

# Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

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Volume 7

Issue 1 *The Asian Experience in the Caribbean: A  
Special Double Issue*

Article 7

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April 2010

## “Yes, ma’am, Mr. Lowe”: Lau A-Yin and the Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda*

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### Recommended Citation

Harrison, Sheri-Marie (2010) ““Yes, ma’am, Mr. Lowe”: Lau A-Yin and the Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda*,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol7/iss1/7>

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Queer subjectivity in Anglophone Caribbean Literature historically occupies a marginal space that is defined in oppositional terms like "unnatural," "foreign," or "abnormal." In earlier decades of twentieth-century literary production in the region, non-heteronormative or queer subjectivity appears only as a subtext and not as a sustained or developed part of the central theme, functioning more often than not to illustrate non-native or foreign elements of Caribbean subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Claude McKay presents in *Banana Bottom* (1933) one of the earliest depictions of queer subjectivity through the Englishman Squire Gensir, who "lived aloof from sexual contact, a happy old bachelor with ... 'not the slightest blemish on his character'" (92). Characters like Busha Glenley, described in terms of "purely animal sexuality ... with his many concubines," stand in contrast to what seems to be asexuality on the Squire's part (128-129). As Wayne Cooper points out in *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance, a Biography*, Squire Gensir is a "fictional prototype" of McKay's homosexual English patron Walter Jekyll (32). Squire Gensir's muted sexuality seems characteristic of an unspoken preclusion from representing homosexuality in a Jamaican setting. Gensir is nonetheless present in a narrative that uses sexuality as one of the determining indices of what is natural or unnatural in turn-of-the-century rural Jamaica. Gensir's lack of sexuality or possible latent homosexuality and his "prototypical" relationship to Walter Jekyll position him as an outsider who experiences the culture surrounding him only in a "cerebral" way, but is not an active participant in it (85).

If Squire Gensir's lack of sexuality encodes him as foreign to the Jamaican context in *Banana Bottom*, a brief lesbian encounter in Paule Marshall's novel *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) encodes queerness as betrayal. Marshall's novel reflects the Black Nationalist discourses of the 1960s that are specifically racialized, gendered, and sexualized in terms of Afrocentricity and compulsory heterosexuality. Her protagonist Merle's brief affair with her London patroness costs her her marriage to a Ugandan nationalist, who ultimately abandons Merle, returns to Africa, and takes their daughter with him. The narrative suggests that Merle's husband perceives the queer affair as a betrayal of womanhood and race that may ultimately contaminate their child.<sup>2</sup>

These narrative relegations of queerness to the subtext of Caribbean subjectivity have been complicated in more recent literary production. Various writers have begun the work of liberating the queer Caribbean subject from the subtext, offering more complex portrayals that challenge the dismissal of non-normative sexuality as an aberration and alien to the region. Authors like Michelle Cliff, Shani Mootoo, Dionne Brand, and Patricia Powell, among others, represent the complex issues surrounding Caribbean non-heteronormativity, while attempting to carve out legitimate spaces in a region that is publicly and vehemently hostile to the presence of non-normative sexualities in their midst.<sup>3</sup> Their writing problematizes foundational values and institutions that govern communities and nations. These institutions more often than not play integral roles in the sustained marginalization of heteronormative subjectivities. At the center of my discussion of these issues is Patricia Powell's most recent novel *The Pagoda*, whose

exploration of non-heteronormative subjectivity complicates essentialized notions of gender and sexuality, and their use in the organization of national subjectivity.

