Mule Women and the Practice of African Diasporic Fiction
Honey de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out...So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see (Hurston 14).

In Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, Patricia Hill Collins posits that all human interactions are shaped by an overarching power structure wherein social categories like race, class, and gender function as interrelated axes along a matrix of domination that determines individual consciousness and group access to institutional power and privileges. The matrix of domination figures prominently in this essay’s mission to understand how notions of Black womanhood have influenced the evolution of Black subjectivity discourse. Here, the Atlantic slave trade is taken as a focal point in that its execution is viewed as facilitating a critical turn in the identity forming processes of African women and their descendants from pre-colonial Africa to the modern diaspora. The African slave trade’s mechanisms for incorporating tenets of international slave economy and colonialism into existing African cultural systems serve to demonstrate how the matrix of domination contributes to a reduction of Black women’s subjectivities to mule womanhood. This essay positions Makeda Silvera’s novel The Heart does not Bend within African diasporic fiction’s legacy of thematizing these cultural processes for determining Black women’s subjectivities.

Africa, The Slave Trade, and Mule Womanhood

As Toyin Falola simplistically puts it in his 2002 publication, Key Events in African History: A Reference Guide: “[African] women’s conditions were different in many ways before the imposition of European rule” (291). Falola continues by describing the features of women’s socio-cultural roles throughout pre-colonial Africa – West Africa, in particular:

Where the institution of the queen mother existed, as in some West African communities, women held power as regents, advisors to kings, and kingmakers… Women created their own powerful and influential organizations, which enabled them to be actively involved in politics and the management of affairs important to them, such as trade… Above all, they had reproductive power, producing children in societies that cherished large families. (291)

Falola’s portrayal of pre-colonial African women as an empowered and productive group due to their influence on trade markets and family lineage is consistent with the general trend within scholarship focusing on gender in pre-colonial African societies.

G. Ugo Nwokeji’s “African Conceptions of Gender and the Slave Traffic” is one example of such scholarship. Nwokeji describes his work as an “attempt to recast the question of gender [in the slave trade] by taking into account African factors to explain not only the overall demographic structure of the trade but also
interregional differences” (51). Nwokeji supports the idea that conclusions concerning the gender politics of pre-colonial African societies can be drawn based on a demographic analysis of the slaves shipped from their ports by providing an in depth look into the Bight of Biafra region’s activity during the slave trade. Ports in the Bight of Biafra region of western Africa saw female slaves shipped at a higher rate and percentage than anywhere else in what Nwokeji calls “Atlantic Africa” from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Beginning with the assumption that “the gender division of labor is at the core of constructions of gender anywhere” (54), Nwokeji attributes this anomaly to the Bight of Biafra’s unique distribution of labor between men and women in the agricultural trade market. This conclusion resembles Falola’s in its representation of pre-colonial African women’s social, cultural, and political prowess as stemming from their control over the agrarian economy and child production.

In “Gendered Themes in Early African History,” David Schoenbrun draws conclusions on the gender politics of various pre-modern African societies based on samples of their artwork. Schoenbrun, in discussing the statuary of the Jenne-jeno peoples from the Middle Niger Delta, observes:

One statue from the Middle Niger Delta, made sometime between 1100 and 1400 CE, depicts a stern-faced female with two figures, one male and the other female, climbing up her chest. But the climbers are not infants or children – they’re clad just like the woman on whom they climb and one of them even wears a beard. This figure very likely represents the spirit of a founding matriarch and shows that women who successfully navigated the challenges of motherhood could enjoy continued power and authority long after their tired bodies had ceased to live. (262)

Schoenbrun also observes at another point that as a result of women’s laborer position in the agricultural economy: “Women were the instruments of men’s success” (264). When combining this aspect of Jenne-jeno society with the analysis of their statuary Schoenbrun offers above, we have a concrete example of how women’s gendered roles in the pre-colonial African economic and family structures influenced the ethnic formulation of these nations, and their cultural representations of those ethnicities.

The fact that pre-modern Atlantic African nations depicted their social valuations of womanhood in art demonstrates how essential women’s subjectivities were to the ethnic identities of these cultures in that these depictions endowed the female-gendered social consciousness with symbolic force. Women were recognized as vital to childbirth, which is necessary in order for family lines and cultural heritage to persist, therefore women and motherhood came to symbolize lineage, cultural heritage, and collective historical memory. Women were the labor and executive force driving the agricultural economic trade markets, so femininity became symbolically synonymous with earth… land… the home/motherland; so much so that their
force as mothers is represented via their portrayal as the ground upon which members of society walk in order to advance. As such, the Atlantic African feminine consciousness was symbolically endowed with enough cultural force to heavily influence the formation of those societies’ ethnicities.

When African women’s gendered class identities as ethno-cultural symbols for the motherland and communal heritage came into contact with the white supremacist machinery of the slave trade, they underwent the process Anthony D. Smith describes: “Certain events generate profound changes in the cultural contents of ethnic identities. Among these are war and conquest, exile and enslavement, the influx of immigrants and religious conversion” (26). However, Smith adds, “even the most radical changes cannot destroy the sense of continuity and common ethnicity” in the effected societies (26). As the race myth\(^2\) was instituted throughout Atlantic Africa in order to facilitate the smoother operation of the slave trade its tenets became so intertwined with those of the existing indigenous ethnicities of western Africans that their social constructions became inextricably linked. As a result, all of the diverse elements constituting the cultural ethnicities of Atlantic African nations became emblematic of a monolithic caste system based on skin color across the New World as peoples of those nations were dispersed during the slave trade.

Recognizing the existence of colonial, misogynistic, human trade, and war enterprises in Atlantic Africa prior to the slave trade’s global execution, the term “pre-colonial” – as used throughout this essay – does not apply an exclusively egalitarian character to the indigenous ethnicities of western African societies. Instead, “pre-colonial” here intends to mark the shift that occurs in the appearance of those societies’ socio-cultural programs once combined with the slave trade’s machinations in forming the contemporary diaspora. Pre-colonial African ethnicities, as related to the social construction of Black women’s collective subjectivities, undergoes a dramatic change following the imposition of the European race myth. With the institution of this mythology as a cultural category, the slave trade introduces race – and, consequently, a new form of nationality – as new axes along the matrix of domination actively shaping the individual and collective cultural identities of diasporic Black women.

The European implementation of the race construct implies a discourse on nationalism in that it directly influenced the appearance and performance of indigenous African ethnicities. Ethno-symbolist\(^3\) scholars of nationalism, like Anthony D. Smith, argue that societal constructions of nation, nationhood, and nationality, are contingent upon established ethnic identities. As such, the social development of ethnicity inherently entails establishment of national identity because those ethnic practices become culturally associated with the physical land societies inhabit. Therefore, to affect a peoples’ ethnic identity – as the slave trade and race myth certainly did with Atlantic Africans – is to affect their national identity. The ramifications of this for indigenous African women were profound due to their symbolic role in the formulation of those nations’ ethnic
identities. With the Atlantic slave trade’s introduction of these elements into the social machinery surrounding the production of indigenous African female consciousness, we see how race, class, gender, and nationality come to constitute major elements of the matrix of domination acting on Black women’s subjectivities from that point on.

