



“When the Skin Comes Off, Their True Selves Emerge”

Folkloric Irrealism and Gender Politics in Twenty-First Century Caribbean Short Fiction

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Abstract

*This article considers how a contemporary wave of Caribbean short story writers re-work the language of folkloric irrealism as a tool of critique against the structural inequalities ingrained in the patriarchal capitalist world-system. Building on the Warwick Research Collective’s (2015: 72) examination of how irrealist aesthetics correspond to the “violent reorganization of social relations engendered by cyclical crisis,” it considers how transplanted folk figures attend to the distinctly gendered geographies of unevenness produced by the expansion of capitalist modernization. This article first unpacks the significance of the short story as a distinct vector for folkloric re-inscription, tracing the form’s dialogic interconnection with folk orality and its unique responsiveness to registering the processes of uneven development in Caribbean societies. Secondly, it offers close readings of selected short stories from collections including Nalo Hopkinson’s *Skin Folk* (2018), Breanne Mc Ivor’s *Where There Are Monsters* (2019) and Leone Ross’s *Come Let Us Sing Anyway* (2017). Tracking a resistant aesthetic of folkloric corporeality, it considers how these writers re-animate oral poetics to critique the interrelated problems of global racial capitalism and what Silvia Federici describes as capitalism’s new war waged against women’s bodies in the current phase of accumulation (Federici 2018).*

Keywords: Folklore, Short Fiction, Feminism, Gender, World-Systems Theory, World-Literature



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In Leone Ross's (2017: 129) short story, "The Müllerian Eminence," a precariously employed janitor named Charu Deol finds a disembodied hymen "wedged between a wall and a filing cabinet in the small law office where he cleaned on Thursday nights." Illuminated by the light of a "stained-glass window," the hymen

didn't look anything like the small and fleshy curtain he might have imagined, not that he had ever thought about such a thing. At first, it didn't occur to Charu Deol that he'd found a sample of that much-prized remnant of gestational development, the existence—or lack thereof—which had caused so much pain and misery for millennia. He hardly knew what a hymen was, having only ever laid down with one woman in his life: the supple fifty-something maid who worked for his mother. (2017: 130)

After this initial moment of uncanny disruption, the short story depicts the unruly multiplication of this fetishized body fragment in the interstices of unevenly developed urban space; while some hymens are "like bright cherry-red fingernails," others resemble "a golden cobweb," "glimmering wrought iron," "a cat's paw," or a "silver star" (Ross 2017: 134–8). As an involuntary "witness" to this fantastical invasion, Deol vicariously experiences the "knowledge contained within each hymen," which acts as an irrealist cipher for repressed memories of sexual abuse and structural harm:

First, he realised it was a hymen. Next, that the hymen had lived inside a twenty-seven-year-old woman, for twenty-seven years. When she was twenty-four, her boyfriend returned home, bad tempered from a quarrel with his boss. When she asked him what was wrong one too many times, the boyfriend...grabbed her arm and squeezed it as tight as he could, causing a sharp pain in her shoulder and her heart. When she said "you're hurting me"...he squeezed all the tighter and looked happy doing it, and the little flesh crescent inside her slid through her labia and down the leg of her jeans and onto their kitchen floor. The boyfriend swept it up the next day. The bin bag burst in the apartment rubbish dispenser; the hymen got stuck to the edge of someone's yellow skirt, and helter-skelter, this little pink crescent was pulled along the cold and windy city streets (Ross 2017: 131).

Set against a backdrop of global financial crisis (2008), the eruption of hymens in public space gives figurative expression to the marked escalation of gendered violence unleashed by neoliberal capitalism.¹ Such shapeshifting aesthetics provide the metaphoric frame for Ross's (2017) border-crossing short story collection, *Come Let us Sing Anyway*, which presents irrealist corporeality

¹ According to David Harvey (2007: 22), neoliberalism "is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade." However, as Wendy Brown (2015: 176) notes: "Neoliberalism...is best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as homo oeconomicus. Neoliberalism thus does not merely privatize...[r]ather, it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves." For specific context surrounding the neoliberalization of the Caribbean, see for instance, Winston H Griffith's article "Neoliberal Economics and Caribbean Economies" in *Journal of Economic Issues* (2010), and Jeb Sprague's *Globalizing the Caribbean: Political Economy, Social Change, and the Transnational Capitalist Class* (2020).

grounded in Caribbean folklore, as a site where the multiple violences of the patriarchal capitalist world-system are registered and subversively re-inscribed.

As the Warwick Research Collective (2015: 66) argue, irrealist writing is a pervasive feature of world-literature produced at “particular moments of systemic crisis, above all as experienced in the semi-peripheries of the world-system.” Building on Michael Löwy’s (Löwy 2007: 196) suggestion that irrealist works can offer an “implicit negative critique” of capitalist modernity, the WreC (2015: 70) argue that “the in-mixing of the imaginary and the factual” that characterizes irrealist writing is “arguably more sensitive” to registering circumstances of combined and uneven development, and the “seemingly incongruous conjunction of ‘abstract’ and ‘scarring’ modes of capitalisation.” While the WreC (2015: 72) underline how irrealist aesthetics correspond broadly to the “violent reorganisation of social relations engendered by cyclical crisis,” there is less consideration of how critical irrealism attends to the distinctly gendered geographies of social unevenness produced by the expansion of capitalist modernization. Yet, as feminist scholars such as Maria Mies (1998: 75) highlight, the rise of capitalism as a world-system was based not only on “large scale conquest and colonial plunder,” but also on the subjugation of female bodies and the appropriation of their labor. For Mies (1998: 170–171), “violence against women and extracting women’s labor through coercive labor relations” are “necessary for the capitalist accumulation process and not peripheral to it.” Emphasizing the intersection between colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal violence, Mies (1998: 2) argues that “the subordination and exploitation of women, nature and colonies are the pre-condition for the continuation of this accumulation model.” Building on Mies’s foundational critique of the organic relationship between patriarchy and capital accumulation, Silvia Federici (2004: 181) has similarly underscored how the expansion of the capitalist world-system transformed the female body into a site of “contestation,” enforcing the gendered division of labor whereby “the uterus [was placed] at the service of population increase and the production and accumulation of labor-power.”

Drawing on the WreC’s conceptualization of critical irrealism, this article considers how a recent wave of Caribbean short story writers re-work the language of folklore as a particular tool of critique against intersecting forms of colonial, patriarchal, and accumulation-driven violence. Taking Ross as a starting point, it investigates the revitalization of the folkloric frame narrative in border-crossing short stories from the Caribbean and its diaspora, which place at their thematic center transplanted feminized shapeshifter figures. This article first unpacks the significance of the short story as a particular vector for folkloric inscription within Caribbean cultural production, tracing the form’s dialogic interconnection with folk orality and its unique responsiveness to registering the processes of uneven development in Caribbean societies. Secondly, it offers close readings of selected short stories from collections including Nalo Hopkinson’s *Skin Folk* (2018), Breanne Mc Ivor’s *Where There Are Monsters* (2019) and Leone Ross’s *Come Let Us Sing Anyway* (2017). For each of these writers, the fabulist short form offers a forum for critiquing the interrelated problems of global racial capitalism and what Silvia Federici (2018) describes as

capitalism's war against women's bodies in the current phase of accumulation.² Tracking a resistant aesthetic of folkloric corporeality, this article works to demonstrate how transplanted folk figures critique the historical transformation of the female body into a site of contestation, while resisting the new processes of enclosure engendered by neoliberal capitalism.