Powell's thematic consideration of non-heteronormative subjectivity has broadened through her first three novels. In *Me Dyin Trial*, the development of the protagonist Gwennie's subjectivity is mediated through issues of religion, sexuality, immigration, domestic violence, and gender inequality. The central storyline does not revolve around non-heteronormative thematics, but subplots are dedicated to the relationship between Gwennie and her gay colleague Percy Clock, and his influence on Gwennie's son Rudie's perception of his own homosexuality. Powell's second novel *A Small Gathering of Bones* makes male homosexual subjectivity the central thematic preoccupation in the novel. It is among the first to feature a queer protagonist and treat queerness as a part of the normative framework of day-to-day lived experience in Jamaican society. In *The Pagoda*, Powell's engagement with gender and sexuality through a Chinese woman disguised as a man in 1893 further illuminates the marginalization of homosexuals in the twentieth century in *A Small Gathering of Bones*. In *The Pagoda* there is an evasion of certainties where the relationship between gender, sexuality, and identity is concerned. Such evasion problematizes the use of race, gender, and ultimately sexuality to mediate belonging and consequently national identity in the Caribbean. In *The Pagoda*, the central character Lowe/Lau A-Yin is a cross-dressed Chinese immigrant who is triply displaced in the immediate post-emancipation Jamaican landscape as female, Chinese, and queer. He symbolically embodies an intersection of race, class, and sexual politics. His body becomes a volatile crossroads in which the gamut of identity politics is enacted literally and symbolically in many instances through sexuality. By setting the novel in the immediate post-emancipation context and placing a cross-dressed Chinese woman at its center, Powell complicates the mediation of nation, identity, and belonging by race, gender, and sexuality in Caribbean discourse.

In *The Pagoda*, negotiations of sexual and gender identity are placed in the forefront while conflicts of citizenship and nation building are in the background. The novel is set at the turn of the nineteenth century amidst post-emancipation labor and property frictions between the ruling white planter class and the black peasantry. An additional point of contention between these two groups is the introduction of East Indian and Chinese immigrants as indentured laborers.<sup>4</sup> Setting this narrative within a volatile historical context illustrates that negotiations of sexuality, gender, and race are not solely a contemporary phenomenon, but instead have been underrepresented within decolonization discourses. The novel also illustrates how such negotiations are traceable to and recognized as part of colonial power relations, which continue to inform projects of sovereignty and decolonization throughout the Caribbean's historical landscape. The novel's engagement with queer subjectivity is part of a larger political discourse in which the evasion of certainties with regard to essentialized categories of gender and sexuality functions to illuminate additional dimensions of disenfranchising power relations within decolonization.

The colonial institution organized itself around relations that regulated its subjects according to gender, race, and sexuality. Michel Foucault describes sexuality as “one of those [elements of power relations] endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin for the most varied strategies” (103). In its capacity as a multifunctional instrument in the organization of power, sexuality “is linked to the economy through numerous and subtle relays, the main one of which is the body - the body that produces and consumes” (106-7). Within the plantation economies of the New World, identities collapsed into bodies, which were racialized *and* sexualized in the service of economic productivity. Sexuality and gender occupy pivotal positions among the elements of power relations that sustain society, and are instrumental in the organization and perpetuation of a particular order. Power is understood as a multiplicity of relations in the formulation of law rather than simply a dominant/dominated dichotomy. As Foucault suggests power “is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (93). This discussion thus focuses on *The Pagoda*'s representation of how gender, sexuality, and race function in the organization of Jamaican society. In *The Pagoda*, Lowe's journey to self-discovery grounds discourses of belonging that are mediated by gender, sexuality, and race within a historical context. Through Lowe's traumatic memories of racial turmoil, sexual trauma, and gender-based conflicts, the novel is an analogue for Jamaica's travails through slavery into the volatile post-emancipation period of the novel's setting. It revisits the history of indentureship in order to explore experiences of violence, subjugation, and symbolic erasure that are shared not only among Africans and their descendants, but also by the Chinese and East Indians contracted for indentured labor. The narrative stakes a claim for a broader inclusive sense of racial, gendered, or sexualized notions of Caribbean subjectivity.

