KAIAMA L. GLOVER

A REGARDED SELF

Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being

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A REGARDED SELF *Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being*

Kaiama L. Glover

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For Salome and Ayizan,
my glorious girls.

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The irony is not lost on me.

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DISORDERLY, adj. Not acting in an orderly way; not complying with the restraints of order and law; tumultuous; unruly; offensive to good morals and public decency.

SELF-DEFENSE, n. The act of defending one's own person, property, or reputation.

SELF-LOVE, n. An appreciation of one's own worth or virtue; proper regard for and attention to one's own happiness or well-being.

SELF-POSSESSION, n. Control of one's emotions or reactions especially when under stress; presence of mind; composure.

SELF-PRESERVATION, n. Preservation of one's self from destruction or harm; a natural or instinctive tendency to act so as to preserve one's own existence.

SELF-REGARD, n. Regard for, or consideration of, one's own self or interests.

Definitions derived from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, and other sources.

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INTRODUCTION

The "I" is unseemly.

—Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* (2000)

There is power in looking.

—bell hooks, *Black Looks* (2015)

This is a book about practices of freedom. Its focus is women, for reasons that I hope will become apparent, but many of its arguments are not, in the end, rigidly gender-specific. This is also a book about community—about assemblages of individual beings bound more or less comfortably together by a shared set of attitudes and interests, aims and imaginaries. By narratives.

More precisely, this is a book about the challenges posed by certain practices of freedom to the ideal of Caribbean community. *A Regarded Self* proposes an inquiry, within the geocultural space of the French- and English-speaking Caribbean, into the ethics of self-regard. It offers a sustained reflection on refusal, shamelessness, and the possibility of human engagement with the world in ways unmediated and unrestricted by group affiliation. It asks how, given a regional context that privileges communal connectedness as an ethical ideal, individual women can enact practices of freedom in its wildest sense. What alternative modes of being do their noncommunal or even anticommunal choices suggest? How do such freedom practices disrupt North Atlantic theorizations of the individual in/and community? How capable are we, Global South scholars and beings-in-community ourselves, of maintaining commitments to read generously in the face of antisociality or moral ambiguity? What ordering codes do we inadvertently perpetuate through our own ways of reading? These questions animate my reflections in these pages.

Reading "professionally"—critically—very often encourages our investment in the act of analysis as political undertaking. As scholars, especially those among us who are raced and gendered both within the academy and in society more broadly, we are inclined to read for our own politics. We tend

to dismiss, decry, or question the value of creative works that do not plainly generate or gesture toward programs or possibilities for political change. In the worst instance, we become ensnared, as Anne Anlin Cheng has written, by "identity politics and its irresolvable paradox: the fact that it offers a vital means of individual and communal affirmation as well as represents a persistent mode of limitation and re-inscription" (2009, 90). Our critical selves risk falling into the trap of empathetic identification, a phenomenon Adriana Cavarero describes as the articulation of the self through "the use of a history of suffering and tribulation told by another—most of all by someone who belongs to the ranks of the oppressed" (2000, 91). This is an understandable desire, but it is a consumptive form of engagement, a selfish form of relation. It tends to want moral or political clarity at the potential, if not likely, expense of the other's unique experiences.

For while it is true that we have arrived at a moment in postcolonial and Global South studies wherein assumptions about national sovereignty as the ideal political formation or about the continuing symbolic power of communal narratives of suffering and redemption have been widely disavowed, we remain very much bound to the political. If we have become wary, that is, of placing too much faith in collective forms of governance, we nonetheless persist in evaluating individual actions through the prism of communal politics. In this, we inevitably invest in "whole sets of assumptions that our academy and society continue to make about marginalized subjects and the politics that surround them and the social preconditions that constitute them" (Cheng 2009, 91). In our desire to confront and contest the spiritual, intellectual, and material deprivations that are the direct result of long-standing global injustice, and to identify allies in those efforts, we risk deeming only a very narrow set of acts recognizable as legitimate forms of agency.

This book means to hold up a mirror to a broader critical community of readers that, with all the best intentions, implicitly demands allegiance to its moral principles and politicized practices. Though my inquiry is sited in the Caribbean, the questions I pose here resonate in other contexts as well. Indeed, writers in geocultural spaces beyond the Caribbean and its diasporas have also asked to what extent our own uninterrogated expectations can amount to a differently repressive dimension of contemporary critical theory, especially where these expectations interpolate raced and otherwise vulnerable women. As Toni Morrison has queried urgently: "What choices are available to black women outside their own society's approval? What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static community?" (2004, xiii).