The dissemination of this new African cultural configuration to regions of the African diaspora, via the slave trade, profoundly influenced indigenous notions of African womanhood. Women’s gendered class subjectivities as symbols for African homeland and social memory remained intact, but being combined with the elements of change the slave trade introduced resulted in their symbolic force being confined to race discourse. This is due to the necessity for Africans and their descendants to continue to assert their ethnic identities as they negotiate their racialized existences in the African diaspora. It is in the diasporic context that we see how the reduction of Black women’s ethnic symbolism to mere race discourse also influences notions of nationality.

Sara Mills uses the term “third culture” to describe what results when indigenous culture and imperial culture interact during the colonialist encounter (29). Taking an ethno-symbolist approach, we can apply this idea to the forming of African diasporic national identities during the slave trade. Therefore, contingent upon the construction of a third culture during encounters of conquest is the simultaneous construction of what we can call a third nation, or third nationality. In the African diasporic context this process would likely have involved: 1) Africans attempting to apply the same systems for forming ethnic identity they employed in Africa to the new locations of their dispersal and 2) the existing ethnic and national identities of these nations, as determined by their participation in the slave trade, working to constrict African influences on, and claims to, those identities through use of the race myth.

Tracy Fisher describes the latter part of this process in “Black Women, Politics, Nationalism and Community in London.” She writes:

British national identity has been socially, politically, and culturally constructed… Black people have been told that a British nation exists without the inclusion of Blackness, and it reflects a British national identity that is predicated on reified notions of culture and race as static and fixed. Ultimately the statement raises [the question]: Can one be both Black and British? (138)

Though each had its own methods for instituting the race myth in its dealings with Africans, this third culture/nation-forming process occurred throughout the various regions constituting the African diaspora. As Africans settled in the New World, their indigenous cultural practices had to adapt to account for the racialized resistance they faced. This adaptation, as Smith mentions earlier, does not result in a diminished sense of shared ethnicity among Africans. Instead, it changes the cultural content of those shared ethnic identities and practices.

Where the symbolic force assigned to pre-colonial African womanhood revolved around class and gender, the role of African female subjectivities as
symbolic agents for the continuance of ethno-cultural heritage comes to include
the categories of race and third nationality in the diasporic context. In this new
context, the same ethnic practices that culturally linked Africans to their
indigenous homelands became political acts aimed at establishing similar links to
the lands of their dispersal. The reduction of African cultures to a single race
entity in these new lands spurred diasporic Africans to use the ethno-cultural
machinery they were most familiar with to combat this reduction and stake some
claim to the cultural identities of the new regions they inhabited. The result was
their indigenous constructions of women’s subjectivities as representing
motherland and cultural heritage coming also to represent a means of
establishing new national identity in combating the race myth.

As such, Black modes of subjectivity formation throughout the African
diaspora resemble the process Temma Kaplan describes in “Revolution,
Nationalism, and Anti-Imperialism”:

Nationalism uses women as symbols, especially in their role as
mothers, to represent the collectivity. Serving as talismans,
women’s – especially mothers’ – deportment, dress, and sometimes
religiosity guarantees the very survival of the collectivity.
Controlling women’s behavior, thus, becomes a life and death
issue; and real-life challenges to the nation’s customs or certain
women’s insistence on performing as, or refusal to act as, symbols
of the nation appears to threaten the survival of the country and
everyone in it. (170)

When combined with the race and nationality concerns brought on by the slave
trade, diasporic Africans’ New World attempts at using indigenous cultural
practices for configuring the social position of women as symbolic of land-ties
and familial bonds serves to burden Black womanhood with the weight of
representing Black culture and collectivity. Black women serve as the symbolic
sites where diasporic Black populations’ struggles to maintain their indigenous
identities in the face of oppressive New World identities becomes represented.
Black female subjectivity in the African diaspora, therefore, functions as a form
of mule womanhood.

Mule Womanhood and Black Subjectivity

Referring to Black womanhood as mule womanhood here extends the
metaphor established by the quotation invoked at the start of this essay in that it
underscores the burden Black women bear as the symbolic sites of Black cultural
heritage and collectivity. This condition plays on Black women’s subjectivities in
various ways. The manner in which women have served as tools in African
descendants’ struggle to negotiate indigenous African identities with New World
Black subjectivities is heavily discussed within the discourse of Black feminist
theorists and African diasporic writers. Among Black feminist theorists, these
discussions often revolve around considerations of how Black women factor into
the subjectivity forming processes of Black populations. As a result, these
thinkers – including Hazel Carby and Michelle Wright – offer gendered examinations of Black subjectivity that illuminate Black women’s roles in shaping the collective consciousness of African descendants across the diaspora. African diasporic writers often depict the means by which Black populations across the diaspora established and continue to use cultural machinery for positioning women as symbols in their societies. Such discussions found in the text to be examined here elucidate how Black women’s pre-colonial connections to agrarian labor and childbirth factor into the appearance of their contemporary diasporic socio-political status as mule women.

In *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, Michelle Wright's discussion of how dialectical models shape discussions of Black subjectivity highlights the true differences in discourses about the Black male subject that are often hidden under homogenous readings of a Black nationalist tradition. Wright’s readings of Black feminist engagements with this tradition work to express her understanding that race theories intended to liberate Blackness from its tenuous position are incomplete when they do not account for Black women. Hazel V. Carby makes a similar assertion in *Race Men*. Carby scrutinizes W.E.B. DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folk* and finds that the text presents a “genealogy of race, nation, and of manhood” that is not only gender specific, but also “encompasses only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity” (10). These observations by Wright and Carby highlight what makes the position of the Black feminine subject especially interesting to observe when tracing the longevity of the culturally designed attenuation of Blackness in the New World. The historical failures to consider women in the formulation of Black subjectivity theories and ideologies Wright and Carby describe are commensurate with their role as the symbolic proprietors of all Black culture. As mule women, or cultural talismans, the position of Black women is seen as set or foundational to any discussion of Black subjectivity; and therefore goes largely unexplored by thinkers seeking to (re)define diasporic Black identities.

