give them the usual ball of chalky mud and sticks and hair to bury outside their house for protection" (p. 203). It is meant to be a performance for the benefit of Icilma, Lillian's surrogate mother, who earnestly believes in the power of Obeah as she is part and parcel of the plan to christen Lillian that night. At no time, however, are any of the actors in this drama prepared for the unforeseen phenomenon of little Lillian actually questioning the image that she sees in the mirror which is a pertinent dimension of Obeah. And at no time does the author project any understanding for the reader as to the possibility of this occurrence if Obeah is to be regarded simply as an ancestral practice with no meaning and effect in 21st century Dominica.

John seeks to balance an obvious exploration of Dominican Obeah customs with a repertoire of biblical allusions in the novel that themselves become an integral ingredient in the formation of the identity of the Dominican people. There is the projection of the Madonna image as Icilma holds Lillian on her lap; the parody of John the Baptist who baptizes and converts by the riverside through the character of John Baptiste who converts Iris from an innocent, despoiled young lady into the whore that she becomes near the riverside; Mary-Alice's very late pregnancy which is reminiscent of Elizabeth's foretold pregnancy in her old age; reference to Up There being a place of Noir that is characteristic of Noah's Ark that rested "up there" on the mount offering solace and salvation to its insiders much the same as Up There offers to its maroon inhabitants; the blood sacrifice for salvation pertinent to the novel's storyline as was Christ's ultimate sacrifice of self in shedding his blood for the salvation of all; and Icilma's willingness to surrender her child rather than see it torn in two as in the case brought before King Solomon. In spite of John's use of these devices to dilute the prominence of Obeah and its unexplained phenomena, the episode of Lillian's failed baptism further feeds and nurtures her identity as a demonic child that must be alienated and denied at all costs.

Similarly, the remnants of the Carib tribe have an identity that is forced to remain hidden from the rest of society. Simon, Iris' father and Matilda's lover, kept his identity as a healer hidden, only to practise his arts with Matilda. The Carib history itself has remained unclear to Dominicans, much like that of the African maroon communities, to the point where "Caribs were now more mythologized than real" and

accused of being “depraved” and scorned for “eating human flesh” (p. 31). Simon is only able to keep his identity alive by roaming the Caribbean lands and seas, allowing himself to be enveloped by memories of the past while travelling to Carib ruins and reciting names of historical places in his head. In an attempt at self-fulfilment, Simon goes out in search of the last of the Caribs in South America as the only way he can keep the memory and identity of his people alive is by surrounding himself in the remnants of it.

In Iris, the Carib identity shows itself through her character and genetic traits, stemming from the ancestral days. The Caribs are known for their inner strength and ability to withstand the vagaries of fate, instilled in them after having their land and their lives taken away and their name demonized. Even though the Carib numbers have dwindled, this particular feature lives on, particularly in Iris, who, while being beaten and tortured by two women, remained silent and was duly recognized for being “a Carib...she would take her blows in silence” (p. 120). Such a physical acceptance serves as the precursor to the psychological reality of rape with a broken bottle. All aspects of Iris’ identity have been somewhat distorted. Instead of being influenced by her West African heritage, as she should have been given that she was the daughter of the great Matilda, she was instead robbed of it and forced to take up the identity thrust upon her by her own personal fate. Having been almost given away by her mother, Iris is nurtured by a Lebanese family at the upper end of the social hierarchy in Roseau, and spends most of her life yearning for a man she could never call her own, and for this she is beaten and raped with a broken Coke bottle, condemning her to spend the rest of her life as a prostitute.

It is evident therefore, that Iris’ identity is not given a chance to develop, and instead, she represents nothing more than a prostitute, whose life story and “identity” are immortalized in *chante mas* song for Dominican history. Iris has been a victim of displacement in society, and the importance of culture manifests itself in Iris’s vacuous personal identity. From birth, she was raised by the other women in Matilda’s clan, and given preferential treatment by others, largely due to the colour of her skin and her “desire to please and be liked” (p. 33). In her formative years however, she is shunned by the upper class, unacceptable for marriage to one of their own. Caught between these two divisions in society, she

“simply did not have a frame of reference to understand the meaning of her skin in a society of people who defined themselves in an ascending rank... She did not understand the meaning of her poverty ... she was still never able to determine which one of the three – color, class, poverty – was responsible for the inescapability of her destiny.” (p. 95).