Morrison's questions are useful to pose as much with respect to the kinds of disorderly female characters I consider throughout this book as with respect to their various creators. The authors of the works in my corpus are themselves disordering. They present characters who remain morally ambivalent, politically nonaligned, and adamantly unrecoverable and so call attention to the inadequacy of any model that suggests a binary moral context. They remind us how often and how easily victim and perpetrator come to inhabit the very same being. Their narratives resist easy co-optation into any preexisting system. As such, they caution us not to get too comfortable in our righteousness. Perhaps most important, they encourage us to imagine refusal itself as a legitimate critique and to not burden the refuser with an obligation to fix things or to refashion the world for all of us.

I have wanted to honor refusal in my own readings here. Recognizing that it is our inclination to consume certain characters and the narratives that contain them in order to satisfy a latent desire for empathetic identification, the challenge both in reading these works and in writing this book has been to "remain in the gift of discomfort" (Cheng 2009, 90) these novels offer. I have sought not to systematize but to suggest useful commonalities among the works I engage here—this body of literature that has been so thoroughly read for its political intent, or lack thereof.

Admittedly, it may very well be that "without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (Lorde [1984] 2007, 112). And it is certainly true that communal affiliation of the right sort can provide an individual (woman) with both protection and deliverance. In the extended postplantation context of anticolonial nation-building and antiracist activism in the Americas, communities of contestation and resistance have transformed the hemisphere and defined freedom in unequivocal terms. But it is equally true that a certain communal imperative has emerged out of this context, an imperative that has posited normative social and political principles to which proper citizens are expected to conform. Adhering to these principles has meant a broad dismissal of individualism as an ethical subject position, wherein by *ethics* I mean the collectively determined frame within which moral legitimacy and consequent deservingness of social approbation are situated. Given the weight of this imperative, the significance of "simply" investing in the self must not be underestimated.

Writers in the postcolonial Americas, and in the Caribbean in particular, have long figured community as an objective to be achieved—to be actively crafted both in language and in law. Be it via masculinist discourses of nationalism,

womanist conceptions of intergenerational cultural connections, or transnationalist and diaspora-based discursive frames, the Caribbean has been cast, from both within and without, as irrepressibly buoyed by a deep-seated ontological potential for the communal. The Caribbean literary tradition has been dominated to a large extent by those writers who affirm the existence of an organic, counterdiscursive collective ethos among the people they strive to represent in their work. Committed to articulating parameters for defensive solidarity and creative validity, male writer-intellectuals of the region have long pledged to give voice to silenced communal stories they insist need telling. Works by women novelists similarly insist on communal affiliation as the foundation for individual empowerment.

Such privileging of collective self-definition is a phenomenon that bears out in the critical context as well. As I have argued elsewhere, scholars of Caribbean literature tend to celebrate those writers whose texts focus most vocally on representing the valor of the unheard and disenfranchised insular community (see Glover 2010). The postcolonial Caribbean collective these authors and many of their theorists describe is placed in opposition to the exploitative capitalism and bleak inhumanity of Europe and North America—a strategic refusal of "the unmitigated market-centered, selfish individualism, and rampant materialism of contemporary globalization" (Meeks 2002, 166). The Caribbean presents a space of resilience, resistance, and fruitful heterogeneity—creolized but ultimately coherent, poor in resources but rich in "folk." Irrepressibly buoyed by a deep-seated ontological commitment to the communal, the Afro-Creole Americas declare themselves a Global South cultural corrective to a soullessly technologized, alienated First World order.

Taking as a point of departure this investment in communalist ideology in the Caribbean, *A Regarded Self* looks closely at the linked matters of freedom, community, and ethics—freedom as an ethical practice within and often in conflict with community. While the idea of community as an essentialist, romanticized, and forcibly affiliating social structure has been contested within multiple and diverse academic and political spheres, few have attended to the particular place of Caribbean letters in these debates.[1] Moving in that underexplored space, I consider the motivations and the methods, the stakes and the consequences, that inform representations of women's contestatory grapplings with community, taking as my point of departure five works of prose fiction: Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (*Moi, Tituba . . . sorcière noire*, 1986), René Depestre's *Hadriana in All My Dreams* (*Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 1988), Marie Chauvet's *Daughter of Haiti* (*Fille d'Haïti*, 1954), Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and Marlon James's *The Book of Night*

Women (2009). The woman at the center of each of these narratives exists in a state of conflict vis-à-vis her textual community that more and less explicitly queries the extratextual ordering practices of the postcolonial Caribbean literary community. Her privileging of the self emphatically resists co-optation, both by repressive narrative communities and by ostensibly liberal and liberating critical discourses.