This objectification of Black womanhood serves the purpose of establishing Black cultural and national identities throughout the African diaspora intended to counter the racialized representations of Blackness that became pervasive following the slave trade. As such, Black women in the African diaspora exist as mule women in that the compression of their unique cultural subjectivities into one monolithic representational object is necessitated and defined by the global machinery of the slave trade. The slave trade’s attenuation of Black cultural identities bring about the cultural shift in Black modes of engaging Black women’s identities discussed. This simultaneity is not indicative of some coincidental evolution of two disparate entities occurring at the same time. Rather, as Carby and Wright’s works indicate, the positioning of Black women’s subjectivities – or lack thereof – within Black culture largely determines the course of global Black subjectivities.
Black Women and Diasporic Fiction

In recognizing the inextricable link between notions of Black womanhood and the course of Black subjectivity theory, several scholars have looked to the work of Black women writers throughout the diaspora for examinations of that link’s consequences. The examinations these writers offer improve our understanding of how the social practices for positioning women in Black societies disseminated from pre-colonial Africa to the modern diaspora result in their status as mule women. In examining the Black cultural formulation of feminine subjectivity, the work of Black women writers provides us with useful contemporary representations of the cultural processes and circumstances described throughout this essay.

Makeda Silvera’s novel *The Heart Does Not Bend* offers a critical examination of the state of diasporic women’s subjectivities in that it provides glimpses into how the social machinery for defining Black womanhood is emblematic of their status as mule women. Andrea Davis acknowledges as much in “Diaspora, Citizenship and Challenging the Myth of the Nation”:

Mairuth Sarsfield’s *No Crystal Stair* (1997) and Makeda Silvera’s *The Heart Does Not Bend* (2002) are two novels by African Canadian women that engage [in] critical cross-cultural dialogue in an attempt to examine the experiences of blackness in specifically gendered diasporic spaces. In inserting black women’s experiences as a necessary lens through which to read the African diaspora, these novels contest racist, patriarchal and nationalist narratives that seek to fix black identities in rigid categories defined by particular understandings of “race,” “nation,” and “sexuality.” (64)

In speaking to Jamaican national heritage, Silvera elucidates how the contemporary diasporic identities of Black women trace back to the culturally ascribed symbolism of womanhood originating in pre-colonial Africa. Her depictions of how indigenous African roles for women appear in the contemporary diaspora as a result of slavery’s colonialist legacy works to demonstrate the overall devastating effect the Atlantic slave trade had on the state of Black subjectivity in the New World.

In regards to its depiction of colonialism’s impact on the positioning of individual Black women within the collective legacy of African descendants throughout the diaspora, Silvera’s novel serves as what Christine Kim calls “a moment of public sociality” (62). In this capacity, Silvera’s work inserts itself into the historical conversation with other diasporic texts that elucidate the manner in which Black womanhood becomes muled into symbolizing Black collectivity in the diaspora. As a means of accentuating the contribution Silvera makes to diasporic fiction with *The Heart Does Not Bend*, two novels in this tradition will be noted for their particularly poignant thematic connections to Silvera’s text: Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*

*The Heart Does Not Bend* explores Jamaican women’s relationships and the complicated definitions and permutations of motherhood, loyalty, heritage, and
inheritance. Molly Galloway narrates the story of five generations of women – Mammy, Mama (Maria), Glory, Molly, and Ciboney – all of whom in diverse ways reenact each other’s stories in a never-ending cycle of hope and frustration which consists of relationships with irresponsible men, teenage pregnancies, the simultaneous need and rejection of family ties and obligations, and the hope for each new generation. Maria Galloway, "Mama," who cared for Molly since birth, is the emotional and critical center of the narrative. The novel’s “Prolegomenon” opens the story with the discovery that Maria has left everything to her irresponsible grandson Vittorio in her will. Molly’s story charts her own process of understanding their relationship, her grandmother’s deepest loves and fears, and the events that led to this action.

We later learn that Mama always favored her grandson, but all involved are nonetheless shocked that she would go so far as to leave such an inheritance to one so thoroughly undeserving. What ensues, through Molly’s recounting of her family’s history up to Mama’s death, is our engagement with Mama’s view of inheritance and familial relations as they relate to her outlook on the world. Christine Kim pointedly describes these stakes associated with Molly’s recounting in her 2006 essay “Postcolonial Romance, Ghostly Love Stories, and The Heart Does Not Bend”:

Maria’s naming of Vittorio as her sole heir, a decision that is symptomatic of a lifelong tendency to favour her grandson over all others, makes [Molly’s] positioning abundantly clear. Baffled by, and disappointed in, her grandmother’s willingness to invest, both in life and death, her hope, love, and money in a kind of black heterosexual masculinity that has constantly produced despair in the novel, Molly’s exclusion from Maria’s legal will becomes a form of inclusion as it instills in her a desire to remember the past, unpack the contradictions of Maria’s actions, and recognize the connections that exist between these personal and cultural inheritances. (59)

Navigating this process of inclusion through exclusion and loss with Molly acquaints us with Silvera’s notion of how the Galloway family’s journey represents a diasporic heritage of cultural uncertainty and traumatic shaping of Black women’s consciousness.

As Molly’s family narrative begins in “Part One” of the novel, Mama is confronted with the familiar departure of one of her children from Kingston, Jamaica to Toronto, Canada in search of “fortune abroad” (16). Silvera opens: Maria Galloway didn’t go to the Palisadoes Airport to see her son Freddie off. She never went to airports, not even when her son Peppie left in 1958 and then her daughter, Glory, in 1960… It was 1966 and I was nine years old. He was like a big brother to me, and I knew I was going to miss him something terrible. (16)

Molly’s opening lines introduce us to a Galloway family legacy not altogether uncommon in the diasporic Black world following colonialism and slavery.
Predicated on lack and absence, this legacy represents the difficulties facing the Galloways – and all African descendants – in their efforts to maintain familial and cultural coherence in the New World.

Silvera highlights the connection between the Galloway family and slavery’s legacy in the personage of Mammy – Mama’s mother and Molly’s great-grandmother. Molly describes Mammy as “a wisp of a woman” whose “pass-for-white skin told the story of her mother’s mother’s journey from Africa and her plight on a sugar plantation in Jamaica” (45). Just as Mammy’s complexion serves as a physical marker of slavery’s imprint on the Galloway family, Silvera’s grounding that connection in the experiences of Galloway women is equally telling. Mammy represents the oldest living connection to the Galloway past, and that past – as Mammy describes it here – originates with women engaging the slave enterprise:

Is about 1890 mi born yuh know, so mi pon dis earth long time. Mi see whole heap, mi born not far from here, Port Antonio. Dem time whole heap of ship use to come in from all over de world and dock dere. Is right dere dem dock mi grandmother, tek her from Madagascar, bring her pon slave ship to here. (47)

Mammy’s recollection of the Galloway’s family origins in the New World serves as the backdrop for Silvera’s examination of diasporic Black women’s consciousness since the slave trade in that the constitutive elements and ramifications of Mama’s will are later illuminated when viewed within this context.

