Flowing Through the Wound: Radical Mothering and Natural Realism in Opal Palmer Adisa's *It Begins with Tears*

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The Sacred and the Erotic in Opal Palmer Adisa

The sacred exceeds religious systems. It is inscribed in those daily incidents we often attribute to coincidence, and which can only make sense under a different framework. For M. Jacqui Alexander, the sacred is an empowering expression that is "to be found in the meeting ground of the erotic, the imaginative, and the creative" (322). The sacred encompasses not only the metaphysical but also the embodied. Conversely, sexuality, as an embodied act, can channel the sacred—opening pathways to creativity, connection, and expanded ways of knowing. For Audre Lorde, the erotic names any deeply intimate human act, charged with spiritual significance. To be erotically fulfilled is to be spiritually whole: "For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand for ourselves and for our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy that we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us" (56-57). Along the same lines of thought, Mimi Sheller conceives sexuality as a form of political resistance and as an "evidence of sexual agency," once historians stop looking at it as a form of "exploitation and deviancy" (250). Aesthetic acts—writing, drumming, altar-making, sex, birth, mothering—often arise from an erotic yearning to connect with the sacred. In this mutual beingness in which we become one with the sacred, intimacy with sacred energy becomes possible, fostering conscious alignment with spiritual guides and empowering political agency.

Given their colonial historic circumstances, Black Caribbean women have, like their American counterparts, been denied motherhood while forced to breastfeed their master's children despite their own concern about their newborns' future. In *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (2016), Pauline Gumbs notes in her appreciation to Hortense Spillers that motherhood is for the white, middle-class American woman a "status granted by patriarchy … regardless of who does the labor … of keeping them [their children] alive." Contrarily, she proceeds, mothering is that "nurturing work, that survival dance," which is demonstrated by "house mothers in ball culture," "immigrant nannies," and "enslaved women," all of whom offer secure environments for expression, self-love, and nourishment. Gumbs emphasizes that a "mother" is not a "gendered identity," but rather a

"possible action, a technology of transformation" (22-23). In African diaspora narratives, mothering emerges as a vital aesthetic practice.

Throughout her work, Opal Palmer Adisa subverts colonial norms—gender, kinship, and religion—by fusing African ritual with sexual politics and challenging secular views of spirituality as "the opium of the masses" (Sheller 46). *It Begins with Tears* (1997) exemplifies this approach, portraying black radical mothering as creative survival, cultural resistance, and community care (Gumbs 22-23). Adisa's use of African religious elements reflects a form of magical realism rooted in faith—"a necessary component of magic realism"—that "pull[s] readers into her own amplified reality," suspending ties to the "logical" and the "real" (Foreman 285-304, 299). Set in the late twentieth century, the novel portrays radical mothering as doubly radical, subverting neocolonial alienation through interdependence and African-rooted practices.

Building on Lorde's link between sexuality, spirituality, and empowerment, Adisa shows how Afro-Jamaican women, despite political exclusion, transform their communities. Lorde redefines the erotic beyond the sexual as "an assertion of the life-force of women . . . a creative energy empowered," to be reclaimed "in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives." She warns that separating the spiritual from the sexual and political reduces it to a "world of flattened affect." Ascetic withdrawal and cultivated abstinence therefore represent, in her view, a sterile obsession that denies wholeness and diminishes agency. To resist that diminishment, Lorde calls for a deliberate reclamation of erotic knowledge: a full, embodied attention to the "physical, emotional and psychic expressions" that enable access to our truest, most empowered selves. An exploration into our love passions and their deepest meaning functions not only as individual empowerment but as a pedagogy of relation and reciprocity, a way of making and passing on meaning through language, ritual, care and collective labor (55-56).