It is the "radical indeterminacy" (Cheng 2009, 91) of their protagonists that positions these works outside of certain canons and has earned them greater and lesser degrees of disapproval, if not disparagement, from postcolonial scholarly and broader reading communities. In their representations of adamantly self-articulating, sexually self-defining female characters, these writers present self-love—physical and emotional—as both provocation and critique. Their respective creative positions in many ways unsettle the ideological imperatives outlined by the region's most prominent writers. As a consequence, most have seen their political loyalties and ties to a national or regional Caribbean identity called into question by their contemporaries, or their works insufficiently or reductively attended to by literary scholars. *A Regarded Self* thus takes into account both the extratextual and the textual. I look here not only at the ways in which these characters disorder their narrative communities but also at the ways in which their creators disturb and have been misapprehended by communities of theorists and readers, more broadly. I am interested in the critical context within which the writers of these disorderly texts have been implicated, and I ask what the cost of advocating self-regard can be within postcolonial Caribbean literary communities. In this respect, *A Regarded Self* proposes an interrogation of our reading practices—a consideration of the ways in which we as theorists engage in processes of gatekeeping, naturalizing, and otherwise ordering the subjects of our inquiries.

Emerging from a variety of national spaces and historical moments, the novels I consider are united in their crafting of stories that uncover and break apart inflexible constructions of regional collective identity. In representing women characters animated by preservationist self-regard, these works critique the phenomena of totality, unity, and closure that so often endanger those who, by virtue of their race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, or otherwise personal identification, constitute the world's most marginal. Although not one of these works suggests a viable alternative politics (and this very deliberately, I argue), by revealing the insidious pathologies of the social, they create space for the articulation of an ethic.

The self-regarding women at the center of these novels are frustratingly equivocal beings. Every one of them is controversial. Some are downright

unpalatable. Always removed from the explicitly political, and often manipulative or even dangerous, they elicit profound ambivalence from the reader. It is admittedly difficult, for example, not to be frustrated by Condé's Tituba, the free Black woman in the colonial Americas who resigns herself to servitude not once, but twice, in the name of love and lust. It requires an initially counterintuitive reading of Depestre's white Creole beauty Hadriana to understand fully her abandonment of an adoring Black community in the interest of her own (sexual) liberation. It calls for an unflattering reassessment of Black radicalism not to dismiss out of hand Chauvet's Lotus, a frivolous Haitian girl who plays at revolution like a game of seduction. It takes some work to see past the simmering rage that fuels Kincaid's Afro-Carib antiheroine Xuela, faced with her stubborn refusal to get on board with the Caliban-as-hero machine so fundamental to anticolonial subjectivity. And it is, yes, an especially great deal to ask the reader to accept the very fact of James's Lilith, an enslaved woman-child who, quite frankly, is not a very nice person. Tituba. Hadriana. Lotus. Xuela. Lilith. These provocative names announce the disruptive power of the women who bear them—women who defy rather than defer to communities that will not have them or will not love them as they are. Each of these women is an audaciously disordering force within, and on the margins of, her social world. Her defiance of gendered expectations subtends what is ultimately a wide-ranging discourse of dissent.

Whereas the self can be devoured by public scrutiny, it can be saved by private self-objectification.

—Iké Udé, "The Regarded Self" (1995)

The criminal and the narcissistic woman are subject to, yet outside the law; both are attempting to evade its effects, if only momentarily.

—Jo Anna Isaak, "In Praise of Primary Narcissism" (2005)

The practices of freedom and disorder—the practices of refusal[2]—enacted by the women in the works of my corpus demonstrate an unwavering devotion to what I have come to call the "regarded self," a formulation I borrow from a context entirely ex-centric to that of the writers and characters who concern me. Coined by Nigerian visual artist and photographer Iké Udé, the *regarded self* describes the ambivalent nature of social being, wherein it is at once crucial to love oneself, deeply and protectively, and to publicly perform modesty, selflessness, and love for one's community. For Udé, as

for me in my analyses of these Caribbean texts, the regarded self proposes a strategy for navigating the individual's vulnerability to the gaze of more powerful others.