At the core, this narrative discourse of belonging is predominantly race-based, but it is mediated in complex ways through the blurring of distinctions of gender and sexuality. In the wake of emancipation in 1834, plantations looked to Asia as a source of replacement labor for the newly emancipated Negro slaves. Political turmoil and European colonization in parts of Asia created the circumstances under which thousands of Indian and Chinese men migrated to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. According to Walton Look Lai, of the 17,904 Chinese laborers who entered the British West Indies under the indenture experiment between 1853-1884, only about 6% (1152 laborers over 31 years) arrived in Jamaica (7-8). *The Pagoda* begins on April 1, 1893, at a time when the Chinese population in Jamaica is estimated at 481 (373 males and 108 females). The novel begins forty years after the protagonist Lau A-Yin arrives as a stowaway from China — one year prior to the date Patrick Lee notes as the arrival of the first Chinese in Jamaica in 1854 (76). Lowe is situated among the first to migrate to the region, and this places him there before the first women legally arrive in 1884 (Lee 81).<sup>5</sup>

As the novel illustrates, indentured laborers suffer horrendous middle passage experiences of their own on their journey to the New World, and their experiences once there are not what they expect. The novel portrays the experience of transatlantic travel as traumatizing for

the Chinese but their suffering does not secure a space of belonging in Jamaica for the Chinese laborers. According to Lowe, “he couldn’t complain ... The people hadn’t cut his throat yet ... his people, the few Chinese had been meeting hell, at the hands of the Negro people and the few Europeans that controlled the country, ever since they had arrived” (6). The Chinese immigrants live under threat and meet with violent hostility from all strata of Jamaican society. Lowe knows that “he was only there on sufferance” (13). Central to this hostility is Lowe’s observation that, “there were opportunities to be had [for the Chinese] but only at the expense of other people. They had been brought there only to supply cheap labor and keep down wages. They had been brought there only to keep the Negro population in check” (45). The reasons behind importing indentured labor from China ultimately set this ethnic community in opposition to the community of African descendants they are brought in to replace. The visible acquisition of wealth by the Chinese, through shops and other merchant ventures, positions them even more precariously between the subjugated negro masses and the ruling white minority who is losing financial grip and control of the country during the labor crisis that ensues after emancipation. After centuries of plantation interaction between white master and black slave, as Lowe indicates, Chinese immigrants enter this already volatile and racially charged space “on sufferance” (13).

The Chinese’s accumulation of wealth through small enterprise, despite their marginality, creates additional racial tension in Jamaica. Elizabeth’s husband’s response to Lowe’s dream of building a pagoda that would house a Chinese school and benevolent society illustrates that the economic progress of the Chinese is not well received and reflects the general anxiety in the Jamaican society regarding Chinese immigrants. He says, “At first is farming and such. Then next thing shop, and before you know, a little shop in every blasted corner you turn. Now is school and property. Soon you have my people working for you on the estates cleaning for you in the big house. Calling you massa and such ...” (73). Her husband marks the growth and economic progress of small ventures, such as farming, shop-keeping, and property acquisition, as prelude to the re-enslavement of Africans. This reflects widespread fear of the potential of the Chinese to also colonize and enslave and reveals an underlying motive for continuing to regard them with hostility and suspicion as outsiders.

*The Pagoda*’s situating of a Chinese woman at its thematic center inverts the typical narrative of the immediate post emancipation moment. The story does not unfold within a black/white racial binary but instead foregrounds a marginal community and places other clashes in the periphery as it explores themes of gender, sexuality, and belonging in the Jamaican post-emancipation context. Winifred Woodhull, in “Margin to Margin, China to Jamaica: Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Black Culture in Global Contexts,” situates her discussion of *The Pagoda* within the larger discourses of changes and shifts in African diasporic literature. *The Pagoda* is an example of African Diaspora narratives that shift their examination of center/periphery discourses to interactions among the “others” relegated to the margins (periphery to periphery, if you will). This shift allows us to consider the intricate entanglements within a broader section of

geopolitical discourse not accommodated in previous periphery to center engagements. In Woodhull's assessment, *The Pagoda's* engagement with a Chinese protagonist and her negotiations of life in a world that is hostile to her is indicative of a specifically Caribbean historical experience that cannot be understood by examining the traditional black/white racial models (126). Thus, through the struggles of marginal characters in the wider colonial narrative — a Chinese female protagonist in post emancipation Jamaica — *The Pagoda* provides readers with a closer look at the interactions of the black population with other cultures in a way that is not restricted to racial demarcations but also incorporates gender, ethnicity and sexuality. This broader engagement provides a spectrum of intricate entanglements that reveals the instability of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality as essentialized categories utilized in the determination of belonging.