Freddie’s departure to Toronto does not only signal the loss of another one of Mama’s children. It signals our engagement with an entire diasporic cultural heritage following colonialism and slavery. Mama directly comments on colonialism’s legacy in Jamaica when refuting her sister Ruth’s point concerning governmental corruption:

If de government corrupt, it have nutten to do wid dat. From we a pickney we use to hear Mammy and Pappy talk ‘bout de government, for when we revolt and de British back off, a fi we own people, de one dem train in a fi dem England school who tek over and dem continue to give job to friend and company, nutten fi do wid what you talking about. (228)

Mama’s tracing of Jamaica’s governmental corruption to its colonialisit encounter with England displays Silvera’s desire to link this encounter with Jamaica’s unfavorable contemporary social circumstance. The result of which has been a diasporic legacy – as demonstrated through the Galloways – of Black cultural and identity attenuation in the New World. This attenuation has manifested itself as generations of Jamaicans being disconnected from their geographical, ethnic, and cultural heritages in order to escape the destructive traces of colonialism ravaging their homeland. Freddie’s departure leaves only Molly and her Uncle Mikey remaining in Mama’s house in Kingston. Mama’s sisters / Molly’s Grand-aunts Ruth and Joyce also live nearby. Mikey is Mama’s only child remaining in
Jamaica, which underscores one of Silvera’s major thematic threads throughout the novel: the Galloway’s legacy of parental absenteeism. Both Freddie and Glory have left their children behind in Jamaica as they’ve gone on to pursue fortune in Toronto. Observing Mama’s role in managing this family history engages us in the gender politics shaping her world-view and inheritance decision.

As Galloway men go, Freddie’s womanizing – and failure to take responsibility for Monica and their baby, Freddie Jr. – represents the norm. His father, Oliver, mistreated and cheated on Mama while physically abusing her and being largely absent from the lives of his children. It comes as no surprise in Toronto when Freddie’s relationship with Bella dissolves into him abusing her and abandoning their son, Vittorio. Mama recognized this attribute of her husband in their son even in Jamaica when predicting his abandonment of Monica and Freddie Jr.: “Yuh mark my word, when him reach foreign all will be forgotten” (19). Vittorio’s development into a thieving, womanizing, all round low-life and financial burden on Mama comes as even less of a surprise. Even Pappy allowed Mammy and their children to wallow in squalor while keeping an expensive tab for his mistress at a local grocer.

The seemingly essentialized trope for Black manhood the Galloway men come to represent would be more accurately categorized as Silvera’s strategic attempt at representing a woeful pattern of behavior characterizing the relationship between Black men and women in the New World. We see how women share in the perpetuation of this pattern when viewing the novel’s central relationship between Mama and Molly.² Molly spending her childhood living with and being raised by Mama instead of Glory represents the maternal norm for Galloway women. As we learn, the Galloway women share an unluckiness or ineptitude in matters of the heart that results in their repeated involvement with irresponsible men and mothering of illegitimate children as teenagers. Just as Mammy had done for her with Freddie and Glory, Mama willingly raises Molly (as well as Vittorio and Molly’s daughter, Ciboney, later) during her early childhood in order to allow Glory opportunities to seek advancement without the burden of raising a child. In serving as surrogate mother to several generations of Galloway children, Mama stands as the novel’s prevailing model for maintenance of familial and cultural ties despite a largely fragmentary family legacy. In speaking of “many African societies,” Gay Wilentz contextualizes this connection between Mama’s motherhood role and the maintenance of social connectivity with her assertion that “the role of mother not only brackets in the notion of what it is to be a woman, but dialectically branches out into a community role” (42). As such, the views and actions expressed by Mama throughout the novel become a referendum on family legacy in particular and Black diasporic heritage in general. In viewing Mama’s relationship with Molly and the rest of the family through this lens, we come to understand her political stakes for Silvera. Mama’s ideological perspective on whose responsibility it becomes to maintain Jamaican heritage in the face of
disconnection illuminates the rationale behind her will and serves as a commentary on the gender and consciousness politics shaping diasporic Black identity.

Mama’s response to circumstances facing the Galloways through the course of the novel – and the insight those responses offer into her inheritance decision – illuminate Silvera’s discursive engagement with identity-constituting elements of the matrix of domination, including: race, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality. As our narrator, Molly’s perception of Mama’s actions and all they entail shapes our own. As such, Molly often serves as our narrative center for examining the socio-cultural ramifications Mama and the Galloway family’s interactions represent. This nature of Molly and Mama’s relationship in The Heart Does Not Bend functions as our point of entry into much of Silvera’s significant analysis of the matrix of domination’s affect on diasporic Black subjectivities. We can see this in the manner through which Mama’s reaction to major familial issues throughout the text each represent a response to specific elements of the matrix of domination.

Christine Kim’s consideration of Mama’s reaction to Molly and Mikey’s lifestyles highlights one such instance from the novel concerning the issues of sexuality and religion: “Maria’s resistance to Molly’s sexuality parallels her response to her son Mikey’s homosexuality – she accepts and embraces him on one level, but dreads the social and religious consequences of his sexuality on another level” (64). Mama’s conversation about Mikey with her friend Miss Gatty is revelatory of Mama’s ideologically linking religion and sexuality in the manner Kim describes. In response to Miss Gatty’s suggestion that Mikey’s homosexuality “might all be a part of God’s plan,” Mama offers a religious metaphor to articulate her perspective: “Gatty, don’t talk nonsense, what kinda plan? Mi sacrifice too much already to be curse wid dis. A mi son and mi love him, but mi not Mary and him not Jesus. Mi nuh want him fi bear any cross, for de mother always feel it, and mi load too heavy already. From mi born mi bad luck”(28). This is one of the more profound statements in the novel in that its imagery speaks to several elements shaping this essay’s thesis. The image of Mama as a load-bearer speaks for itself, but becomes even more poignant when asking what exactly constitutes this curse of bad luck burdening her that Mikey’s sexuality threatens to compound. Whatever it is, Mama cannot spare the additional weight of something she clearly believes Mikey can control, as evidenced by its deviance from God’s plan. We see further demonstration of Mama’s rationalization of sexuality through religion in her exchange with Molly and her partner, Rose, following her discovery of their lesbian relationship later in the novel.