Being gazed upon is a matter of being beheld, which literally—etymologically—implicates both regard and possession.[3] Thus, the anxiety produced, as psychoanalytic theory would have it, by the fact of being seen and known as an object-being that exists for others—of being grasped or seized and "understood"—is arguably compounded in the postcolonial context. Postcolonial studies is deeply preoccupied with the question of the gaze and the hierarchies of power it determines. The field has been influenced definitively, for example, by Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity as a strategy of Global South resistance to the degrading transparency imposed by the North Atlantic imperial gaze. Frantz Fanon's memorable account of devastating interpolation—"*Look*! A Negro!" ([1952] 2008, 89; emphasis mine)—similarly demands we consider who, historically, has regarded whom and with what consequences. Jean-Paul Sartre's passionate opening salvo in his essay "Black Orpheus" offers yet another expression of this concern: "Here are black men standing, *looking* at us, and I hope that you—like me—will feel the shock of being seen" ([1948] 1964–65, 13; emphasis mine). As these canonized instances attest, the stakes of the (formerly) colonized individual's exposure to the regard of the metropolitan Other (and, later, vice versa) animate regional intellectual production. It is against this backdrop that I situate the women of these novels at varying points on a continuum of *self*-regard—that I highlight their indulgence of behaviors ranging from self-concern to selfishness, from self-care to something brazenly akin to narcissism.

Admittedly, *narcissism* is a big word. First conceived of by Sigmund Freud as a normal psychological condition constitutive of the fundamental human drive to defend the integrity of the self, narcissism so defined amounts to a "libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" (Freud [1914] 1957, 73–74). If the individual's childhood environment is emotionally stable, so Freud's logic goes, a balance is maintained in adulthood between love/desire for the self (ego-libido) and love/desire for others (object-libido). If, however, this balance is somehow upset (via improper parenting or trauma, for example), that healthy "primary" narcissism can become pathological, causing the individual to withdraw any love for or attachment to other objects in the world and to direct libidinal energy exclusively toward the self. Since Freud, narcissism has been in fact most readily associated with pathology: the gaudy frivolity of the reality television star, the humble-bragginess of social media, the vanity of the millennial. Narcissism triggers our innate suspiciousness

regarding the individual and, especially, the autobiographical subject. It is perceived viscerally and adamantly as incompatible with ethics—and it is "a characteristic commonly and pejoratively attributed to women" (Isaak 2005, 50).

Over a decade before historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1979) denounced narcissism as the scourge of post–World War II modernity, however, psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut called for consideration of a narcissistic continuum and of the pop-cultural propensity to obscure its complexity. As Kohut observed in his 1966 essay "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism," "although in theoretical discussions it will usually not be disputed that narcissism, the libidinal investment of the self, is per se neither pathological nor obnoxious, there exists an understandable tendency to look at it with a negatively toned evaluation as soon as the field of theory is left" (1966, 243).[4] In other words, while narcissism is, according to early psychoanalytic theoretical principles, a natural and neutral human behavior, it is anxiety producing in the practical context of human relation. This anxiety is particularly acute when it comes to the postcolonial Caribbean, wherein the very possibility or desirability of a lone, integrated self is itself a question, and narcissism is perceived as a distinctly North Atlantic pathology, the inevitable product of a coldly individualist culture.

Given that *narcissistic* is an epithet that has been used to describe (condemn) not only several of the fictional characters I consider but also their creators, my reflections throughout this book are overlaid or undergirded to varying degrees by this analytical conceit. Recognizing that narcissism is overburdened by pathological connotations, I pointedly lean into its pejorative and unsettling dimensions in my analyses here. Accusations of narcissism attach to several of the novels I discuss, making apparent the threat they issue to the communities they represent as well as to certain communities of readers. I mean to underline the discomfort and even outrage these characters and their texts produce—to home in on their disordering effect, in both the medical and the metaphorical sense. The popular understanding of narcissism as a "relational malady" (Schipke 2017, 5) accords with what the American Psychiatric Association names a "personality disorder"—"an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 645). I want to insist on the fact that the term *disorder* is meant to signal a fundamental maladaptivity of the self with respect to externally constructed models of acceptable or reasonable social (communal) behavior. In the works in question here, the maladaptivity of their protagonists produces a disordering effect that crosses the boundaries of the text.