Discourses of gender identification and non-normative sexuality are also entangled in the racial tension that is fueled by wealth and property accumulation, and serves to further complicate essentialized notions of belonging. As the narrative unfolds, Powell reveals that Lowe first assumes his masculine costume to escape China and the elderly husband to whom his beloved father trades him in repayment of a debt. As the plot develops through memories of the past juxtaposed with current events, the reader learns that Lowe's escape from China also involves contradictory perceptions of self that are fostered by his gendered status as female.

Decades prior to the beginning of the narrative he is Lau A-Yin, beloved daughter of a doting father who fills his head with fantasies of freedom and mobility that are embodied in his father's meticulous mappings of sea voyages that he never takes. As a girl, Lowe is not sent to school, but spends an inordinate amount of time as companion to his father, who teaches him how to write and inspires Lowe's desire for travel. After calligraphy lessons, "his father brought out the decaying sheets that were the maps, and Lowe ... trundled along the stubby route of his father's forefinger, listening to the faltering voice outline expeditions by sea" (25). They even attempted voyages, "the route too was always the same; the goal was America, not to work but to explore" (25). Their inability to ever make it beyond the coast of Mauritius foreshadows the impracticality of his father's fantasies of freedom and exploration for his daughter. Ironically, the nature of the book his father is constructing for twenty-three years illustrates the lack of substance and depth to his planning and fantasies: "it was to be a collection of nine short stories, all of which had already been titled, all the pages numbered, some with illustrations; only the stories were left to be written" (25). Having worked out the structure of the book, after twenty-three years he is still unable to devise its substance. This lack of substance mirrors his treatment of his daughter, in whom he inculcates dreams and fantasies of travel that are not possible for a Chinese female.

Predictably, "on none of their expeditions had they reached America;" but the seeds of freedom of movement and the dream of unrestricted travel take root in his impressionable daughter (26). The break in their relationship occurs when Lowe's body beings to change: "they had been bench and bottom, eye and socket, but that was when Lowe was still wide-eyed and

before his limbs suddenly shot up and his *body started turning against him*" (24).<sup>6</sup> Their inseparability is disrupted by puberty, which characterizes the maturing female body as adversarial to the father-daughter relationship. The separation for Lowe is so traumatic; he marks his maturing body with revulsion:

... one morning Lowe awoke to the riveting stench of puberty ... One day Lowe turned thirteen and realized that over the years he had acquired no playmates at all, his only companion had been his father, and now all of a sudden his body had changed and his father had disappeared neatly into himself and there was no one now, nothing at all but a head full of stories, his head full of dreams. (26-27)

Puberty is described in terms of an offensive smell that brings him a changing body, loneliness and isolation. Time with his father precludes him from making friends of his own age, and once the outside of his body begins to change into a more womanly form with "wisps of hair that lodged themselves underneath his arms and between his legs," his father's disposition towards him also changes, and he is left alone with nothing but his father's fantasies of trans-Atlantic travel (27). Rejection by his father in addition to his betrayal in selling Lowe into a marriage to repay a debt conflates femaleness with abjection. A demoralizing marriage imprisons "a girl with a bloated head full of dreams. A restless girl thinking of expeditions," and sends the girl cross-dressed as a boy on a boat bound for Jamaica (139). In Lowe's story to his grandson that is actually the story of his escape from China, he explains that the girl Lau A-yin "must leave. There is no future. And she wants to live" (187). Living, for Lowe means leaving China and femaleness behind.