As such, Iris is caught between two cultures, and this confusion consumes her and stunts the development of her identity; therefore the only one we see in her and what she will be remembered for is the label of 'prostitute,' given to her by the people of Dominica. Supplementing this, however, is her brief but enlightening role of mother to Lillian. In her dying days, Iris makes an attempt to save her daughter from her fate, in fear that Lillian too would be forced to live out the consequences of a falsified history. And it is this attempt on Iris' part that must be heralded as revealing a redeeming dimension of her identity. This is a woman who has been dealt a negative hand by fate, who causes uproar and furore among respectable Dominican families, who is seen as an outcast by all. Yet she mirrors her mother's love and attention and kindred spirit toward her daughter as she endeavours to tell Lillian the true story about her grandmother, the powerful tribal leader Matilda. Iris attempts to compensate for her denial of self to her daughter and although it is short-lived, the memory of this scenario takes root in Lillian's young mind and is drawn upon in adulthood in her quest for selfhood.

John writes with exacting clarity on the role of the mother in this novel as motherhood – both biological and surrogate – becomes a central thematic concern. Chief mother to her daughter Iris and to the entire maroon community is Matilda. Iris herself is mothered by the women of Up There, the Mother superior of the convent she is attached to briefly, her Lebanese surrogate mother, the village prostitutes that seek her welfare, and the former nun, Mary-Alice. Her daughter Lillian may not have had the initial benefit of a biological mother in Iris but her father's wife Icilma adopts her as her very own. This situation is made more complex by the presence of Mary-Alice and Aunt Margaret in her life. Lillian herself has never given birth to any offspring but her collective children are the traumatised, abused, raped and belittled women of the world as she has dedicated her life to being a feminist and champion of women's rights. The account of Mrs. Richards' role in Iris's rape may even be interpreted as the final and ultimate recompense for her daughter's wounded pride and public humiliation when her husband's lover strips her in public during the annual Carnival celebrations. In promoting this theme, John brilliantly paints the emerging identity-formation of the novel's mothers as life-altering and nurturing in a manner that promotes the ultimate welfare and fierce protection of their daughters at all costs.

An integral dimension of identity that is portrayed in the novel is that of sexuality and the male and female dynamics in society which contribute toward the accepted standards and behaviour in Dominican life. Both men and women have their own separate socio-cultural identities. From the start of the novel, we are given two varying images of women: Matilda, the strong Black woman that everyone respects and seeks the help of, and Iris, the outcast used over and over by men for their own

pleasure. Androcentrism and masculinism still glorify the stereotype of women being the weaker sex, and we are introduced to Lillian as having dedicated her life to helping that figurative woman “who had found herself in trouble when she had tried to stand up to the expectations of her culture, or the dictates of her government, or the demands of the social order under which she lived” (p13).

Dominica to a great extent is a microcosm of this global patriarchal social order, with men having power over women. The Dominican women accepted that Iris was the lover of John Baptiste, offering advice even on how to have a child with him, ensuring a continuation of his actions to maintain her lifestyle even after he marries someone else. When Matilda is approached and warned about Iris becoming a plaything for men, she is quite pleased that her fourteen year old daughter had done so well for herself. Mary-Alice cannot come to terms with this situation, in particular the fact that these women have grown to accept it as part of their culture. Mary-Alice is myopic, however, in that she fails to see Matilda’s attitude as emanating from the knowledge that whereas she, as a Maroon, had to hide from the wider society, Iris found a means to infiltrate that same society at the very level of the elite. This is the achievement that Matilda is in high praise of, not her daughters’ licentious lifestyle that Mary-Alice frowns upon. This reveals another dimension of sexual identity as Mary-Alice’s attitude toward women’s sexuality is entrenched in the patriarchal insistence on female monogamy but acceptance of male polygamy as reflected in the multiple sexual activities of John Baptiste, Winston Baptiste, Bird and Teddy.