Critical Irrealism, Gender Politics, and the Caribbean Short Story

In *The Postcolonial Short Story*, Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell (2013) emphasize the dialogic connection between folk orality and literary form in postcolonial short fiction:

In the postcolonial short story, orality could be seen as evidence of cultural survival, acting as one of the contrary means by which the onslaught of colonization and the eradication of indigenous cultures are challenged.... The short story thrives in transitional societies, whose foundations are not yet established, so that the voices of submerged populations have an opportunity in which to be heard. (P. 4–6)

Echoing Frank O'Connor's (1963: 28) foundational theorization of the short story as a genre defined by its engagement with the voices of so-called "submerged populations" who are pushed to the peripheries of modernizing societies, Awadalla and March-Russell (2013: 4) suggest that "orality can be regarded as a trope to which the short story is drawn." While, in postcolonial contexts, the short form offers a prolific vector for expressing the dislocation caused by forced assimilation under colonial modernization, many short stories foreground the importance of folk orality as a signifier of resistant cultural identity. The interplay between orality and literary form has been central to criticism surrounding the Caribbean short story, with many critics underlining the politicized presence of orality as an instrument of postcolonial critique. In his work on the West Indian short story, Kenneth Ramchand (1997: 21) emphasizes the centrality of the short form to the Caribbean literary tradition, boldly stating that "there are no West Indian novelists, only short story writers in disguise; no West Indian novels, only fabrications taking their shape and structure from the transfigured short stories they contain." For Ramchand (1997: 24), the short story form is "the most distinctive literary product of the meeting of oral tradition and writing," acting as a generic bridge between the oral tradition and the appearance of the West Indian Novel. Ramchand (1997: 30) highlights how the episodic short form thus presents a distinct "instrument of social and cultural analysis" corresponding to the complexity of Caribbean socio-political contexts. In a study of the Indo-Caribbean short story, Frank Birbalsingh (2004: 125) also considers the influence of oral practices in shaping the narrative structures of the Caribbean short form, arguing that the genre is a "direct descendant of a Caribbean oral tradition of folktales," characterized by "discursive, digressive, episodic and anecdotal literary patterns."

² First introduced by Cedric Robinson (1983), the term "racial capitalism" denotes the mutually constitutive relationship between capital accumulation and racialised exploitation. See Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983).

Many critics argue that the tendency towards literary experimentation in the Caribbean short story stems in part from this dialogic connection with folk orality, evident in the recurrence of transplanted folkloric figures and intertexts. As Stewart Brown and John Wickham (2001: xvii) observe, “many, probably most, West Indian short story writers have been conscious of, and to some extent influenced by, oral forms and the stories spun around figures like Anancy, the West Indian trickster, or Amerindian spirits like Ol’ Higue.” Although trickster-like shapeshifting infuses the Caribbean literary imagination more broadly, the short story offered a prolific forum for conveying the language of folklore, with many Caribbean short story writers revitalizing the oral form as a particular mode of cultural resistance during periods of socio-political transformation. This can be seen, for instance, in the folkloric short fiction which emerged during the period of decolonization that swept the region in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Andrew Salkey’s (1973) exemplary collection, *Anancy’s Score*.³ In this context, the short form offered a distinct mode for expressing the renaissance of anti-colonial folk literature which evolved, in the words of Sylvia Wynter (1971: 100), as “the cultural guerrilla resistance” against the market economy.

The dialogic encounter between folk orality and literary form energizes the short stories of many Caribbean women short story writers, who deploy folkloric intertexts as a mode of resistance against intersecting patriarchal and colonial structures. As Simpson (2004: 1–30) notes in her discussion of the Caribbean female writing tradition of the 1980s and 1990s, many of the short stories published since the 1970s “embraced oral sources as their narrative base,” such as Olive Senior’s *Summer Lightning and Other Stories* (1987), Hazel Campbell’s *Singerman* (1992), Velma Pollard’s *Considering Woman* (1989), and Alicia McKenzie’s *Satellite City and Other Stories* (1992). Revitalizing oral poetics in order to critique prescribed gender roles, these writers re-configure what Simon Gikandi (1992: 200) describes as the “language of the folk” in order to create a “third term that challenges and deconstructs the claims of both colonialism and male-centered nationalism.” This can be seen in the network of soucouyant tales which invoke the skin-shedding vampiric folk figure evolved from African and Caribbean oral traditions, also called the “Ol’ Higue.” The transplanted soucouyant re-appears in a range of short fiction, forming the metaphoric frame of collections such as Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River* (1978), which re-envision the soucouyant as a vehicle for decolonial and feminist resistance. In *The Things That Fly in the Night*, Giselle Liza Anatol (2015: 35) discusses “the figure of the soucouyant—the frightening old hag, skin-shedder, bloodsucker, fly-by-night—[who has] remained persistent in the cultural imagination.” According to Anatol (2015: 1–2), the “reappropriated” soucouyant tale brings into focus the mutually reinforcing systems of patriarchal and colonial oppression, unveiling simultaneously the structural constraints to female

³ Salkey’s *Anancy’s Score* (1973) reanimates the Anancy trickster figure from Afro-Caribbean folklore in order to critique the socio-political fabric of post-independence West Indian societies. As Simpson (2004:18–19) writes in “Patterns and Periods: Oral Aesthetics and a Century of Jamaican Short Story Writing”: “Combining the satirical purpose of Anancy stories in Old World Africa and the resistance motive of Anancy and similar tales in New World Plantation societies, Salkey not only produced a distinctive body of stories but also restored the social relevance of Afro-Jamaican mythology.”

empowerment, while shifting power dynamics in order to offer “explicit depictions of women’s bodily sovereignty.” Anatol’s statements thus underscore how the process of re-working folkloric intertexts offers a distinctly gendered tool of socio-political resistance against intersecting forms of oppression undergirding capitalist modernity.

Building upon the above theorization which foregrounds the historical importance of orality to short fictional narratives, this article now examines a contemporary wave of writing which revitalizes the folkloric imaginary in response to interlocking forms of gendered and racialized violence perpetrated against women by the patriarchal capitalist world-system. In doing so, it considers how such collections call attention to what Marxian feminists, such as Mies, describe as the co-constitutive relationship between capital accumulation, colonialism, and patriarchy. By tracking how transplanted folk figures offer a metamorphic reconceptualization of what Federici (2019) describes as the enclosed “periphery of the skin,” the following close readings also suggest that folkloric corporeality presents a distinct locus of emancipatory struggle against the intersecting geographies of social unevenness produced by the rise of capitalism as a world-system.

The Speculative Soucouyant in Nalo Hopkinson’s *Skin Folk*

In the epigraph to her short story “Riding the Red,” Nalo Hopkinson (2018), describes the de-territorializing imperative behind her border-crossing short story cycle, *Skin Folk*:

Throughout the Caribbean, under different names, you’ll find stories about people who aren’t what they seem. Skin gives these skin folk their human shape. When the skin comes off, their true selves emerge. They may be owls. They may be vampiric balls of fire. And always, whatever the burden their skins bear, once they remove them—once they get under their own skins—they can fly. It seemed an apt metaphor to use for these stories collectively. (P. 1)

Emphasizing the dialogic connection between folk orality and literary form, Nalo Hopkinson firmly situates her work within a lineage of short fiction which revitalizes oral poetics as a mode of socio-political critique. For Hopkinson, the folkloric frame narrative offers a multi-focal forum for critiquing both the longue durée of racial capitalism and the colonization of the gendered body under neoliberalism. The metamorphic body—and a motif of de-colonial skin-shedding—forms the thematic link underlying the collection. Drawing on Afro-Caribbean mythology, European folklore and the tropes of speculative fiction, the stories collected in *Skin Folk* reconfigure oral intertexts, such as the vampiric soucouyant in “Greedy Choke Puppy,” a cockatrice in “Slow Cold Chick,” and the water-mumma depicted in “Money Tree.” In several stories, the demonized soucouyant folk figure is transplanted to a speculative dystopian future, where extrapolated forms of bodily commodification appear in skin-shedding sex suits (“Ganger Ball Lightning”) and in the futuristic body swapping that appears in “A Habit of Waste.” For Hopkinson, folkloric body territory becomes the material site at which overlapping forms of neo-colonial and patriarchal violence converge.