Disguising the manifestations of his femaleness with bands around his breasts and boy's clothing, Lowe begins a dual exile from his homeland and his female body. Cross-dressed as a boy, he stows away on Cecil's ship, and is discovered by Cecil when he falls ill. Cecil uncovers Lowe's secret while nursing him back to health in his cabin. During the three month voyage across the Atlantic, Cecil rapes Lowe repeatedly, keeping him hidden in his cabin to protect him from the abuses of the crew, in addition to retaining exclusive possession of the only female on board. In Jamaica, Cecil ensures that Lowe continues to pass as a man because Chinese women are not yet allowed to migrate, and when Lowe becomes pregnant, Cecil arranges for the baby to be born secretly, sets Lowe up in a shop, and eventually procures the wealthy Sylvie as Lowe's wife and passes himself off as the child Elizabeth's father. Cecil essentially creates the man that, "A girl who used to be a wife" becomes (187). Perhaps the most lasting impression of Cecil's crafting of Lowe's life is his own contribution to Lowe's abject perception of his femaleness. In one of his many angst filled outbursts Lowe admits, "he can't bear to become the girl [his father] hate. The girl that disappoint him" (221). Lowe's alienation from a female sense of self begins with paternal rejection and betrayal into a forced marriage. Repeated rapes by Cecil and subsequent pregnancy further compounds Lowe's sexual trauma and this trauma's relationship to femininity. These factors consolidate Lowe's rejection of his female self, to the extent that in the narrative he is never represented by any other pronouns than masculine ones.<sup>7</sup>

Judith Butler's provocative and hallmark critique of essentializing identities according to categories like gender and sexuality is appropriately applied to *The Pagoda's* representation of gendered dissonances. For Butler, gender is not a stable or static category, but a performance that is constituted by numerous rehearsals and repetitions:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, intuited in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self ... (179)

In *The Pagoda*, Lowe's masculinity is described in terms of the "costumes" Cecil provides "for the drama Lowe lived out in that house all these years with Miss Sylvie" (17). His life as a man, father to Elizabeth, and husband of thirty years to Sylvie is described as a "fabulous masquerade," which over the years adds up to a generally convincing performance of masculinity (33). For Butler, the ability to perform gender through drag conveys an instability and dissonance that shows the imitative structure of gender. Lowe's ability to masquerade as male, husband, and father for over thirty years illustrates the imitative structure of gender and its instability in the categorical ordering of a society.

The narrative and Lowe's persona unravel through a series of recollections about Lowe's traumatic past immediately after Lowe loses the shop that has defined his position in his community as a Chinese man and a proprietor. The loss of the shop propels him into a journey that has preoccupied him nocturnally for two months prior to the night when the narrative begins. The novel opens with his awakening from "torrid dreams" and moving through the still dark house to Miss Sylvie's writing desk to "the unfinished letter to the daughter" (5). Over a month, Lowe's dreams make the need to tell his daughter "the secrets he could no longer hide inside" all the more urgent and this manifests itself in his desire to write her a letter explaining that, "all these years he had kept his life private, hidden," and that he is actually her mother (6). Subsequently, the loss of the shop destabilizes his decades long masquerade in such a way that Lowe has as infinite amount of time on his hands with nothing but memories to occupy him. For months prior to the morning the shop is destroyed, Lowe is plagued by phantoms from his past that besiege him in his dreams and through voices in his head. The act of composing this letter and exposing himself to his daughter is recuperative for Lowe; the process of writing forces him to come to terms with the events of his life that lead him to assume and maintain a forty-year gender and sexual masquerade, and the consequences that accrue to him, his daughter and her family. It is a testimony that unfolds in physically and emotionally transformative ways for Lowe throughout the course of the novel, as he is forced to confront past traumas and their evident consequences in his current life. In telling Elizabeth who he is, he is once again forced to confront Lau A-Yin.

Lowe's recovery of Lau A-Yin is symbolized and executed through the letter to Elizabeth that will "give testimony" to his life, and through the Pagoda. The agoda, taken from the title of his father's book is a recuperative space for the queer outsider, a distinct and physical manifestation of who he is amidst the masquerade that he is forced to assume to survive in a hostile foreign place. The Pagoda is to be a place where Chinese culture can be fostered, taught and therefore preserved in foreign space. It is to be "a school for Chinese children born on the island. A school and meetinghouse where they could hold weddings and celebrate festivals" (40). In its insularity, it is representative of his desire for a welcoming cultural space that can be achieved in a landscape where he and his fellow Chinese can be safe in the place that is hostile to them. Lowe's Pagoda stands in contrast to the empty shell of his father's book, also called "The Pagoda." According to Lowe's vision, the Pagoda will be a place to recover and preserve elements of his Chinese heritage (like his native Hakka language) that he loses over the years. It will be a place of preservation and dissemination for future generations of Chinese descendants, so they can know themselves more fully.