Digging further into the literal-cum-metaphorical purpose of the concept, it is crucial to note that pathological narcissism—like every other personality disorder—arises foremost as a coping mechanism. It is an individual's means of contending with her or his perceived vulnerability to the psychosocial assaults of the outside world and, as such, can be a far more nuanced term than popular understandings would have us believe. It is important, then, to examine Kohut's rearticulation of narcissism as a necessary adaptive strategy, a survivalist impulse to provide resources for the self in moments or spaces wherein that self is denied sustenance—or denied altogether.

This nonpathologizing conception and deployment of narcissism in a Western, European context as a defensive response to one's community and its order is taken up explicitly, albeit ambivalently, by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. On the one hand, Fanon condemns narcissism as an essentialist obstacle to his ideal of race-blind human solidarity.[5] Yet, on the other, he hints at the possibility of a dynamically narcissistic practice of individual disalienation whereby it becomes possible to refuse the psychic violation of hostile external forces—"I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I turn my back on the degradation of those who would make man a mere mechanism" ([1952] 2008, 23). I am interested in this latter instance, the instance attended to by Sylvia Wynter, who reads Fanon's deployment of narcissism as a veritable "counter-manifesto with respect to human identity" (2001, 37)—the means by which to negotiate, if not resist, being "locked in thinghood" (Fanon [1952] 2008, 193), which is the result of one's being determined from without the self, being posited as lack, either sexual (in the Freudian context) or racial (in the postcolonial context). For Fanon, the concerted denial of the individual colonial subject's interiority reflected the primary malignancy of colonialism and racialization. The reduction of the colonized body's use value to the desires of racial capitalism was a violation that could be countered only by a retrieval of self-awareness in its most robust form. Decoloniality and the psychic survival of the colonial subject depended on this operation. Inasmuch as Fanon, a practicing psychoanalyst, understood the phenomenon of the nonwhite-raced individual's inferiority complex and alienation as socially conditioned—as something imposed on that individual's subconscious—narcissism as a praxis of extreme *self*-consciousness offered something of an escape valve.

Admitting the existence of a continuum from healthy to pathological narcissism makes it possible to understand narcissism as something other than the product of a "culture of competitive individualism" (Schipke 2017, 5). It allows us to tease out what Monica Miller elegantly names, in her analysis of Udé's and others' work, "a narcissism more compensatory" (2009, 245).[6]

Narcissism thus understood would signal the performance of self-love in a context wherein that self is improperly loved or unlovable on its own terms. Narcissism thus understood dovetails with Udé's call for defensive self-regard.

Self-regard exists in a wide and slippery ethical space. While it is defined as "regard for or consideration of oneself or one's own interest," it is also synonymous with "egocentricity, egocentrism, egomania, egotism, narcissism, navel-gazing, self-absorption, self-centeredness, self-concern, self-interest, self-involvement, selfishness, selfness, [and] self-preoccupation" and "related to" "complacence, complacency, conceit, conceitedness, ego, pomposity, pompousness, pride, pridefulness, self-admiration, self-conceit, self-esteem, self-importance, self-indulgence, self-love, self-partiality, self-respect, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency, smugness, vaingloriousness, vainglory, vainness, vanity, self-assumption, self-consequence, self-content, self-contentment, [and] self-glorification."[7] This connotative concatenation reflects the ambivalence with which we tend to approach expressions of self-regard in general. And the stakes are particularly high in contexts wherein self-sacrifice and solidarity are the privileged modes of social identification and interaction. The stakes are arguably even higher when it comes to nonwhite women, perhaps because Black and brown women are presumed neither to have nor to aspire to such a relationship with the self.

Community presupposes the visibility, and concomitant policing, of its members. And some members are decidedly more policed than others. Women's bodies—be they placed in a colonial, nationalist, postcolonial, or even feminist context—are particularly vulnerable to the regulating impulse of the communal. To be in community is, above all, to be exposed, "to be posed in exteriority, having to do with an outside in the very intimacy of an inside" (Nancy 1991, xxvi). To be in community is to be vulnerable to the regard of others. It is to be always considered. Beheld. Rendered, ultimately, transparent to the gaze of others. Given this, self-regard constitutes an effort at individual liberation from, or at the very least resistance to, being beheld and judged from without. And to the extent to which this external regard can be intrusive, coercive, or otherwise violent, efforts to render oneself illegible or to see oneself otherwise certainly may be read as attempts at self-protection.