Indeed, a significant characteristic of the Dominican women in this novel is their allowance of their own sexuality to take flight. Lillian opens the novel by telling of her plans to seduce Teddy, thinking that “the sex would be just an inevitable and, she believed, unfortunate by-product” (p. 15) of getting what she wanted from him. On the other hand, Iris, as well as Lillian, uses sexuality as an outlet for her buried emotions and grief. The physical intensity of Iris was “actually the aggression of an otherwise powerless, disappointed and very angry woman, who was, in fact, molesting them with her body” (p. 2), while in Lillian’s case, “as her disconnect intensified, so had her appetite for hard-core sex” (p. 245). Lillian’s traumatic history can therefore be linked to her sexuality – further proof that identity is formed by events of one’s past. Regardless of whether or not the men know that they are being taken advantage of via women’s sexuality, the fact is that sexuality remains a hidden, yet essential part of the identity of the women in Dominica. As such, when Iris brings eternal shame on Mrs. Richard’s family, she seeks to destroy and defile her body, knowing that doing so would cripple Iris to the greatest extent possible. And Lillian is her mother’s daughter. Her use of sexuality to achieve her own ends mirrors her mother’s as the novel’s end

highlights her increased intense sexual encounters with Teddy that mirror her growing need to uncover, discover and recover her past, for which his assistance is necessary.

On the other hand, the West African maroon communities to some extent counter this stance on women, as they allow women such as Matilda to be chief over them, just as her mother was before her. The patriarchal dynamic extends into these communities as well, however, with men being allowed to have several wives, and Matilda being beaten by Simon. Nonetheless, all power and authority reside in Matilda, providing a stark contrast to the typical identity of Dominican women. She too uses her sexuality to secure her dominance, slapping Mary-Alice with her breasts, and using her large black frame to intimidate others. The working of gender relations in the Maroon communities is therefore more complex and intricate than that among the genetically watered down Dominicans, but such is the identity of the West African woman. Despite the difference between these two types of women, the common factor is that both are in fact heavily influenced by history.

History also impacts the language and culture of the characters in this novel leading to another dimension of identity-formation. In Dominica, the language gives life to the characters, highlighting the little things that make them Dominican. Matilda slaps a nun, the nun falls in love with a man while on his back, and the man runs as though he is flying. In contrast, the scenes in the US are somewhat dull and monotonous, such as the conversations between Teddy and his ex-wife. The language of the Dominican characters is rich and complex, while that of scenes in the US is more intellectual, logical and, perhaps, predictable. The difference between the West Indian and North American speech varieties marks the distance between the two cultures. The narration that tells of Dominica and its characters provides elaborate and detailed descriptions oozing colour, sound, rhythm, and style. Ideally, it embraces the cultures of the island, giving it a stamp of identity. Furthermore, language is also indicative of the lack of understanding between the different identities represented on the island. For many years Dominicans referred to 'Up There' as Noah, assuming that it evoked the Biblical story of the Ark being atop a mountain. However, it was later discovered that what the maroon community called themselves was 'Noir,' meaning Black, which captures the essence of the people themselves. As such, this misunderstanding of their name complicates their ethnic and socio-cultural identity and value as a people.

Similarly, although Mary-Alice speaks flawless patois to Matilda, her attempts to change her mind about Iris's situation is futile, saying that Matilda does not understand her to which Bird responds "you are the one that does not understand her" (p. 191). As such, it is not only the language variety spoken, but also paralanguage and an understanding of cultural sensibilities that forge identity. Mary-Alice later

explains that Matilda gave her a “full-blown speech in which the mountain woman used a kind of Creole that one did not hear normally, the complex Creole of someone who never spoke English [...] but was nonetheless completely comprehensible” (p. 222). Consequently, the message goes beyond the words themselves; rather the tone, behaviour, and attitude of Matilda tells the story. And Matilda’s story lives on in her granddaughter, if not in cultural practice, then certainly in the message. For both Matilda and Lillian have the same message – help others, help women. And both Matilda’s and Lillian’s identities are marked by macabre and striking similarities in communicating this message: the metaphor of the mirror belongs to both from the early days of Matilda gazing into a mirror to Lillian’s youth when she looked into a mirror and saw a woman hanging; their adoption of masks to tell a story that was not their own; their interpretation of sexuality as critical – not for personal pleasure – but rather as a necessary mechanism in the scheme of life; and in the voices, drums and act of flying that come to both at different times and in different ways.