The shop and Cecil's death in the fire that consumes it frees Lowe from the life that Cecil creates for him, and leaves him open to explore and decide who he really is and his place in the foreign landscape that he refuses to leave. In response to Sylvie's desire to flee with Lowe when Omar threatens him with exposure, Lowe discerns that, "he didn't know what to tell her. He didn't want to go anywhere isolated. He wanted to have the Pagoda right here on the island for the Chinese whom he had grown close" (145). Even in his status as outsider, Lowe desires to remain in Jamaica, and through the Pagoda establish a tradition that will preserve his culture in a foreign land for his descendants and those of his fellow Chinese. It is a tradition that once established will ground the Chinese in Jamaican space, and make them a part of that space.

Lowe's goal in writing the letter reveals a dual purpose that bears deeply personal and ethnic motivation. First, he desires to reveal himself to Elizabeth as her mother and after decades actually become a mother in some meaningful way. Writing the letter leads him into a recovery process in which he finds fragmentary memories of the past that prompt him to masquerade as a man, and aspects of Chinese culture that he wants to integrate into his daughter's and his grandchildren's understanding of who they are as people of Chinese descent. The letter that is meant to help Elizabeth discover who he is leads to Lowe's recovery of his female self, Lau A-Yin, even as building the Pagoda consolidates fragments of Lowe's past recovered through the process of writing. The Pagoda is a tangible space within which these recovered fragments can be preserved and disseminated to future generations.

Lowe's masculine masquerade casts gender as a series of repeat performances rather than a stable identity, and thus, compromises the stability of essentialized sexualities. In the novel, the portrayal of sexuality is two-sided not in terms of homo/hetero dichotomy, but in its capacity to traumatize and perpetuate trauma, in addition to being recuperative and beneficial to Lowe's recovery of self. The novel complicates positive/negative, natural/unnatural, and normative/non-normative distinctions in sexual interaction by portraying a positive and a negative manifestation

of both heterosexual and homosexual intimacy in a way that complicates easy assignments of one sexuality as good and another as bad, as acceptable or unacceptable. By extension, it complicates the determination of belonging based on race, gender, or sexuality. Lowe as a cross-dressed woman, and consistently referred to in the text as masculine (he, him), experiences positive homosexual and heterosexual intimacy with Joyce and Omar respectively, and negative homosexual and heterosexual intimacy with Sylvie and Cecil respectively. The determining factor of positive or negative, natural or unnatural here is not the partner's gender or sexual preference (Lowe's androgyny implicitly complicates this), but rather the partner's approach to his/her desire for Lowe's body, and the partner's racial designation.

His sexual interactions with characters of European ancestry in the text are conflated in their tendency to consume Lowe and deny him personal agency in determining his own place in the Jamaican community, in a way that mirrors colonization's potential to perpetuate hegemonic superiority of one group over another, rendering the latter powerless in their interactions with the former. Cecil does not give Lowe the choice of being wife, mother, or even female when they arrive in Jamaica and Lowe is already pregnant with Elizabeth. Lowe asks: "Did you once ask me what I wanted when you bring me here? ... Did you ask me if I wanted shop life? ... Did you ask me if I wanted married life, wanted to have a daughter?" (97-98). To which Cecil retorts:

What you wanted, Lowe, to marry like a real woman and settle down. Is that it?  
... You the only Chinese woman on the island. Is that? What you think they  
would have done with you? ... you know what them do with Chinese women in  
British Guiana? In Cuba? In Trinidad? Bring them to whore house. Is that what  
you wanted? (99)

Within the existing order of Jamaican society, where only Chinese men are legally allowed to immigrate, and as the female Lau A-Yin, a lone Chinese woman, Lowe is subject to predictable harm and even more violence. Cecil's decision to continue the masculine masquerade that Lowe assumes to escape China is also the decision that determines the position Lowe will occupy in the post-emancipation society.