In “A Habit of Waste,” Nalo Hopkinson (2018) re-imagines the gothic trope of body-switching, describing a speculative future in which the narrator exchanges her body for an *upgraded* model featured in the “Mediperfection” catalogue. The story takes its name from Slade Hopkinson’s poem “The Madwoman of Papine,” which is also quoted in the short story’s epigraph:

These are the latitudes of ex-colonised,
Of degradation still unmollified,
Imported managers, styles in arts,
Second-hand subsistence of the spirit,
The habit of waste,
mayhem committed on the personality,
And everywhere the wrecked or scuttled mind.
Scholars, more brilliant than I could hope to be,
Advised that if I valued poetry,
I should eschew all sociology.

(Slade Hopkinson, “The Madwoman of Papine: Two Cartoons with Captions”)

In the remainder of this stanza, Slade Hopkinson (1986: 268) registers the contradictory and uneven processes of capitalist development through the figure of a “pauper lunatic,” who models “one mildewed dress from year to year.” Described as an “invisible old woman” who occupies a “triangle of grass” (S. Hopkinson 1986: 268) at a crossroads, the madwoman emerges as an interstitial figure condemned to the peripheries of an unevenly developed modern world-system. As Josephs (2014: 28) notes, the madwoman is at once part of the “scenery” and a “social symbol” that orients those who go by. The speaker-poet’s interest in the madwoman “inserts her into a national narrative that attempts to make sense of the social divides in Jamaica created by colonialism and class, divides that her state consistently marks the speaker as being on the “right” side of” (Josephs 2014: 25). According to Josephs (2014: 26), the “madwoman’s material and symbolic apposition to the promise of the University of the West Indies in Mona only emphasizes the dashed social expectations of political independence for Jamaica.” At the heart of Slade Hopkinson’s poem is the inhibited corporeality of the madwoman at the crossroads. We can see in her “introverted stance,” “dangling arms,” “chin on breast,” and “forehead parallel to the eroded, indifferent earth,” a paradigmatic “figure of post-colonial decline” (Josephs 2014: 26). In the poem, the body becomes a material locus for social processes, the poetic emphasis on estranged embodiment communicating a broader systemic crisis of uneven development and socio-economic division: “one loaf now costs what two loaves used to” (S. Hopkinson 1986: 268).

Evoking a historical lineage of colonial oppression and “degradation still unmollified,” the poetic intertext of “A Habit of Waste” contextualizes Nalo Hopkinson’s speculative critique of the neo-colonial exploitation of the racialized and gendered body. The short story’s intertextual allusion thus foregrounds how the uneven “matrix of power” undergirding the colonial past

continues to pervade the “postcolonial” present.⁴ In “A Habit of Waste,” (N. Hopkinson 2018) the estranged body becomes a locus for critiquing the ongoing politics of exclusion in the neoliberal world-system. At the beginning of the story, Hopkinson (2018) similarly describes the body at a crossroads, a moment of defamiliarization in which the narrator Cynthia encounters her “cast-off” body:

I was nodding off on the streetcar home from work when I saw the woman getting on. She was wearing the body I used to have! The shock woke me right up: it was my original, the body I had replaced two years before, same full, tarty-looking lips; same fat thighs, rubbing together with every step; same outside ass; same narrow torso that seemed grafted onto a lower body a good three sizes bigger, as though God had glued leftover parts together. (P. 145)

Here, the thematic device of folkloric skin-shedding is re-imagined as an uncanny return of the abject body. Cynthia’s encounter with her “cast-off” body captures both the violence of capitalist abstraction and the production of “surplus” bodies under neoliberal capitalism. In particular, Hopkinson (2018) underscores the financialization of the body, describing how the dystopian company “Medi-perfection” recycles human bodies as a mode of capital accumulation. Speculative skin-shedding also becomes a marker of socio-economic division, expressed in Cynthia’s laments that “body-switching is really a rich person’s thing” and that “she couldn’t afford to keep doing it every few years, like some kind of Vid queen” (N. Hopkinson 2018: 149). While the list of options available in the “Medi-Perfection catalogue” (from “arrow-slim Cindies” to “Dianas with lithe muscles and small firm breasts”) articulates the standardizing effects of capitalist abstraction, Hopkinson emphasizes the way racial capitalism reproduces the violent and uneven differentiation of bodies:

On my pay, I’d had to save for five years before I could afford the switch. When I ordered the catalogue from MediPerfection, I poured over it for a month drooling at the different options: arrow-slim “Cindies” had long, long legs (“*supermodel quality*”). “Indiras” came with creamy brown skin, falls of straight, dark hair, and curvaceous bodies (“*exotic grace*”). I finally chose one of the “Dianas”, with their lithe muscles and small, firm breasts (“*boyish beauty*”). They downloaded me into her as soon as I could get the time off work. I was back on the job in four days, although my fine muscle control was still a little shaky. (P. 145–6)

In the above passage, Hopkinson underlines how Medi-Perfection’s body-swapping business model generates profit through the strategic perpetuation of racist and sexist ideologies. By enumerating the differential value ascribed to commodified bodies in the marketplace of the future, the short story brings into focus the ongoing social production of ‘alterity’ that is historically enmeshed in colonial legacies. As Besette (2013: 168) notes: “Hopkinson is very aware of the role the physical body plays in the history of colonialism and the oppression still physically being

⁴ This term was first used by *Anibal Quijano* (1992) to denote the intersecting modalities of domination undergirding the modern/colonial world-system. See Quijano, A. (2007). “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality.” *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3): 168–178.

carried around by its victims.” Cynthia’s enumeration of the body and its “cast-off” parts shows how the commodification of the racialized and gendered body is ingrained in the neoliberal accumulation model.

As narrative focalizer, Cynthia also foregrounds a broader structural crisis of socio-economic inequality and social disintegration under financialized neoliberalism. As suggested by the title of the story, the trope of the “cast-off” body facilitates Nalo Hopkinson’s wider critique of the production of a “surplus” population, or what Zygmunt Bauman (2003) terms “wasted humans.” For Bauman (2003: 5), the “production” of “wasted humans,” meaning lives deemed “redundant,” is “an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity.” Through Cynthia’s employment at a food bank, the story evokes a wider backdrop of severe austerity measures, welfare erosion, and labor precaritization, signaling how neoliberal hegemony necessarily produces humans as “waste” (Bauman 2003). The figure of Old Man Morris, a Trinidadian man who visits the foodbanks where Cynthia works, shows how racialized and classed bodies are deemed “surplus” in neoliberal capitalist societies. Nalo Hopkinson (2018: 150) describes how Old Morris belongs to an economically and racially segregated community, underlining the erosion of material infrastructure in descriptions of “tenement row houses,” “lumped along one side of the short street,” “rotting piles of garbage in front of the many houses,” which smells like “clotted carrion.” Having been “[a]id off” from his job at “the car plant” during the “last depression,” Old Man Morris explicitly diagnoses the ongoing crisis of social reproduction inherently linked to the cyclical crises of capitalism, which threatens the conditions of life:

After that, I couldn’t find no work again; I was already past fifty years old, nobody would hire me.... When I got the letter from the government, telling me that them cuttin’ off Rita pension, I didn’t know what to do. My one little pension wasn’t goin’ to support me (N. Hopkinson 2018: 156).