Every one of the narratives I examine in this study encourages a careful consideration of the extent to which a woman's self-regard might be recognized as an achievement—a justifiable response to the prejudices and other perils of the existing communal order. The female protagonists in all of these fictional works at some point become aware of the literal and symbolic threats posed by the often dangerously fragile community in which they are embedded. They

attest to the fact that many supposedly safe spaces contain the possibility for great harm, depending on who inhabits them. They reveal the insecurity of home—the extent to which the domestic is under siege by or complicit in the maneuverings of politics. All of these women engage in some degree of narcissistic pushback with respect to persistent, structural social trauma—self-regard is the tactic they adopt in the face of impossible satisfaction from their community. What, they compel us to ask, should we make of an individual's "misbehavior" in social contexts that are themselves pathological? Do conditions of enslavement and its traumatizing aftermaths expressly call or allow for radical narcissism? Under conditions of constraint, might deviance better be understood as defense? Might self-regard be a legitimate recourse—the best and only recourse—for a self ever vulnerable to the violent, consuming force of the ordering social gaze?

I am certainly not the first to consider the challenges to individuated being in community in the Caribbean—what Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken pithily articulates as the question of "how personhood has been constructed under the weight of the notion and practice of 'nationhood'" (Benedicty[-Kokken] 2013, 7). Nor am I the first to do so in foregrounding matters of gender—to ask "how national belonging and the nation-state continue to play a fundamental role in circumscribing Caribbean people's lives" (Horn 2014, 3). Notions of (in) decency and (dis)order have long been understood as having everything to do with women's social—and especially sexual—(non)conformity to behavioral conventions governing the public sphere. Further, as Donette Francis reminds us, "conditions of belonging presuppose a raced, gendered, classed, and sexed body, and . . . for women and girls the struggles have often been against kin as much as colonizer" (2010, 2). It is no coincidence that the novels I consider feature disorderly women characters in contexts of nation-building, wherein the stakes of communal identity formation are particularly high and wherein incautious women too easily find themselves cast as necessary Others to a developing idea of Same.

The claims of both literary theorists and social scientists of the postcolonial Americas—put forward in works like Belinda Edmondson's *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women's Writing in Caribbean Narrative* (1999), Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010) and *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (2018), Donette-Francis's *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* (2010), Mimi Sheller's *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (2012), M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (2005), and Deborah

Thomas's *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (2011)—advance compelling critiques of the heteronormative and misogynist continuities between colonialism, nationalism, and postcolonialism. Moreover, as these studies make apparent, the diverse societies of the Caribbean have long adhered to an entrenched Protestant ethic of respectability—with women in particular expected to conform to codes of "decency" as part of their commitment to shore up liberatory anticolonial projects as well as postcolonial nation-building efforts—to adhere to and "perform normative scripts of sexual citizenship such as the good mother, the respectable woman, the worthy Christian, or the father of the family . . . which involved the harnessing and simultaneous disavowal of the erotic potential of the body" (Sheller 2012, 10). These masculinist ordering codes are well known and have been well studied. Also well known and well studied are the gendered expectations of and constraints on Caribbean womanhood intrinsic to colonialism, along with those resulting from the blind spots of white feminist politics.[8]

On the one hand, there is little surprising about the phenomenon wherein women in colonial and postcolonial spaces, literary as much as extraliterary, are called upon to do battle with misogynistic and patriarchal white supremacy, with misogynistic and patriarchal Black nationalisms, and with hegemonic North Atlantic feminisms. These are the "enemies" we know ("we" being postcolonial, Caribbeanist, womanist scholars). Of interest to me, however, are coercions slightly different from those to which we already have become attuned. I am interested in texts and authors that not only defy the usual suspects but also deeply unsettle *un*usual suspects—ostensibly progressive, antiestablishment communities of readers and critics—thus revealing the strictures to which that same "we" is perhaps insufficiently attentive.[9] Crucial here is my effort to enact the praxis David Scott outlines in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, notably, "to imagine an ethos, or perhaps even a *habitus*, of critical responsiveness to the tendency of . . . identities to harden into patterns of exclusion that seek to repel or abnormalize emergent or subaltern difference" (1999, 217).