Essentially, the novel’s end, which alludes to the end of Lillian’s life, proves to have a paradoxical sense of beginning for her, for it is only at this point that she fully comprehends and truly embraces her identity after searching and researching her past in Dominica. This identity is based primarily on her own past, and that of her family, thus her acceptance of who she is comes only when she accepts her own pain-filled history. As such, much like Matilda, who anxiously awaited her identity as an ancestor in the after-life, so too does Lillian allow death to be the vehicle in which her identity lives. But her death is not sudden; rather, it is foreshadowed throughout the novel from the reader’s first encounter with her as she sees a mirror image of death in the form of a hanged woman, her digging of a six-foot grave, and the negative portrayal of her character overshadowing the good she achieves as an activist. Her impending death is reflected in the metaphoric meaning of her own words echoed throughout the text: “*I’m going home*” (p. 81); “*I came home to face it*” (p. 199); “*I’m not going back...*” (p. 211); “*Almost there!*” (p. 246); “*a sinking image*” (p. 256); “*I’m bracing the wall but my hands are burning. It’s only a matter of time before I burn*”; “*It was now beginning to get dark, the sun had not just fallen behind, but was now slipping into the sea*”; “*the absence of warmth*” (p. 289). An exploration of the cover photograph of Marie-Elena John’s published work depicts a woman running forward but looking back. If the author’s use of biblical allusions is to be extended to explain this image, then the reader recalls the story of Lot’s wife who leaves her home but cannot escape looking back, which ultimately leads to her destruction. Lillian, indeed, is *physically* destroyed at the novel’s end.

On the flip side of the coin, Lillian’s downward spiral is directly proportional to Teddy’s upward climb. In revisiting Dominica’s past, Lillian embraces her own and

succumbs to a beckoning call from her ancestors as her identity is finally claimed. It seems ironic that Teddy, who was simply meant to be a support for Lillian during their trip to Dominica, and who really had no past to revisit, was the one who emerged victorious in adventuring into Dominica's future as an emblem of the African and West Indian diaspora living in the US. As Lillian crumbles, Teddy is enlightened and permeated with a new vigour, a new soul as he climbs toward a point where he can venture into a new future. He is told the story of Dominica's past and Lillian's family history by Professor Bird and he runs toward Lillian to tell her what she already knew – that her ancestors jumped to their death in the ultimate sacrifice to preserve their identity. But it is in Teddy's running that the reader understands his rebirth. "In the distance, Teddy was growing smaller and smaller... That was how Teddy was running, flat out, like a child" (p. 288). This account depicts the eureka experienced by Teddy when he suddenly realizes and then recounts the history of Lillian's family as him "Bringing certain kinds of spectacular good news" (p. 288). This child image of Teddy counters the adult Teddy that the reader meets at the novel's start and is highly necessary as the first Teddy had never experienced a real childhood. He was destined for greatness, and his parents' decision to extract him from his own community and anchor him in an alienated environment was a strategy necessary for him to attain the greatness that he was meant to attain. His child-like appearance at the novel's end reflects a reclamation of innocence and zeal and spirit which only a child can muster, and it is only now that Teddy is in a position to venture into his own future.

Teddy's upward climb comes suddenly, much like the discovery of something long buried, quite unlike the frequent glimpses John affords the reader into Lillian's pre-mediated, conscious decision to end her life. The reader travels with Lillian along the road to her death as she ultimately answers to the voices that call on her to jump to their heaven. Herein lies John's final masterpiece of paradox. Teddy attains his own enlightenment that somehow manages to restore to him his stolen childhood and usher in a new future, but Lillian also attains her own heaven with her ancestors that comes not in *climbing*, but rather in *jumping downward* as they themselves did many years before her. In Lillian's mind, therefore, she did not use the awareness of her identity to end her life but rather to begin to live life. She dies physically but is renewed spiritually. Such an awareness allows her to claim that "In the public aftermath of her death, she would not disappoint the people of Dominica... Let them sing on her – she wanted her own song, it was her birthright. A *chante mas* to guarantee her place in history, alongside her grandmother and mother" (p. 291). This is *her* identity after all.

Lillian realizes that there is no end to her existence as her identity and her history are both unburnable. Her story comes full circle to redeem her action of not giving to

Teddy the cuff links she had made for him – the Twi design that was called *Hye won Hye* which in English is translated as “that which does not burn”. It is her history and identity, after all, that does not burn. They, like the cuff links, belong to her. Indeed, her story will achieve immortality in *chante mas*: she the *soucouyant*, her mother the “prostitute”, and her grandmother the “murdering Obeah woman” – identities that embrace the history, culture, sexuality and language of her people – identities that are etched into the very core of their souls and as such, identities that remain **unburnable**.

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