Through the figure of Old Man Morris, Hopkinson underlines how this macro-economic climate of financial crisis—and the subsequent privatization of public pensions—becomes embodied through the lived experience of systemic food insecurity. As in Slade Hopkinson’s poem, “The Madwoman of Papine,” the body becomes a material locus for the contradictions internal to the processes of capitalist development, encapsulated by the poetic lament that “one loaf now costs what two loaves used to”. In “A Habit of Waste,” the trope of the “cast-off” body calls attention to the embodied contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, registering intersecting forms of accumulation by dispossession compounded by the crisis of social reproduction. At the same time, the speculative soucouyant motif of skin-shedding articulates the *longue durée* of racialized capitalism’s production of so-called “surplus” populations.

In the short story “Precious,” Nalo Hopkinson (2018) also revitalizes the folkloric body in order to critique intersecting forms of structural violence. The story offers a re-inscription of the myth of Midas, examining the links between gendered corporeality, patriarchal extractivism and

capital accumulation.⁵ A tragedy of avarice, the myth of Midas describes a king who—seduced by golden dreams—is *blessed* with the ability to turn objects into gold. Unable to touch food without transmuting it, Midas begins to starve to death. The “golden touch” has become a symbol for the dangers of capitalist greed, an allegory of acquisition which satirizes the destructive desire for limitless accumulation and communicates the “need to circulate wealth rather than hoard it” (Darcy 2021: 66). For Hopkinson (2018: 194), the reconfigured myth offers an allegorical critique of accumulation-driven violence against women. A “walking treasure,” the narrative focalizer Isobel is “[blessed] in return for a kind word,” with the ability to produce jewels and gold simply by using her vocal cords:

I stopped singing in the shower. I kept having to remove flakes of gold and rotted lilies from the clogged drain. On the phone I would say that I was calling for my poor darling cousin, the one struck dumb by a stroke at an early age. As I spoke, I would hold a cup to my chin to catch the pennies that rolled off my tongue. I would give my own address. If the plumber thought it odd that anyone could manage to spill her jewelry box into the bathtub, and more than once, he was too embarrassed to try to speak to the mute lady. I’m not sure what he thought about the lilies. When he was done, I would scribble my thanks on a piece of paper and tip him with a gold nugget (N. Hopkinson 2018: 193).

From the outset, the story describes the body as an over-exhausted site of resource extraction, while underlining the interrelated enclosure of the female body under capitalist patriarchy. Conditioned to a life of “obedience,” Precious is first enslaved in her family home, where she is forced to live in a regime of forced labor as a producer of jewels. In the face of her father’s coercion, Precious occasionally voices frustration about the commodification of her body, remarking that she would rather “taste the muscled length and cool scales of a snake shape themselves in [her] mouth,” than look into the “greedy gaze of [her] banker as [she] brings him another shoebox crammed with jeweled phrases, silver sentences, and the rare pearl of laughter” (N. Hopkinson 2018: 195). An occupied territory to be plundered—from which wealth is extracted with direct violence and insidious coercion—Isobel’s mythological body analogously mediates what Mies (1998) describes as the intersecting subjugation of women, nature, and colonies as a “precondition” of capital accumulation. The folkloric depiction of the female body as a terrain of raw material extraction (such as gold and minerals) foregrounds simultaneously the colonial plunder undergirding the rise of capitalism as a world-system and women’s subordination under the patriarchal mode of production.

Throughout the short story, Hopkinson (2018) recurrently describes how the gendered body in pain corresponds to the mythical production of extracted “gold nugget[s]” and commodities:

The pain in my elbow made me whimper. Quartz crystals formed on my tongue with each sound, soft as pudding in the first instance, but gems always hardened

⁵ For further discussion of the links surrounding patriarchal capitalism and extractivism see, for instance M. L. N. Trujillo (2021), “Notes for a Critical and Ecological View of Patriarchal Capitalism in the Web of Life.” *Capital & Class*, 45(1): 21–32.

before I could spit them out. The facets abraded by gums as they slipped past my teeth. By the time the ambulance arrived, I had collected hundreds of agonized whimpers into a bowl I fetched from the kitchen. During the jolting ride to the hospital, I nearly bit through my lip with the effort of making no sound. The few grunts that escaped me rolled onto the pillow as silver coins. “Ma’am”, said a paramedic, “you’ve dropped your change. I’ll just put it into your purse for you, okay?” (P. 194)

The extremity of violence perpetrated against Precious’s body foregrounds what Mies (1998: 145) discusses as the organic intersection between primitive accumulation and the “direct violence” by which “women are exploited and superexploited.” As Mies (1998: 170) suggests in *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, “violence against women [is] an intrinsic element of the ‘ongoing primitive accumulation of capital,’” constituting “the fastest and most ‘productive’ method if a man wants to join the brotherhood of the ‘free’ subjects of owners of private property.” In “Precious,” the reconfigured myth of Midas attends to the mechanisms of exploitation and extraction underlying the structural “war” against women engendered by the rise of capitalism. In particular, Hopkinson (2018) mediates an accelerating crisis of gendered violence under financialized neoliberalism through Precious’s relationship with the mercantile figure of Jude. Although at first his desire for accumulation is satiated by the wealth produced from the “cries and groans of lovemaking,” eventually he begins to accrue wealth from the sounds of the body in pain to alleviate his escalating financial debt:

He often tried to scare me, hiding in the closet so I shrieked when he leapt out, grains of white gold spilling from my mouth. One night he put a dead rat in the kitchen sink. I found it in the morning, and platinum rods clattered to the ground as I screamed. I begged him to be kind, be pleasant, but he only growled that we needed more money, that our investments weren’t doing well. I could hear him on the phone late at night, pleading for more time to pay his debts. He became sullen, and often came home with the smell of liquor on his breath. I grew nervous and quiet. Once he chided me for keeping too silent, not holding up my part of the marriage. I began to sob, withered tulips plummeting down. “Bitch!” he shouted. “Quit with the damned flowers. More gold!” The backhand across my mouth drew blood, but along with two cracked teeth, I spat out sapphires. That pacified him for a short time. (N. Hopkinson 2018: 195–196)

Here, the vicious cycles of abuse and accumulation present capitalism’s inherent violence against women as a form of control over bodies and territories. The routine violence enacted on Precious’s mythological body attests to what Rita Laura Segato (2018) refers to as the “masculine mandate” and intersecting “pedagogy of cruelty” underlying the new war on women:

The pedagogy of masculinity and the masculine mandate proper to virile subjectivation exacerbate strategies of desensitization and lead to an overt pedagogy of cruelty, a practice of expropriating jouissance made to serve appropriative greed. The repetition of violence and cruelty produces an effect of normalization and thus leads to the low levels of empathy that are indispensable for predatory enterprises.... Habitual cruelty is directly proportional to the isolation of citizens that results from their desensitization to the suffering of others and to narcissistic and consumerist forms of enjoyment. (P. 202)

Echoing Segato (2018: 202), “Precious” highlights the logic of commodification that is embedded within the “pedagogy of cruelty,” a term which “name[s] all the acts and practices that teach, accustom, and program subjects to turn forms of life into things.” Alongside its critique of the distinctly gendered devaluation of life, the story’s conclusion stages in fabulistic terms corporeal resistance against the “habitual cruelty” enacted on Precious’s objectified and over-exploited body. No longer able to hold back the “years of resentment,” she affirms that she is “no longer a treasure trove,” reclaiming her name and thereby shedding her commodity-status as “Precious” (N. Hopkinson 2018: 199). As she “ejects” stones with the “force of thrown rocks”—“seething red garnets” and “cold blue chunks of lapis”—the reconfigured commodity form becomes a tool weaponized against heteropatriarchal power incarnate in the figure of Jude:

As I shouted my name, a final stone formed on my tongue, soft at first, as a hen’s egg forms in her body. It swelled, pushing my jaws apart until I gagged. I forced it out. It flew from my mouth, a ruby as big as a human heart, that struck Jude in the head, then fell onto the pile of treasure. He collapsed unconscious amidst the bounty, blood trickling from a dent in his temple. The red ruby gleamed as though a coal lit its core. I felt light-headed, exhilarated. I didn’t bother to check whether Jude was still breathing (N. Hopkinson 2018: 199).