Throughout this book I propose possibilities for thinking more broadly about human efforts that are not overtly state-centric but make affective calls for transformation. In this respect, my project dovetails meaningfully with our current suspicion regarding existing modes of revolutionary upheaval and calls for greater attentiveness to risky individual expressions of defiance. Whereas, for the most part, the theorists with whom I engage seek in their work to identify or construct coherent counterdiscursive (literary) strategies via which sexed Caribbean subjects claim the status of citizen, *A Regarded Self*

attends to literary configurations of individual refusal that not only transgress existing models of postcolonial Caribbean community but also caution against the codification of potentially constraining counterdiscourses. Insofar as a distinction is maintained between the notion of communal identity and that of bourgeois individualism, I am interested in the space between the presumed virtue of the one and the unseemliness of the other. What *do* we get when we don't get what we expect—ideologically or politically—from these women, these authors, these texts?

Order

One of the basic impulses in Caribbean thought is undeniably the need to reconceptualize power. The fascination with worlds of closure; the need to ground a new society on a visionary discourse; the exploration of a foundational poetics . . . [are] manifestations of the desire to establish a new authority, to repossess time and space . . . pursuit of an ordering and ordaining vision.

—J. Michael Dash, *The Other America* (1998)

Our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people," with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This "oneness," underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of "Caribbeanness," of the black experience.

—Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1994)

The border between the political and the literary in the Caribbean has always been permeable. Over centuries of official colonial exploitation and in the interminable wake of North Atlantic empire, peoples of the Caribbean have struggled to delineate and to assert a geoculturally specific, resistant identity. Community has been a particularly significant concern for Caribbean writer-intellectuals in their efforts to determine empowering sociopolitical identities in the face of centuries-old practices of dispossession, historical erasure, and disenfranchisement—both by racist Euro–North American imperial structures and by rapacious neocolonial regimes. Confronted with the relentless twinned forces of psychosocial alienation and military repression, Caribbean social actors have understood that purposeful national and regional unification is critical to cultural and political survival. In the anticolonial context of the first half of the twentieth century,

especially, community clearly amounted to a political imperative—"a militant and strategic response to a situation of oppression which [could] only be overturned by organized collective action . . . predicated on a strong sense of unity and solidarity" (Britton 2011, 5). To define community in opposition to clear and common enemies was a political necessity. And it was politically advantageous given the vulnerability of European empires in the wake of World War II.

The construction of Caribbean community as refusal had—and has—at once tactical, ethical, and creative dimensions. It has served as a political rallying cry, undergirding long-standing masculinist discourses of nation-building and Black radicalism as well as more recent narratives "of globality, transnationalism, diaspora and various other forms of international community" (Forbes 2008, 17) so critical to the sociopolitical survival of peoples of color. Integral to these interventions in the realm of policy and governance has been an investment in the communal on the part of the Caribbean cultural elite. The centrality of strategically constructed community in the domain of politics has manifested with equal clarity in Caribbean letters. As Celia Britton (2010) and Lucy Evans (2014) have outlined in their studies of literary representations of community in the putatively former colonies of the French and British Americas, respectively, Caribbean fiction is marked by a commitment to highlighting and promoting the collective specificity of the region.

Both Britton and Evans consider the diverse challenges prose fiction writers face in seeking to give voice to the people whose stories, they argue, have been globally silenced. They consider the "*models* of community" (Britton 2010, 4) these writers propose not merely as representations of communal solidarity but also as so many "self-conscious engage[ments] in the act of community-building" (Evans 2014, 16). Britton argues that the writers of her corpus—among whom are Jacques Roumain, Édouard Glissant, and Patrick Chamoiseau—understand the creation of community to be "their duty *as writers*" (2010, 3).[10] Evans identifies a parallel phenomenon among anglophone intellectuals: "Brathwaite concludes his study [*Contradictory Omens* (1974)] with the phrase 'The unity is submarine,' suggesting that beneath the region's plurality of cultures and ethnicities lies the unifying experience of migration. Derek Walcott's vision of Caribbean culture as a 'shipwreck of fragments' places a similar emphasis on the unification of disparate parts" (2014, 9). Evans goes on to cast a wider net, noting that "the cultural theory of [Wilson] Harris, Glissant and [Antonio] Benítez-Rojo engages with the concept of communal identity in relation to broader visions of a Caribbean regional consciousness" (28).