Mama tells Molly: “… it nuh right, a Satan work. Him nuh mean yuh no good. Look pon yuh, a nice attractive girl, yuh can get any man out dere, even a husband, and yuh go tek up wid woman. It nuh right. It nuh right” (185). In furthering her objections to Molly, Mama invokes similar language as she employed with Miss Gatty in discussing Mikey: “Lawd, talk to me. Is whose sins
mi paying for? Mi father? Oh Lord, dis is too heavy a load. First Mikey, now mi one and only granddaughter” (185). Mama voices her objections to Rose the next morning as well: “It nuh right, Rose. Dem is white-people ways... All I know is what de Bible seh – man do not lie wid a man as one lies wid a ‘oman. Read Leviticus. And dat go for ‘oman, ‘oman thing. Destruction can only follow, an’ mi nuh mek yuh ruin Molly” (187). This exchange not only works to solidify Mama’s religious rationalization of sexuality as a choice, it also reveals her ideological view of this choice as racially significant. Mama hints at this ideology in her earlier discussion of Mikey with Miss Gatty. In response to Miss Gatty’s inquiry of whether Mikey has ever been “interested in girls,” Mama acknowledges: “Never. From him born him different. Him tek him whole physical features off Mammy, same small bone, all him have from him father and me is de Blackness, nutten else” (28). Where her acknowledgement that Mikey has been “different” from birth would seem to contradict her viewing his sexuality as a choice, Mama’s intended point is even more profound for her. Mama’s racialization of sexuality is interesting in its conflation of “Satan work” with “white-people ways.” We know Mama not to be a noted racist – as evidenced in her love for Vittorio’s Italian mother, Bella, in Toronto – so we can assume she does not believe White people are Satan. More interestingly, what she seems to suggest in her statement to Rose is that along the racial hierarchy, homosexuality cost a cultural and racial toll that Blacks simply cannot afford. This cost can, of course, be quantified as the impossibility of gay and lesbian relationships resulting in children. The stakes for Mama, it would seem, are generational. To fall in love with someone of the same sex is to work against one’s cultural heritage. With this in mind, Mama’s description of Mikey’s physical appearance takes on an interesting light. For Mama, Mikey literally embodies a cultural contradiction. The only thing generationally tying Mama to Mikey is race. It’s the only aspect of Mikey that she cannot deny responsibility for, as far as she’s concerned.

In Mama’s formulation, race is a primordial absolute from birth while one’s sexuality is culturally and consciously determined. Therefore, the decision to engage in a gay or lesbian relationship bespeaks a cultural disregard counter to self-preservation. Mama’s couching this ideology in religion is telling for Silvera in terms of its relationship to Jamaica’s colonial past. Silvera addresses this connection at several points in the novel. When describing Mammy, our most direct connection to Jamaica’s slave and colonial past, Molly notes: “Mammy couldn’t read or write, but she was one of the most spirited and intelligent women I’ve ever known. She had a memory that wouldn’t quit, she seemed to know people’s motives, and she knew the Bible from Genesis through Revelation” (45). Mammy’s knowledge of the Bible despite not being able to read or write is emblematic of Western religion’s proliferation in Jamaica through indoctrination. Molly further demonstrates the expanse of this indoctrination in Jamaica when discussing the larger Galloway family following her and Mama’s return to Jamaica from Toronto later in the novel:
Grand-aunt Ruth and Aunt Joyce had been going to a Baptist church every Sunday for years, but Grand-aunt Ruth also studied with a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses every Wednesday on the verandah, and Mama, never one to pass up the opportunity to debate, joined in. Cousin Icie was Roman Catholic and went to a church nearby, and Cousin Ivan was a “turn-back” Seventh Day Adventist. Thursday evenings, Mother J, a member of the Church of Redemption (Pentecostal), came to hold prayer meetings, and everyone but Cousin Ivan and me joined in. Given the tolerance shown to all these different beliefs, I found it unforgivable that they wouldn’t accept Mikey’s difference. (226 - 227)

Silvera’s description of the Galloways’ religious beliefs is telling in that the denominations she lists are religions that would have been proliferated in Jamaica during slavery and colonialism. While Silvera does not seem to make any qualitative statements on the state of pre-colonial Jamaica’s religious ideologies, she draws a distinct connection here between contemporary religious ideologies like Mama’s and Jamaica’s colonialist encounter with Europe. Therefore, Mama’s prioritizing of race in her religious rationalization of sexuality indicates that her ideological positioning of race as the root of Black cultural identity stems from slavery and colonialism.

As a result of the Atlantic slave trade and its conjoining colonialist efforts, race has come to encompass all elements of diasporic Black cultural identity. The resulting consciousness that comes to define diasporic Black subjectivities is represented as Mama’s cursed load. Race’s position as colonialism’s most effective weapon in the destabilization of Jamaican culture identifies it as the culturally attenuating force Mama represents the fight against. All of the pressures and hardships Mama suffers in the name of maintaining familial and cultural heritage stem from the colonialist efforts race represents. As such, Mama bears the cultural load of fighting race’s effects. She is, in short, a mule woman. Silvera underscores this point in Mama’s objections to Mikey and Molly’s sexualities. In both instances Mama internalizes her family’s sexuality choices as having ramifications for her.

Christine Kim’s essay’s consideration of melancholia’s role in shaping the discursive structure of Silvera’s novel leads her to theorize community and loss in similar terms as those just employed in describing Maria’s mule womanhood. As a mule woman, Maria’s social function is predicated on and necessitated by the loss of cultural continuity Africans’ dispersal from the continent during slavery represents. Kim views such engagements with loss in Silvera’s text as referendums on community:

[Judith] Butler suggests that grief makes it “possible to appeal to a ‘we’… Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of all of us” (Precarious 20). The shared feeling of loss permits a sense of the communal to be constructed, even though the specific losses of individuals vary. Moreover, this notion that loss creates a public “we” becomes a
way of drawing attention to the construction of certain living bodies as objects of loss. (62)

When applied to Kim’s formulation, Maria’s role as a mule woman dictates that her continued individual engagement with grief and loss works to inspire a sense of diasporic collectivity. Diasporic Black women, as represented by Maria, are defined by their mule womanhood in that colonialism and slavery have established them as symbolic bearers of cultural collectivity by constructing their bodies as objects of loss.

Silvera’s representation of Black womanhood as the conflating point between loss and collectivity puts her in direct correspondence with other contemporary writers of diasporic fiction. We see a similar literary representation of mule womanhood’s effects acting upon diasporic women due to colonialism in the character of Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. The conflict for Nnu Ego stems from her traditional view of West African womanhood and family versus the modern conceptions of West African womanhood that are arising as a result of assimilated British colonial ideals. This becomes clear after Nnu Ego has already lost one son, and has just birthed another: “She had been trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her [first] child. This time she was going to play according to the new rules” (74).