In contrast, his sexual interactions with Black Jamaicans are not an exercise in racial power dynamics. Instead, it is conveyed as a mutual exchange between individuals of equal status. This latter phrase is seemingly contradictory when considering Lowe's status as Chinese and therefore doubly othered within a cultural hegemony determined by British colonial rule. The conflict dissipates however when one considers that his encounters with both Joyce and Omar occur after he loses his shop; the field is leveled and he is embraced as equally "less" than whites because he possesses nothing of value. After Omar threatens him with exposure, Lowe finds solace among the men at Miss Cora's shop and marvels at how easily he is embraced. He wonders about their ease of interaction with him now, including him in their discussion of the political and social news of the country:

Here they were! As if it was essential that there be no barrier between him and them. No shop counters. For all of a sudden they were openly discussing their political plans in front of him, as if without the shop he had become one of them. (136)

Despite racial demarcations, the loss of his shop situates him among their ranks as equally disenfranchised in a country hostile to those marked as racially inferior others. The counter that divides the commercial space while he still manages the shop symbolizes a physical separation among them not determined entirely by race in this novel, but also by proprietorship and proximity to oppressive colonial power — signified in the novel by Cecil and Sylvie. Ann-Marie Lee Loy identifies the Chinese shop in West Indian fiction as a “repository of nation.” As such, “the burning of the Chinese shop in *The Pagoda* is not so much an act against Lowe the person as it is against his relationship with the representatives of White colonial power in the community” (3). That is, the destruction of his shop is not an attack against Lowe so much as against his associations with Cecil and Sylvie. This association pairs Lowe not just with proprietorship, but also with oppressive colonial power that is “identified as outside of the nation” (3). Setting fire to the shop identifies it as “enemy territory;” thus, without the shop and its attendant relationship to white colonial power, there is no counter, and no separation between Lowe and black Jamaicans. It is on the basis of this newfound social equality that sexual contact between Lowe and Joyce, or Lowe and Omar is a mutual exchange with empowering potential, rather than an unequal one in which one partner undermines the agency of the other. With Joyce, it is a discovery of the more nurturing and considerate aspect of intimacy, and with Omar it is the achievement of comfort with heterosexual intercourse between two abandoned individuals and an acceptance of himself as female.

The novel actively engages in the evasion of certainties where the relationship between gender and sexuality is concerned. This evasion complicates the use of race, gender, and ultimately sexuality to mediate identity and belonging and by extension complicates how these elements are used in the dissemination and maintenance of power. Butler identifies gender as a “strategy of survival” within compulsory systems in society, like heterosexuality: “gender is a performance with clearly putative consequences. Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (178). Doing gender right also involves doing sexuality right according to gender designations. Lau A-Yin’s cross-dressing and sexual transgression illustrates the imitative nature and, as Butler notes, contingency of gender. Lau A-Yin’s forty-year performance of masculinity and eventual recovery of a female self is illustrated through terms of imitation and consequently displaces or negates the notion of an original or essential gender. One could argue that Lowe’s return to Lau A-Yin and her designation as Lowe’s “true self” constitute a re-inscription of essentialized notions gender identity. Nonetheless, Lowe’s wearing of Miss Sylvie’s clothes, make-up, and jewelry at the end of the novel renders this a slightly more complex notion. Lowe

is depicted as eventually embracing femaleness, but it remains couched in terms of imitation and even masquerade.