Describing Jude’s burial in a mound of treasure, the short story’s ending echoes the allegorical message of the myth of Midas, communicating the “need to circulate wealth rather than hoard it” (Darcy 2021: 66). In reworking the language of folklore, Hopkinson’s fabulist short story critiques the corrupting power of capitalist accumulation, while presenting the shapeshifting body as a territory of resistance against accumulation-driven violence. In “Precious,” the mythological body becomes an emancipatory territory, resisting the enclosure of the female body and the violence of patriarchal extractivism. The thematic device of corporeal metamorphosis reverberates throughout Hopkinson’s short story cycle, which presents the skin-shedding body as a site of emancipatory struggle, offering a metamorphic reconceptualization of what Federici (2020) describes as the enclosed “peripheries of the skin.”

Gore Violence in Breanne Mc Ivor’s *Where There Are Monsters*

In *Gore Violence*, Sayak Valencia (2018: 34) argues that the “twentieth century can be understood as synonymous with violence,” a violence that has been “radicalized through neoliberalism and the advent of globalization,” until “by the first decade of the twenty-first century, it merits the label gore reality.” Adopted from the “taxonomy of cinematic genres,” gore violence denotes the evolution of a “grotesque and parodic element of the spilling of blood and guts, which as it is so absurd and unjustified, would appear to be unreal, gimmicky and artificial” (Valencia 2018: 31). For Valencia (2018: 20), “gore capitalism” encapsulates the structural relationality that exists between the economic ideology of neoliberalism and “ultraviolent forms of capital accumulation, practices we categorize as gore.” In her collection *Where There Are Monsters*, Breanne Mc Ivor (2019) turns to the imagination of folklore to critique cannibalistic forms of capital accumulation

in gothicized Trinidad and Tobago. Reconfiguring folkloric intertexts, Mc Ivor (2019: 146) magnifies the logics of gore capitalism, attending to the surreal extremities of violence which—as one character remarks in “Never Have I Ever”—don’t “seem real.”

Set against a backdrop of neoliberal reform in Trinidad and Tobago, Mc Ivor’s gothic stories register the scarring impacts of structural adjustment, socio-economic inequality, and dependence on petroleum-based energy exports. Frequently, Mc Ivor employs the gothic mode to critique social and political abandonment under neoliberal capitalism, showing how free market economic policies give rise to social fragmentation and the necro-capitalistic activities of organized crime. In several stories, revitalized folkloric figures such as the vampiric soucouyant and the mythological were-shapeshifter from Caribbean folklore (Lagahoo) prey in the interstices of unevenly developed peripheries. In “The Course,” for instance, a shapeshifting monster is haunted by vague recollections of the “disfigured shreds of human bodies that he woke up with” in the Northern Range; in “The One Night Stand” an anonymous vampire figure leaves a trail of cadavers along the banks of the Diego Martin River. Mc Ivor’s (2019: 42) stories are punctuated by a recurrent motif of “blood red writing,” presenting the spectacularized reporting of dismembered cadavers in newspaper headlines. While the proliferation of cannibalized bodies offers a synecdoche for the scarring impacts of neoliberalization, the gothic refrain of “red writing” which “burns the top of each page” expresses aggravating spirals of violence, registering the accumulation of gore as the “uncontrolled and contradictory dimension of the neoliberal project” (Pratt, quoted in Valencia 2018: 26). The spiraling multitude of articles—and the unifying refrain of “blood red writing”—emphasize the extent to which gore violence functions as a “tool used against bodies by the global economy” (Valencia 2018: 31).

This urban gothic landscape sets the stage for Mc Ivor’s broader thematic engagement with the use of violence as a mode of capitalist “necro-empowerment,” a term coined by Valencia (2018: 86) to denote the “dystopian” violence perpetrated by “socially marginalized group[s]” to acquire “individualized power,” illicit “enrich[ment],” and “self-affirm[ation].”⁶ “The Boss,” for instance, depicts a nexus of violence emerging from the black-market economy. The story follows the son of the “cocaine kingpin of the Caribbean” as he attempts to find legal employment in the Port of Spain. During Nathan’s interview for a job at an advertising company, the CEO—a former journalist—tells the story of how he first reported on the arrest of Trinidad’s biggest drug lord who “flooded the country with cocaine” (Mc Ivor 2019):

“They hanged him.”

“Not that time. Police found Micey’s burnt body in a car. My cameraman got some footage of the car when it was still on fire. Two weeks later, they found his head stuck on a stake in the ground. I suppose The Boss meant it to be a warning.

The boy chews the nails of his index finger.

“Three times The Boss was charged with murder and each time the witnesses were killed. He was Trinidad’s biggest drug lord. The whole country knew it. But they could never get him on drug charges.”

⁶ As Valencia discusses in *Gore Capitalism* this term derives from Achille Mbembe’s concept of *necropolitics*. For further detail see chapter 4, “Necropolitics.”

“They hanged him eventually!”
“Too late. After he flooded the country with cocaine.”
The CEO takes a pen out of his pocket and draws a line under NATHAN PETERS
on the resume. (P. 72)

Describing a series of gang-related executions, this passage communicates the dual crisis of neoliberal labor precaritization (“people can’t get work in this place”) and the emergence of black-market economies such as narco-trafficking. Through the advertisement subtext, “The Boss” also presents the spectacularization of gore violence produced by the illicit shadow economy, showing how accelerated neoliberal capitalism has transformed violence into a commodity in the global marketplace (Valencia 2018).

While the stories collected in *Where There Are Monsters* (Mc Ivor 2019) capture spiraling gore violence emerging from the black-market economy, Mc Ivor gestures towards the relationship between legal and illegal economies, showing how violence as a mode of necro-empowerment is inherent to the neoliberal phase of accumulation (Valencia 2018). Alongside a nexus of urban violence associated with the illegal activities of the drug industry, Mc Ivor (2019: 145) presents the inferred blood-sucking violence of “psychopath[ic]” CEOs at the epicenter of global finance: Microsoft, the World Bank, and British Petroleum. In “Never Have I Ever” for instance, the narrator suspects “the vice president of one of the big banks” (Mc Ivor 2019: 141) might be responsible for “killing women and dumping their bodies in the Deigo Martin River”:

They find a headless body in the Diego Martin River—the woman’s ribs have been broken and she’s been stuffed into a barrel. The head, partially wrapped in a plastic bag, washes ashore with the next week’s floods. The reports don’t say whether there was any blood in her veins (Mc Ivor 2019: 146).