This assessment echoes Stuart Hall's reflections on "cultural or national identity" and "forms of cultural practice" (1989, 69) in the Caribbean. Hall points to two, largely chronological understandings of culture in the Americas. The first, the "oneness" model, undergirds Negritude, Rastafarianism, and other forms of Pan-Africanism up to and through the 1950s and 1960s and defines "a sort of collective 'one true self'" (69) in opposition to the imposed version of selfhood by which colonizing forces relegated African-descended peoples to positions of degradation and lack. The more recent, more modern approach to identity—"which qualifies, even if it does not replace, the first" (70)—Hall sees as a movement beyond Africa-sited "imagined community" and "imaginative geography and history" toward a recognition of difference and discontinuity among Caribbean subjects.[11] It marks the "play of 'difference' within identity" (73) and aligns with Glissant's *antillanité* (Caribbeanness), the doctrine of *créolité* (Creoleness), and the antiessentialist cultural multiplicity of the Caribbean Artists Movement.[12]

The postcolonial (as opposed to anticolonial) intellectual landscape Hall, Britton, and Evans describe proclaims the internal diversity of cultures and nations in the Caribbean as a decisive refusal of the homogenizing, ethnocentric, universalizing practices of the North Atlantic. This refusal remains bound, however, by a persistently communal intention. These later-century conceptions of the human are, at their most granular, invested in *collective* specificity. Be it in the context of Glissant's Relation, Benítez-Rojo's "repeating island," or "the collective human substance of the Village" celebrated by George Lamming (Lamming [1970] 1991, xxxvi), the smallest unit of engagement is the community. Moreover, such "corrective theories of creolization, métissage, and hybridity have often ended up reinforcing the empirical, geographical, and biological fact of boundaries and borders, recalling the imperatives they seek to undermine" (Cheng 2009, 89). These writers advocate for the significance of discrete cultures in relation and account for exchange and contradiction among diverse nationally or regionally identified collectives. Yet they never go so far as to consider the particular identifications of individuals unmediated by cultural or national identification.

It is well understood that "Caribbean literature deals more with the cultural and political problems of the region than with the inner conflicts of individual souls" (Torres-Saillant 2013, 275). There are consequences to this well-established phenomenon—notably, the codification of a prescriptive order that risks "increasing, not diminishing, the fragmentation in the individual subject" (Lee-Keller 2009, 1297)—the creation of a reified center with respect to which particular, individual souls are (made) marginal, their inner conflicts

elided. Directly paralleling the sociopolitical arena, it is the case, as Curdella Forbes plainly asserts, that Caribbean literary culture, "whether diasporic or nationalist, has insisted on the ascendancy of the communal over the individual" (2012, 40–41).

Women in particular have found themselves inhibited and/or left on the margins by such calls to communal order—obliged to conform to and sacrifice for social and political objectives that in important ways fail to account for or even address the specificities of women's existence or that prescribe fixed gendered modes of adherence as a condition for belonging. Caribbeanist sociologist Mimi Sheller emphasizes the myriad ways in which contemporary constructions of citizenship (and its corollaries, inclusion and legitimation) reflect profound "entanglement in deeply seated colonial *and* postcolonial ideologies of gendered, ethnic, and heteronormative boundary drawing and exclusion" (2012, 7). Caribbeanist gender theorist M. Jacqui Alexander puts forward an even fiercer critique of these constraining continuities: "Black heteropatriarchy takes the bequeathal of white colonial masculinity very seriously," she writes. "Heteropatriarchal nationalist law has neither sufficiently dislodged the major epistemic fictions constructed during colonial rule, nor has it dismantled its underlying presuppositions" (2005, 62).

The absenting or narrow representation of the Caribbean woman in works by male authors of the region—the "consistent erasure of the figure of the black woman in both African American and Caribbean male-authored texts" (Edmondson 1999, 99)—is a much-discussed phenomenon. The very authors credited with providing lexical and philosophical tools for undoing the psychosocial binds of colonialism are guilty of more and less subtle sidelinings of women from the postcolonial canon. Scholars like Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley have criticized the rhetoric of Black male Creole radicalism for having done battle with white patriarchy only to "reinvent heteropatriarchy in black and brown, in Creole" (2010, 208). Caroline Rody has argued that "the male authors whose texts dominated the Caribbean canon until the 1970s, generally tended to objectify women and delimit their figural possibilities" (2001, 113).

Susheila Nasta identifies only two possible representations of "woman" in Caribbean fiction: "either as the rural folk matriarch figure, representing the doer, the repository for the oral tradition, the perpetuator of myths and stories, the communicator of fibres and feelings, or, alternatively, woman, as a sexy mulatto figure, a luscious fruit living on and off the edges of urban communities belonging to no settled culture or tradition" (1993, 214). Allocated the role of auxiliary or sister, advocate or mother, martyr or lover, Caribbean women have been configured in regional fiction as infinitely willing and