Nnu Ego’s particular loss is emblematic of the larger cultural context Gay Wilentz describes in her essay “Afracenrism as Theory: The Discourse of Diaspora Literature”:

> In traditional West Africa, the “compound was usually the unit of political organization”; thus, “wives, mothers, sisters or daughters could direct political influence over males” [Sudarkasa 53]. The balanced interrelationship between women and their communities was disrupted during colonization... But throughout history, the role of women as “custodians of the ‘custom’” (Arhin 94) has informed the life of the community and the culture. (42)

Nnu Ego’s attempts to preserve traditional cultural practice, where most others around her are content with assimilating, seems to indicate her awareness that this responsibility to inform the cultural life of her community rests with her as a woman and mother. The traditional communal functions of Nnu Ego’s mother role become displaced and instead must be employed as an indigenous cultural safeguard against the rise of oppositional British ideals. Nnu Ego’s resulting awareness of this cultural burden she bares as a mother, and its commensurate muling of her feminine identity, causes her to lament the loss of her purer cultural heritage and liken her very womanhood and motherhood to slavery. As a result of colonialism’s effects, Nnu Ego believes that “her love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery” in that her relationship with them will always be defined by the cultural alterations necessitated by her traumatic encounter with colonialism (101).
With Nnu Ego and Maria Galloway, Emecheta and Silvera embody the diasporic literary practice Andrea Davis earlier described as “inserting black women’s experiences as a necessary lens through which to read the African diaspora” (64). The value of this insertion’s impact on our understanding of Mama and Nnu Ego as representative of mule womanhood stems from Silvera and Emecheta’s skill in demonstrating that Mama and Nnu Ego’s individual ideologies and struggles with loss bear collective weight. Understanding how Mama’s ideological perspective emblematizes Silvera’s engagement in a discourse on mule womanhood begins to help illuminate Mama’s inheritance decision and the gender politics driving it.

Silvera grounds the Galloway family story in the generational legacy of its women because she understands the role Black women play in the diasporic heritage of African descendants. Women of the African diaspora— in the personages of the Galloway women—inherit the burden of maintaining cultural, national, and familial heritage in the face of colonial race ideology’s socially destabilizing effects. Mama’s response to this responsibility entirely shapes her view of the world and how her family should function within it. The resulting views on gender contained within Mama’s ideology often dictate how she perceives and engages other generations of Galloways. This is most consistently represented in *The Heart Does Not Bend* through the relationship between Mama and Molly. As the narrator of Mama’s diasporic journey— from Jamaica to Toronto and back to Jamaica again— Molly serves as her most consistent companion and our window into Mama’s expressions of her ideology.

The consequences of race and colonialism for Black women’s subjectivities are apparent in Mama’s views on men. Despite her continued suffering at the hands of irresponsible men— which, without exception, causes her drinking binges— Mama tells Molly:

Man nuh good, yuh can’t depend on dem. Dem is just a necessary evil. Ah glad Freddie left de island. Peppie will tek care of him. Teach him responsibility. Thank God Glory gaan. It would a pain mi fi see her go through pickney after pickney wid dem wutless man, wid not a penny in a dem pocket. All dem have is promises. (63)

In light of her views on the importance of family and generational heritage when facing the cultural and social disconnection that has come to define Jamaica following colonialism, Mama’s seeing men as necessary despite their shortcomings stands to reason. As Kim puts it: “While men often disappoint Maria, she forgives them repeatedly because she believes they are needed to establish the conditions of possibility for stable social structures” (65). Beyond their importance in propagating the race, however, men merit little in the way of expectations and responsibility for Mama. She has— literally, at times— had it beaten into her that she cannot depend on men. Following her husband Oliver’s reentry into her and everyone else’s lives in Jamaica, Mama voices this sentiment during an inevitable confrontation resulting from Oliver’s infidelity: “Love?
Oliver, yuh bring mi to mi senses, because ah forget dat love is a terrible weakness dat mi can’t afford. It hurt me every time” (79).

Mama beats herself up all the more for letting Oliver back into her home because she knew to maintain low expectations for him from the moment he reappeared at her door. She says as much when responding to Miss Gatty’s notion that Oliver might have changed when he first arrived: “Change? Change to what, Gatty? Dem only change pon de outside. You know as much as me, dat man is like croaking lizard” (71). To prove her point concerning the unreliability of men, Mama implicates Miss Gatty by asking, “So how Randolph?” Miss Gatty acknowledges: “Him all right, still running wid de woman and de rum… it could be worse, so mi thank God, ‘cause at least him bring home a little money fi help wid de house, and him nuh beat mi.” As if to say, “I told you so,” Mama replies: “Sometimes, dat’s all yuh can ask for, mi dear” (71). Just as Mama’s views on men are shaped by her recognition of their role in maintaining diasporic generational and cultural ties, Mama’s views on Black women’s subjectivities are also largely shaped as a response to the proliferation of European colonialist ideologies on race. However, as Molly notices in several instances throughout the novel, Mama’s views on the two genders are incongruous. This disparity in Mama’s gender ideology brings us to a better understanding of her inheritance decision and highlights our engagement with Silvera’s examination of the previously discussed modes through which diasporic women’s subjectivities serve as mule womanhoods.

In combating the consciousness resulting from colonialism’s dissemination of race as the primary marker of Black subjectivity, Mama comes to represent a contemporary formulation of pre-colonial African gender ideals. That is, her economic and socio-cultural contributions in food and childcare mark Mama’s feminine power in sustaining Jamaican heritage. It is through these avenues that Mama reveals her cultural gender expectations and views on inheritance.

In Jamaica, Mama earned her income by cooking at home and selling what she made to local eateries, including her sister Ruth’s restaurant. Mama’s house on Wigton Street had a garden where she grew some of her ingredients for recipes, and where Molly cultivated her love for horticulture. Molly and Mama’s shared memories in Kingston often center around them cooking together while Mama tells stories about the Galloway past. Molly gets reminded of this in Toronto when coming across Mama in the kitchen preparing for Christmas at Peppie’s house. Upon seeing Mama buttering cake tins and talking about how she has been “up from dawn a bake,” Molly reflects: “We could have been back on Wigton Street, except for the snow and cold outside” (131). Mama also seems to recognize the poignancy of the moment, because she suddenly commands: Molly, girl, get a pen and paper and come write down dis recipe. Yuh mother nuh interested in dem things, but yuh fi learn. A Mammy teach mi how fi bake and even if yuh nuh like fi cook, it
good fi know how fi bake. And a cake is a thing of beauty, jus’ like
de flowers yuh love fi plant. (131)

After sharing old stories about Mammy and making sure Molly has written
down all the necessary steps and measurements related to the recipe, Mama
beams: “Well, girl, yuh can’t say yuh granny never give yuh anything. Yuh won’t
use it now, but put it up – ah know a time will come when yuh going to crave a
cake, and yuh will be proud when yuh mek it yuhself and it turn out” (136).
Mama’s oral transmission of familial heritage to Molly in this moment represents
her efforts to prepare Molly for the cultural load she must bear as a Jamaican
woman. Mama genders the significance of this act in her tracing its lineage
through Galloway women – first Mammy, then herself, and now Molly. Mama
bestows Molly with the means for withstanding the cultural instability to which
Glory has apparently succumbed. In so doing, Mama has left Molly her most
meaningful inheritance. Molly’s meriting this inheritance from Mama
demonstrates the strength of their bond because Mama clearly believes Glory, as
well as her other children, do not rate such a gesture.