While Mc Ivor describes the anonymity of the silhouetted perpetrator, the narrator implicates various members of the transnational capitalist class in the serial cannibalization of female bodies. Emphasizing the relationship between legal and illegal economies and the accelerating use of violence as a mode of capitalist wealth accumulation, the story depicts gore violence as not simply an unintended side-effect of organized crime and state corruption, but rather a structural feature of hyper-consumerist neoliberalism (Valencia 2018: 24). The deliberate ambiguity surrounding the killer’s identity thus invites readers to consider how the “raw nature of this [gore] violence obeys a logic born out of structures and processes planned in the very heart of neoliberalism, globalization and politics” (Valencia 2018: 22).

The gore aesthetics of the collection also register the interconnected production of hegemonic masculinities in the current phase of neoliberal accumulation. At the beginning of the short story, “The Course,” a man retches up a “chunky concoction brindled with blood” (Mc Ivor 2019: 39). Stricken by the lagahoo curse—a “local word for men who become monsters” (Mc Ivor 2019: 39)—the man’s impulse for cannibalistic violence appears in an otherwise domestic narrative about a woman who worries about the ticking away of her “baby-making years”:

He’d told her the—truth – he couldn’t really remember those nights. But he’d never told her about the disfigured shreds of human bodies that he woke up with. Skin

under his fingernails. A mangled earlobe clutched in his palm. Hair wrapped around his fingers. Somehow, he'd connected clues he wasn't aware of leaving. And even then, she hadn't left. (Mc Ivor 2019: 42)

Drawing on Caribbean folklore, Mc Ivor reconfigures the Lagahoo, a mythical shapeshifting monster from Caribbean mythology in order to critique the role of hyper-masculinity in the frame of neoliberal precaritization. The short story's invocation of the gothic lexicon testifies to the periodicity of the gothic as a mode of socio-political critique. Reading forms of "catachrestic narrative" through the "prism of world-systems theory", Stephen Shapiro (WreC 2015: 96) has argued that gothic forms appear in conjunction with "recurring cycles of long-wave capitalist accumulation." Tracing a history of "catachrestic" vocabularies, from Voltaire's use of the word vampire to describe stock market traders, to Marx's invocation of gothic metaphors in the *Communist Manifesto*, Shapiro (2008) argues that the gothic mode re-emerges in response to the violent effects of economic restructuring. Describing the relationship between aesthetic forms of horror and the "splatter of capitalist periodicity" across the globe, Shapiro (2008: 44) suggests that "gothic tales express the terror of capitalist systematicity, for during these conjunctural moments, capitalism's gruesome nature is most sensationally revealed." While Mc Ivor's adaptation of lycanthropic horror articulates the uneven socio-economic conditions produced by neoliberalism in contemporary Trinidad and Tobago (and its spectral economies of gas and oil), it foregrounds the specifically gendered dynamics of uneven development as an intrinsically gothic experience.

Following the shapeshifter's attempt to "cure" the Lagahoo curse through a course of antibiotics, "The Course" reiterates the involuntary corporeal metamorphosis of the were-creature, enumerating physical symptoms as he is "swallowed by the shadow":

Sweat bursts out from his pores in a paroxysm of feeling. He is convulsed with tremors. He doubles over, digging his fingers into Coraline's hips. He feels as if a fist has grabbed his oesophagus. Even as he drops to his knees, he welcomes the unforgiving hardness of their kitchen tiles. "...Hear me now?" Coraline's voice touches him like a kiss. "Yes." His teeth are chattering so violently that he can barely say the word. (Mc Ivor 2019: 50)

A "curse" which "devours everything he touches," these recurrent images of unwilling corporeal shapeshifting articulate what Valencia (2018: 76) describes as the imprisoning "limits set by the heteropatriarchy and violence used as a tool for male self-affirmation." In *Gore Capitalism*, Valencia (2018: 58) adopts the term "Endriago" to conceptualize the display of "violence as an element of masculine self-affirmation". Taken from medieval literature (*Amadis de Gaula*), the endriago is a man, hydra and dragon hybrid who symbolizes the "new ultraviolent, destructive subjects of gore capitalism" (Valencia 2018: 132). For Valencia, "the becoming-endriago can be understood as one more—very predictable result of the contemporary economic process, which is known in its social incarnation as hyperconsumerism" (Valencia 2018: 132). By reconfiguring the transplanted Lagahoo, Mc Ivor brings into focus the proliferation of violent masculinities—and the "return of monsters"—unleashed by neoliberalism's episteme of gore violence (Valencia 2018: 132).

Throughout *Where There Are Monsters*, the proliferation of dismembered cadavers captures an accelerating climate of violence against women, showing how women's bodies are governed through the lens of hegemonic gore masculinity. Through reconfigured folkloric intertexts, Mc Ivor's collection frequently critiques systemic blindness towards the new "war" on women in the current phase of accumulation. In "One Night Stand," for instance, Mc Ivor directly tackles the surge in misogynistic violence through the character of Jennifer, who works at the "T&T Rape Crisis Centre":

Jennifer swats his hand. "I work at the T&T Rape Crisis Centre."
 He spears an olive. "Great lunch conversation, *babe*".
 "It's an important issue," she says. "There's been this recent surge of violence against women, and we need to make sure that women speak up".
 "So you think the victims *can* speak up?"
 "Of course, three in four victims know the accuser and if they feel empowered to go to the police and name him..."
 "Right. Because the police are upstanding moral pillars and models of efficiency to boot." (P. 182)

Describing the blasé attitude of a "Business Development Executive," the story evokes a culture of impunity surrounding gendered violence, showing how misogyny permeates the criminal justice system. In "Never Have I Ever," the transplanted soucouyant figure emerges in response to the accelerating patriarchal offensive against women's bodies. In the story, two friends try to seduce a "sexy vice-president of one of the big banks" (Mc Ivor 2019: 131), competing for the affection of "Richie Rich," whose demeanor suggests the "casual magnificence of old money" (Mc Ivor 2019: 134). After Julian ambiguously admits to having "killed someone" over a drunken game of "never have I ever," the narrator becomes increasingly convinced that he is a "serial killer" (Mc Ivor 2019: 135). The story initially introduces the trope of gore vampirism through Indira's short story ("La Diabliesse"), about a blood-sucking "demonic temptress" who lures a man away from a party, leads him along a "midnight road," and drains the blood from his veins (Mc Ivor 2019: 137). In "Never Have I Ever," however, Mc Ivor presents an inverted Diabliesse myth, reconfiguring the soucouyant trope to critique an escalating climate of femicidal violence. For Mc Ivor (2019: 138), the anonymous vampiric folk figure analogously represents the extremity of violence used as a "tool" of necro-empowerment (Valencia 2018):

At my desk at work next day, over lunch, I read the paper. The headline screams DRAINED OF BLOOD. A woman has been fished out of the Diego Martin River. Both her hands and feet were bound, and a black piece of rope was tied around her neck. The pathologist was said to be traumatized because the body was totally bloodless. "Like it have vampires out here," someone says as she passes my desk. I barely look up (P. 138).

Describing the commercialization of death in the media through the unifying refrain of "blood-red letters," Mc Ivor again depicts the fetishization of cadavers and the commodification of extreme violence. At the same time, in punctuating the story with a proliferation of newspaper articles so abundant that they bleed into each other, Mc Ivor shows how the oversaturation of gore imagery

leads to a culture of desensitization. In revitalizing the soucouyant figure of Caribbean folklore, Mc Ivor's short story seeks an alternative language through which to critique the phenomenon of gore violence.