At the end of the novel, Lowe is neither fully recovered, nor completely comfortable in his own skin, but he is finally able to complete his testimony to his daughter, signing it at the end with his birth name, Lau A-Yin. The Chinese name is the novel's last word and signifies two things: the recovery of a sense of femaleness and the recovery of his Chinese identity. He confesses to "being [himself] for the first time in [his] whole life," while staying indoors "with [his] hair grown way down to [his] waist ... with Miss Sylvie's dresses on [his back], with her colors on [his] nails, with her rouge on [his] cheeks, her jewelry on [his] fingers and throat" (240).<sup>8</sup> The imagery here suggests that Lowe has abandoned his masculine façade and is slowly, though not without strangeness, embracing Lau A-Yin. What encourages Lowe along positively in his recuperation of a female self is a reorientation to sexual desire, which is especially impacted by his intimate encounters with Joyce and Omar. According to Powell, sex in her novels:

has ... everything to do with characters' bottomless longings, their insatiable cravings and fears, their feelings of helplessness, and power and powerlessness, their desire spurred on by fantasies and dreams, their struggles with race and racism and the intersections of class and hybridity, of colorism and colonialism. (192)

Sex functions as an impulse that has at its core varying negotiations of conflict and power, which have root in colonial conflicts. Where sexual encounters with Cecil and Sylvie are conflated in their capacity to transform Lowe and negate his agency, his encounters with Omar and Joyce have the opposite effect.

Queerness in the novel as physically embodied by Lowe and his struggle to unravel himself depicts a similar sense of unraveling that needs to occur within the decolonization process. The traumas relived in Lowe's nightmares are only overcome through confronting them in the acts of letter writing and Pagoda building. As *The Pagoda* suggests, the national process of enacting sovereignty should also entail this retrospective recovery and examination of negations and traumas throughout history. Within this context, these traumas involve not just racially experienced but also sexual and gendered traumas. How does the self recover from a series of negations that are not restricted to race, but also include gender and sexuality? How does one even recover the negations of self that have occurred? Lowe illustrates how unreliable reliance on gendered and sexuality-based essentialisms are in the construction of identity. *The Pagoda* suggests long deferred acts of remembering are a recuperative force. But this requires full consciousness of the traumas suffered as in the case of Lowe's masculine façade. *The Pagoda* complicates belonging based on race, gender, sexuality, or even citizenship, and offers instead the construction site of a Pagoda and the transformation of Lowe; both remain unfinished, yet under construction and in process at the end of the novel.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The inaugural collection *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* brings Anglophone and Hispanophone Caribbean works together and illustrates the ways writing, centering on non-heteronormative subjectivity is also intricately tied to Caribbean discourses of decolonization. The collection's offerings situate same-sex desire amidst political events and struggles that include the Cuban Revolution, and Jamaica's 1970s civil disturbances. The Hispanophone Caribbean for example, is comparatively more engaged in articulating non-heteronormative sexuality within central thematic—as may be seen in the works of Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba), José Alcántara Almánzar (Dominican Republic), Aldo Alvarez (Puerto Rico), and Marilyn Bobes (Cuba) among others.

<sup>2</sup>See Timothy Chin's "'Bullers' and 'Battymen': Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature" for a more in-depth discussion of the relationship between queerness and identity in selected works by McKay and Marshall. Chin also provides a discussion of the ways authors like Michelle Cliff and H. Nigel Thomas problematizes normative representations of heterosexuality and non-normative representations of queer sexuality.

<sup>3</sup>Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, H. Nigel Thomas's *Spirits in the Dark*, and Lawrence Scott's *Aelred's Sin* are among the novels that prominently portray queer characters.

<sup>4</sup>For additional information on Chinese emigration to the British West Indies, see Walton Look Lai's *Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean*, and Andrew Wilson's *The Chinese in the Caribbean*.

<sup>5</sup>The narrative also reveals that Lowe is living in Jamaica at the time when "Chinese women were forbidden by law to emigrate" (42).

<sup>6</sup>My emphasis.

<sup>7</sup>This dissonance is something I grapple with as I attempt to parse through the complexity of gender and sexual relations in this novel. As you may have also dissonantly observed, I have elected to model Powell's choice in using masculine pronouns to describe Lowe, despite what might be read as a re-inscription of an essentialized female identity by the end of the novel. The dissonance elicited by this kind of pronoun usage reflects the complexity and instability of essentialized gender and sexuality designations, and their usage in the organization of society.

<sup>8</sup>The changes to the original text here are not from feminine to masculine, but rather from first person to third person pronouns.

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