In articulating her theory of “Afracentric literature,” Gay Wilentz includes
diasporic fiction in her conceptualization of oral transmission’s role in carrying
out the task of maintaining cultural heritage that she earlier ascribes to
motherhood:

This mothering, Afracentric approach to literature from Africa and
the diaspora hinges on women’s role in orally transmitting the
values and traditions of their culture(s). For Black women writers,
one aim has been to explore how women have passed on their
cultural heritage to future generations. What folklorist Beverly
Stoeltje calls “generational continuity” – to look back through our
mothers – is the basis for the commonalities of women of African
descent. Within this context, women’s cultural production often
subverts dominant forms... to pass on the culture. (41)

When viewed in the context of Afracentric literature, we not only recognize
Mama and Molly’s exchange as Silvera’s continued portrayal of the cultural load
Black women bear in combating the socially disorienting effects of colonialism
and slavery, we also see that her decision to engage in this practice firmly
establishes her within the African diasporic literary tradition.

Silvera’s representation of the generational continuity between diasporic
women as emblematized in their oral transmission of story also appears in the
Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat’s novel Krik? Krak! Danticat’s shared
engagement in this, as Wilentz calls it, “oraliterary” practice of Afracentric
literature manifests as her decision to publish her novel as a short story cycle
(41). Danticat discusses the significance of this decision in a note she distributed
through her publisher prior to Krik? Krak!’s publication: “I look to the past – to
Haiti – hoping that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with – the
ones that have passed on – will choose to tell their stories through my voice. For
those of us who have a voice must speak to the present and the past” (qtd. in
Casey 525 – 526). For Danticat, writing her text as a collection of short stories affords her the ability to enact indigenous oraliterary practices for maintaining cultural continuity across time through the sharing of story. The significance of this is no more lost on Mama than it is on Danticat or Silvera, which is why she selectively shares this legacy with Molly and not her own unworthy children.

Mama acquires this view of her children honestly. We see Glory’s apparent disconnection from and disavowal of Jamaican culture displayed at various points in the novel, which is pertinent since Glory is Mama’s only daughter. When Mama defiantly sings, “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?” following an altercation she and Molly have with Glory over their use of her address in Toronto for magazine subscriptions, Glory reprimands: “Mama, please, remember we have neighbours, dis is not Wigton Street” (127). Glory’s disconnection from her Jamaican roots becomes imposed upon Molly as well early in her and Mama’s arrival to Toronto: “[Glory] found fault at my every twist and turn. My English was bad. If I expected to reach anywhere, I better learn to talk good, she said” (121). Glory’s disfavoring of Molly’s Jamaican accent as bad English that needs to be corrected symbolizes not only her dissociation from Jamaican heritage and practice, but also her assimilation of Canadian social ideals.

We are introduced to all of Glory’s siblings’ views on Jamaican cultural heritage when Mama calls a family meeting at Peppie’s to discuss a letter she received from Ruth back in Jamaica. As Mama reads the letter aloud, we learn of Mikey’s bitterness for being the only member of his nuclear family remaining in Jamaica, and that his attention to the house on Wigton Street is infrequent. As a result, Ruth informs Mama: “Your house is the shabbiest on the street. The flowerbeds almost don’t exist. The trees need shaping” (143). Ruth urges, “I am doing what I can with the help of Ivan, but talk to the children and see what can be done” (143). Once done reading, Mama opens the family meeting by asking, “What yuh think we should do?” (143). Molly narrates the ensuing exchange: Glory was the first to respond. “Sell de place, Mama. It don’t mek sense to have it going to nothing when you can get good money for it.” “Is what yuh talking ’bout, gal? Sell? Yuh know how much sweat and tears go in dat house? What yuh think mi was doing when you and Freddie in de country wid Mammy and Pappy?”… She waited again. She stared at Peppie… “Somebody need to go down, and preferably is one a you bwoys.” Freddie spoke. “Mama I would love to go and help out, but ah can’t leave Bella and de baby [Vittorio], and frankly I don’t hold dat much attachment for de house. It would only be for you”… “Then is forget, unnu forget so quick? Is amnesia unnu come down wid?”… “Nobody want to remember where dem come from. Well, is one thing I know for sure and dat is ah will never sell dat place, not over mi dead body.” (143 – 145)
This exchange expands our understanding of how Mama’s views on gender and inheritance lead her to leave everything to Vittorio in her will. Where Mama genders her oral transmission of the cultural tools needed to combat her family’s fading heritage as female, she genders the inheritance of material property as male in her preference that one of her (heterosexual) sons take over the house in Kingston. Mama’s children’s extended absences from Jamaica have resulted in their loss of cultural connection to and national pride for their homeland. As the last female Mama raised from childhood in Jamaica, Molly represents Mama’s greatest hope of instilling future generations with the cultural and national heritage necessary to maintain their family’s diasporic legacy. Since she raises him from childhood in Toronto after Freddie abandons him, Vittorio represents a similar opportunity for Mama as Molly in that he is the only male grandson she has consistent contact with.

Mama’s inability to rely on her children for Jamaican cultural maintenance forces her to pin her hopes to the next generation. Though Vittorio is largely undeserving of it, he is the only male heir with whom Mama can enact her gendered ideologies on inheritance. As Mama once said before of all men, Vittorio is a necessary evil. Her lowered expectations for men – coupled with her role as the bearer of family and cultural heritage – leads Mama to bestow fortunes on Vittorio simply because he is male. The tenure of the inheritance bestowed upon Molly for being female takes on a completely different light.

Molly recognizes this difference even before Mama’s death and the subsequent reading of her will. Following the deterioration of Mama’s health due to old age, Molly takes off time from work to accompany her back to Jamaica and spend a few weeks there getting her settled in. As she looks over the kitchen she shared in Toronto with her second husband, Melbourne, Mama states, “Molly, ah leaving de cake tins and dem bottle of fruits fi yuh. Yuh can bake yuh first set of cakes out of it” (207). After not helping Mama at all with her preparations to leave, Vittorio comes down moments before the limo is ready to depart for the airport and helps Mama into the car. Upon seeing the pride in Mama’s eyes at that moment, Molly confesses, “I wished I had been born a boy” (207).