Indirectly drip-feeding news reports of a string of femicidal murders on the banks of the Diego Martin River, "Never Have I Ever" accumulates grotesque imagery depicting the ultraviolent dismemberment of bloodless human bodies. The reconfigured soucouyant myth attends to the shocking realities of gore violence which "hardly seem[s] real" (Mc Ivor 2019: 146), writing back against the spectralization of death in mediatic accounts (Valencia 2018: 247). While the proliferation of cadavers presents a synecdoche for the dismembering forces of neoliberal intervention, it explicitly links the structural logic of misogyny to the commodification of gore violence. Despite the veiled anonymity of the vampiric murderer—a "silhouette" at the "water's edge" (Mc Ivor 2019: 147)—the narrator becomes convinced that it is Julian who is responsible for "killing women and dumping their bodies" in the river (Mc Ivor 2019: 141). Recounting her growing distrust towards the transnational capitalist class, the narrator ambiguously implicates hegemonic representatives of the global economy in the serial cannibalization of bodies taking place in peripheral spaces. In this way, the story emphasizes the structural embeddedness of gendered violence and hegemonic power structures in the global political economy. The transplanted soucouyant figure thus offers a renewed conceptualization of capitalism as a blood-sucking monster, re-deployed to mediate ultraviolent forms of accumulation in the twenty-first century.

Magic Realism and the War on Women: Leone Ross's *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*

A speculative short story set in the not-so-distant future, 2035, Leone Ross's "Fix" (2017: 146) is narrated from the voice of "generation app" who "slowly watch the end of the world" unfold. The episodic short story critiques "the true barbarism of capitalism slowly eating itself" (Ross 2017: 149); the crisis of social reproduction engendered by neoliberal austerity, and the "undeniable march of apathy" perpetuated by the ideology of hyper-individualism (Ross 2017: 146). In this story, a child cuts off her own flesh to feed her starving mother in the financial center of London:

I got you food, Mum. Wednesday, March 3rd, 2035. My parent's generation had the Twin Tower attack; for us it was that sentence, out of one small, homeless girl, standing in Trafalgar square, her face spread across the live screens around her, offering her mother food after a long day out panhandling. I got you food, Mum, she said, and offered the slice of meat, charred on one side, raw on the other and we saw the blooded bandage on her arm.... We beamed that kid and her carved arm out to millions.... But the cannibalism isn't the point. This isn't what frightened me so much that I stopped being frightened anymore.... It was the thousands of people, calling for change and not a thing behind their eyes. (Ross 2017: 146)

While Mc Ivor's *Where There Are Monsters* (2019) foregrounds neoliberalism's gore violence in a globally peripheralized Trinidad and Tobago, Ross's (2017) border-crossing collection registers the gore realities evident in the core capital city of London (UK). Set in the aftermath of the 2008

global financial crash, Ross turns to the visceral language of body horror in order to critique the cannibalizing tendencies of neoliberal capitalism as an uneven, yet globally pervasive phenomenon. Against the backdrop of structural crisis enumerated in “Fix,” the stories collected in *Come Let Us Sing Anyway* (Ross 2017) register an intensifying culture of misogyny, showing how extreme violence against women is a symptom of capitalism’s unfolding crisis. For Ross, shapeshifting female corporeality becomes a locus of world-systemic crisis, the new “war” on women and historically patterned forms of violence enacted on racialized and gendered bodies.

Combining short fiction and episodic vignettes, the polyvocal stories bear witness to the collective nature of trauma derived from misogynistic rape culture. Several stories emphasize a culture of impunity through recurrent tropes of invizibilized violence. In “Roll It,” for instance, a catwalk model is abused by stage director Parker, who usually “hides the damage in her scalp, in the cleft of her buttocks and between her thighs” (Ross 2017: 28). The carnivalesque catwalk described throughout the story critiques the neo-colonial violence perpetrated against racialized bodies, while staging in spectacularized terms an accelerating climate of sexual abuse. In “Roll It,” “fashionista crowds” observe the exoticized display of models “out under the stars and the green expanse of Hope Gardens”:

It’s so dark. The open-air runway loops through the botanical garden and the murmuring spectators. No one in Jamaica has seen a fashion show like this before. Strobe lights and naked torches blend, mottling the face of the barefooted models as they negotiate hundreds of golden candles scattered across the stage. They are dressed as monsters. A hot gust of wind bursts through the palms and banana trees, pushing against the curtain where the woman is waiting to die. She watches as one of the other models stumbles, steps on a candle and stretches her long neck up to the sky—a wordless screaming, like eating air. The audience laugh and gasp and admire the vivid blue dress clinging to her body and the thick blood on her arms and clumped in her long, processed hair. She is dressed as a vampire, what country people call Old Higue. (Ross 2017: 20)

Describing Parker’s brutalized vision of “artistic integrity,” Ross stages the neo-colonial process of “strategic exoticism” identified by Graham Huggan (2001: 115), the process by which colonial history is “transformed into an exotic cultural spectacle [and] becomes a packageable commodity for metropolitan consumption.” The story focuses on Parker’s appropriation of Afro-Caribbean folklore, depicting the eroticized display of catwalk models dressed as the fabled “River Mumma” Oshun and the “Old Higue” from Guyanese folklore. Parker’s exploitative production of colonial history also references the “White Witch of Rosehall,” based on the myth of slave owner Annie Palmer: a “young English bride, brought over to the Rose Hall slave plantation to live like a queen” (Ross 2017: 23). For Ross (2017), the carnivalesque catwalk offers a locus for the commodification of the body under racial capitalism, starkly visible in her description of the hyper-sexualized “river mumma”:

The girl smiles, sharp incisors poking over her lips. She is a river mumma, her dress made of silver-green fish scales, but she is also like a fruit, a knobbed soursop. “Smile. Let them see your teeth,” Parker had instructed. “And when you reach the front, cry. A river mumma is a wet thing.” (Ross 2017: 26)

While appropriated folkloric intertexts present the historical colonization of black female bodies, the story also signals the ongoing legacy of gendered colonial violence within patriarchal neoliberal capitalism. Groomed and coercively controlled by Parker from the age of fifteen, Ross (2017) describes how the nameless catwalk model prepares for the “performance of her lifetime”:

She brushes her hand up and down her body; the chains jingle and she tells herself it is just like jewellery. Parker usually hides the damage in her scalp, in the cleft of her buttocks and between her thighs, but finally he can be gleeful and unrestrained. The bruises are purple and yellow and black; fist-sized lumps across her shoulders. There is a bruise on the sole of her left foot. All for his artistic integrity. Four minutes. River Mumma is finishing her circuit—the woman knows by the rising claps. Has she cried enough to please Parker? He is waiting in the front row, at the foot of the stage. “Perfect”, he said, when the make-up artist brought the old chains to loop around her feet and throat. (P. 28)

The recurring symbol of “old chains” looped around the catwalk model’s “feet and throat” (Ross 2017: 28) communicates how the *longue durée* of racial patriarchal capitalism mutates into contemporary violence perpetuated against the bruised body. The “old chains” also foreshadow the ambivalent ending of the short story. Drawing on the metaphorical associations of the *soucouyant*, Ross (2017) describes the catwalk model’s violent act of emancipation from Parker’s coercive control and the historical specters of colonial violence, as she explosively breaks down the fourth wall of the carnivalesque catwalk show:

Hoovers clitter-clatter, clunk. Hiss of fire, smell of smoke. Never ever-ever look into its burning orange eyes, and if you hear it coming, curse bad words! Curse as loud and as long as you can and pray the rolling calf go on past your house. It can bruise you with its flailing chain, even with its back turned. Flame eyes, dragging broken chain, ripped free... from what? Hell, hell. She knows... Flame creeps up the cheap black fabric where her fingers cling... She can hear Parker, screaming at the end of the catwalk. Screaming for his precious dress. *Whoomph*. Her hair burns. Her bruises peel away under the heat, like black paper. *Roll your hips*, she thinks. Her eyes burn last. (P. 29)

Depicting the transformation of the catwalk model into a ball of fire, the transplanted *soucouyant* figure highlights the constraints to female empowerment in a system of racial capitalism, while presenting a violent reclamation of agency through the trope of folkloric skin shedding.