What Molly recognizes in Mama at that moment is her expectation that Molly, as her female heir, should thanklessly sacrifice her own life to accompany her back to Jamaica – while “Maria’s desire to recuperate Black masculinity,” as Kim describes it, earns Vittorio pridelful glances for basically doing nothing (67). This expectation on Mama’s part is emblematic of the burden Molly stands to inherit as a woman of African descent in the New World. Her circumstance as a mule woman is not only characterized by her cultural burden of symbolically representing pre-colonial African ideals, but also by an overwhelming lack of cultural appreciation for the personal sacrifice contingent with embodying such a representation. Mama came to grips with this reality of her social position, embraced it, and instilled its values in Molly. By the end of the novel, we see that Molly too comes to embrace this aspect of her diasporic heritage.
Despite their love, Molly cannot bring herself to leave Mama when Rose finds an apartment and asks Molly to move in with her. In response, Rose assures her, “I understand, but I don’t like it. I wanted you to choose me” (189). As much as Rose says she understands, the anger with which she ultimately responds to Molly’s decision is more in keeping with her character than understanding would have been. This is not because Rose is an angry person, but because “though she adored her family, she did not shoulder their problems” (168). Rose, like Glory, does not embrace Mama’s manner of viewing the world and is therefore incapable of truly understanding Molly’s choice to suppress her own sexuality in order to please Mama. Molly is unable to shake Mama’s insistence that controversy surrounding Mikey and Frank’s relationship in Jamaica originally forced them to leave for Toronto. She would have been able to if she were more like Rose. Molly admits as much: “I wished I could be like her, free of the responsibility of family history, free of its disappointments” (168).

Molly’s inability to free herself of familial and cultural obligations in the manner Rose does demonstrates her adoption of Mama’s ideologies concerning the role Black women must play in maintaining pre-colonial African socio-cultural ideals in the contemporary diaspora. In the exchange between Molly and Ciboney following Mama’s funeral in Jamaica that closes the novel’s “Epilogue,” we see Molly continuing Mama’s generational work and suffering some of her related frustrations. When pressed by Ciboney to explain her reasoning in letting Rose leave, Molly simply states, “I chose Mama” (263). In response to Ciboney’s assertion, “you have to live your own life, Mom,” Molly offers the following retort:

Ciboney, we don’t live our lives independent of others. It’s all a give and take, and when you take, you have to give back… Rose is fun and adventurous, and totally free. All the things I’m not. All the things I love about her. But she has a blind spot. She forgets that in some small way we are all dependent on each other. (263)

Following a brief silence, Ciboney’s inquiry into whether Molly has always disliked Vittorio leads Molly to answer: “No… Don’t you remember when I used to take you and Vittorio to the movies, the botanical gardens, the park, zoo? Everywhere” (263). When Ciboney replies, “I don’t remember,” it causes Molly to “flinch at her reply and remember Mama asking her children, ‘Unnu have amnesia?’” (263).

Molly’s harkening back to Mama during this exchange indicates that Black women’s representational roles as mule women will persist as long as the destabilizing race ideologies of slavery and colonialism continue to dictate global Black subjectivities. As such, Silvera’s *The Heart Does Not Bend* contributes to a rich legacy of diasporic women’s writing that engages the socio-cultural forces shaping Black women’s subjectivities as mule women. Kim highlights this point in expanding upon her earlier formulation of diasporic women’s bodies as objects of loss:
Racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies, then, are excluded as they are included within larger social bodies, and thus speak to the continual and ongoing sense and remembrance of the loss of living bodies within social narratives. Instead of longing for the connection they once had, Molly’s grief [following Maria’s death] propels her to recognize the ways in which her grandmother’s past actions, both nurturing and punitive, continue to inform her life and remind Molly of the ways in which she remains abjected from particular collective identities. (62 – 63)

Kim’s observation is emblematic of Silvera’s engagement in a discourse on mule womanhood with her novel in that it perceives the identity-making constructs of colonialism, including race, as obscuring an indigenous cultural identity for which characters long and work to reclaim. It is in portraying these reclamation attempts that Silvera most directly engages the trope of diasporic Black women as the load bearing mules of indigenous culture.

Notes
1 “Atlantic Africa” refers to those nations on the western coast of Africa, bordering the Atlantic Ocean, whose ports participated in the vast majority of activity during the African slave trade.
2 As is standard in Black Studies, this project assumes that race – as most of us understand it in the contemporary Western world – is a socially constructed category invented for the purposes Jacob Pandian and Susan Parman describe in their 2004 publication *The Making of Anthropology: The Semiotics of Self and Other in the Western Tradition*:

   Beginning in the 16th century, an elaborate mythology of race with multiple semiotic significations came into being…Along with such a development of racial mythology and racial science, which were created to serve the economic and political interests of Europeans and Europe in the New World, there came into being a body of knowledge that depicted sub-Saharan Africa as an undeveloped, wild country, peopled by inferior or sub-human forms of humanity. (pp. 159-160)

As a result of this race myth, the designation “Black” becomes the encapsulating term for representing all peoples of African descent across the African diaspora following the global dispersal of Africans during the Atlantic slave trade.
3 Umut Özkirimli’s *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* offers a useful synopsis of the ideological movements shaping the course of recent scholarship on nationalism. Chapter 5 discusses the major thinkers and ideas in the ethno-symbolist movement, and the criticisms leveled against them.
4 Wright’s work is an introduction to racialized Enlightenment discourse on subject formation, an overview of the most important Black responses to these philosophies, and a feminist intervention into theories of diasporic Black identity. In presenting all of these elements simultaneously, Wright insists that the integration of these textual histories is a necessary foundation for any
consideration of the Black diaspora. By exploring the logical fallacies in the Black subject construction in the West through discussions of Hegel, Jefferson, and Arthur de Gobineau, Wright demonstrates that racist discourses are not cohesive and that the "counterdiscourses" that emerge in response to these philosophies are correspondingly varied. In her discussions of counterdiscourses created by W. E. B. DuBois, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Frantz Fanon, she relies on Marxist and Hegelian theories of the dialectic to explain how Black thinkers have critiqued the fallaciousness and paradoxes of Western racial discourse. According to Wright, "these counterdiscourses all produce a synthesis that simultaneously speaks to the idealist construction of the Black Other and the existence (or possibility of) a Black subject” (68). The history of twentieth-century Black thought is, for Wright, a trajectory that moves between being configured as Black other to configuring the self as a Black subject. Black subjects must negotiate a form of subjectivity that is a negation of their negation in a history of Enlightenment thinking.

5 Gay Wilentz is one such scholar. In “Afracentrism as Theory: The Discourse of Diaspora Literature” Wilentz’s theory of Afracentrism seeks to define the scope of Black subjectivity by examining Black women’s writing as a mothering discourse that, in its orality, contributes to Black cultural continuity.

6 While Molly’s role as narrator centers our experience and interpretation of the novel in her perspective – a fact she points out herself when stating if Mama “were telling this story, she might tell it differently” – Molly allows Mama to speak for herself by always clearly demarcating what Mama has said or done from what she feels as a result of Mama’s words or actions (160). As a result, we can assume the credibility of Molly’s reporting on events.

7 Molly escapes this designation because she gave birth to Ciboney before leaving Toronto and meeting Rose while studying horticulture at the University of Texas.

References


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