In “The Müllerian Eminence,” Ross (2017) turns to the language of magic realism as a tool for defamiliarization, showing how patriarchal violence intersects with the endemic crisis of global capitalism and overlapping systems of oppression. The story opens with a direct quote from Henry Grey’s *Anatomy of the Human Body* (1918), in which he states that the hymen—the remains of the “Müllerian eminence” in females—“has no function” (Ross 2017: 129). Ross’s initial description of the medicalization and regulation of female bodies contextualizes the short story’s magical real subversion. In reconfiguring the symbolic (so-called) “virginal membrane,” Ross critiques the propertizing violence of neoliberal capitalism and the pervasive proportions of sexual abuse articulated throughout *Come Let Us Sing Anyway*. The story describes the multiplication of

disembodied hymens which appear in the interstices of urban space, re-inscribing the fetishized body fragment as an itinerant symbol of misogynistic rape culture.

After his initial encounter with the hymen in a law-office, Deol becomes “witness” to the escalating eruption of fantastical hymens across the fragmented urban cityscape. As a precariously employed first-generation immigrant, Deol articulates the precarious modalities of shift work under neoliberal capitalism, as he moves from his “Thursday job” in a law office, to his “Tuesday job working for a company that made industrial bleach,” to his “Sunday job at a university where he cleaned staff offices and found thirty-eight hymens” (Ross 2017: 135). In framing the narrative around the increasingly precarious working conditions of Deol, Ross presents the structural precaritization of labor alongside an accelerating culture of gendered violence. As “witness” to an invizibilized epidemic, Deol habitually expresses surprise about the endemic nature of violence against women (Ross 2017: 138). For instance, at his “Sunday job at a university,” where he “cleaned staff offices,” Deol is shocked that “eleven of the hymens were from woman abused by scholarly, well-respected men” (Ross 2017: 137).

While the fantastical hymens act as a conduit for the re-emergence of traumatic memories attached to domestic abuse, rape and sexual harassment, the “knowledge contained inside each hymen,” Deol observes, does “not manifest in good and tidy order, like a narrative on a TV screen”: “It was more, thought, Deol, like being a djinn or a soul snake, slipping inside the twenty-something skin and looking out through her eyes” (Ross 2017: 137). The story describes Deol’s descent into madness; as the number of hymens increases, he becomes increasingly anxious about the prospect of “forgetting even one precious story,” since “to forget would be sacrilege” (Ross 2017: 137). Deol becomes debilitatingly encumbered by the multiplication of voices, wandering the streets with a “coat full of hymens” rubbing his ankles and a “satchel on his back” stuffed with “scribbled paper” (Ross 2017: 138) transcribing the unruly knowledge contained within each hymen. The paralyzing flood of traumatic memories registers in magical realist terms an accelerating offensive of violence unleashed by crisis. Through the tropes of magic realism, the eruption of hymens in public space constitutes a subversive politicization of structural misogyny, strategically dislodging gender-based violence from its enclosure in the domestic sphere.

Although “witness” to “the strange sickness of city women,” Deol is repeatedly exposed to the culture of apathy which surrounds patriarchy’s “pedagogy of cruelty”:

On Monday, or perhaps it was Thursday, he took himself to the church that was a law office. The gravestone ached with the weight of early spring daffodils. The rector found him bent over one of the graves, inserting his fingers into the damp soil...

“Can you not see them?” Charu Deol said.

“What, my son?” Asked the rector.

Charu Deol grasped the man’s lapels and dragged him upright. He was weeping, and frightening a holy man, but the hymens were thick on the ground like blossom, and the task was suddenly, ferociously beyond him. He dropped the rector and ran through the graveyard, past clinking, bleeding, surging, mumbling pieces of women. (Ross 2017: 139)

Here, Ross's irrealist registration of structural blindness underlines how sexual violence perpetrated against female bodies functions as an ingrained structural feature of the capitalist world-system. Throughout the story, Ross (2017: 138) describes how Deol's mission to bear witness is squandered by a culture of desensitization which surrounds endemic violence against women: "'it's complicated', say the men. 'What can I do?' they say." In the face of a public anaesthetized to misogynistic violence, Deol's precarious life begins to unravel; "[o]n Wednesday he [is] fired from his Wednesday job" (Ross 2017: 137) for refusing to take off his "suspiciously bulging coat for the security guard;" at his "Tuesday job," he is dismissed after he finds the boss's "hymen on the edge of her computer desk" (Ross 2017: 137). The escalating unravelling of Deol's life registers the accumulative violences of the capitalist world-system, showing how the growing precarization of existence intersects with an accelerating—and invizibilized—war on women.

Deol recurrently observes the simultaneous fragility and violence of the magical real hymens; imagining them as glass, he "feared he would trip and fall and shatter them, piercing his veins and tendons" (Ross 2017: 139). As focalizer, Deol frequently describes the feeling of being "assaulted" by the vicarious collective trauma contained within each individual hymen. While the growing intrusion of hymens in public space presents a magic realist mediation of the global upswing in gender violence, Ross's (2017) story strategically resists the mono-vocal language of victimization, emphasizing the polyvocality of experiences contained within each individual hymen. In particular, Ross (2017: 134–137) stresses the distinctive individuality of each "bagged" hymen: "some were like bright cherry-red fingernails;" "a golden cobweb," "thin silk," "a silver-star," "one s-shaped," "glimmering wrought iron," "crystalline." Even as each hymen has an individual story to tell, the surreal collectivity of the hymens evokes the idea of multitude as force. Describing the proliferation of hymens—which blossom "outside law offices," beat "on door[s]" and crawl "up the windowpanes" (Ross 2017: 140)—the surreal merging of voices, histories, and sensations gestures towards the emergent energetics of collective feminist assembly.

For Ross, and the other writers examined in this article, the literary re-invention of folk orality becomes a particular tool of critique against the structural inequalities ingrained in the patriarchal capitalist world-system. In reconfiguring folkloric intertexts, the short stories discussed here attend to the distinctly gendered geographies of social unevenness produced by the expansion of capitalist modernization and the new corporeal enclosures generated by neoliberal capitalism in crisis. For each of these writers, the fabulist short form offers a literary vector through which to map the interrelated problems of global racial capitalism and the new war on women in the current phase of globalization. On a thematic level, the racialized and gendered body becomes a material site at which intersecting forms of neo-colonial and patriarchal violence converge, while foregrounding the growing re-politicization of embodiment as a site of collective resistance in emergent feminist imaginaries. In each of these collections, folkloric shapeshifting also occurs at the level of form. Combining hybrid aesthetics such as folklore, gothic horror, magic realism, and speculative fiction, they exemplify the cross-border formal experimentalism taking place in a contemporary wave of Caribbean short fiction by women. The irrealist fabric of these short stories speak to

emergent pedagogies of feminist resistance reacting against “the true barbarism of capitalism slowly eating itself.”

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