Donna Aza Weir-Soley contends that, in response to Christianity's divide and colonial views of Black women as "sexual deviants," writers must affirm Black women as both sexual and spiritual beings (2). Weir-Soley argues that the "poetics of eroticism"—depicting Black women's sexual and spiritual wellness—help reduce "the effects of historical traumas" and enable "healing, creative adaptation, recuperation and resistance" (5). This corrective intervenes against long-standing discursive archetypes—most prominently the Jezebel stereotype, which frames Black female sexuality, independence and decisiveness as inherently transgressive, and has been deployed to justify social exclusion and punitive practices (White 27-61; Jewell 49-51). Black women's sexuality under slavery was not confined to the private sphere but constituted a matter of public concern: print culture and polite conversation obsessively monitored and evaluated enslaved women's procreative capacities—debating optimal "breeding"

conditions and publicly naming "breeders"—so that reproduction, once discussed in public, inevitably made the slave woman's sexual life itself a subject of public scrutiny. This instrumentalization of intimate life helped naturalize the Jezebel trope: talk about reproductive capacity bled readily into attributions of licentiousness (White 31). Consequently, the domestic and affective realms—precisely those devalued by civil society—became crucial sites of political practice in plantation societies. From the home and through strategies of reproductive autonomy, alternative kinship, and everyday care, African Jamaican women forged practices of citizenship and collective self-determination that contested their public dispossession (Sheller 52-53) revealing an "interplay between gendered discourses and state power" (59).

In *It Begins*, many female characters practice mothering beyond blood ties, reframing it as a grassroots form of citizenship. Examples include Ms. Cotton and Monica, Monica and Althea, Jasmine and Angel, and Beryl with Marva's newborn. This echoes historical figures of "proud and independent slave women"—often called Quasheba and represented as "natural rebels" or "national heroes"—who "reenacted and sustained their communities" through political and religious roles not tied to reproduction (Sheller 50-51).

Colonial and neocolonial systems enact "patriarchal violence on racialized, marginalized women" brutalizing their "families, bodies and environments, all while representing them as invisible, deviant and suspicious" (Motta 125; Segato 201, 598-604; Vergès 24-25 qtd. in Sinalo and Mandolini "Introduction"). Historically, African Caribbean women's bodies were exploited for plantation labor and reproduction, serving both production and the expansion of the slave workforce. Today, they are abused for the sake of white feminists who "use the maternal labor of black women as domestic servants to buy their own freedom … [and] as guinea pigs … to perfect the privilege of sterilization" (Gumbs 21). As a result, black women's emancipatory struggles have fundamentally turned around the reclaiming of the body. *It Begins* invites readers to wonder at its female characters' family ties and reproductive or non-reproductive technologies. For Sara Ahmed, "wonder" allows gender discourse to detach from the ordinary, opening space for new readings of reality (178-183). Wonder is indeed one of Adisa's feminist strategies, since her wondering makes visible taken-for-granted activities in Afro-Jamaican domestic spaces. Ahmed sees emotions not as fixed states but as "processes of movement and association," circulating across social and psychic fields. Thus, she rejects limiting wonder to "the sublime and the sacred," embracing it as an embodied, everyday experience (45, 180).

Ahmed's claim that wonder links the sublime and the material finds resonance in M. Jacqui Alexander's vision of the sacred as embodied—a force that intervenes in the fabric of daily life (Alexander 293). Alexander's claim that the sacred is a social, not private, act mirrors Adisa's vision of spirituality as a force

of political engagement and transformation (295). The crossing between imaginary and embodied spaces—"the synthesis of the sexual and the spiritual" (Weir-Soley 266)—shapes Afro-Caribbean female resistance in *It Begins* and challenges assumptions about knowledge. Aligned with Weir-Soley's poetics of eroticism and Lorde's and Alexander's sacred erotic, Adisa's women resist cultural colonialism through ancestral, radical (primordial) survival technologies: their Black magic.

From Magical to Natural Realism, Detangling Black Magic in *It Begins with Tears*

Voodoo, Santería, and Obeah are a few examples of the so-called magic practiced in the Caribbean. Some label Voodoo and Santería religions, while others refer to Obeah as science. These are ultimately ancestral customs with the potential to "shape minds, hearts, and nations" (Cutter 130-131). Black characters in Caribbean literature, particularly women characters, frequently resort to this kind of magic for power, healing, and agency. These magical practices have been criminalized and disregarded throughout the long history of colonialism to enslave and subjugate Africans. According to Paton, "the concept of religion has acted as a race-making category," creating a division between "'primitive' peoples" who believe in superstition or magic and "'civilized' peoples" who follow religion (1-18, 2). "Black magic" was weaponized by Europeans to demonize enslaved cultures. By reclaiming this term, I seek to restore its emancipatory potential, just as I aim to strip "primitive" of its colonial stigma. As the Sankofa principle teaches, progress requires looking back—revealing that what we dismiss from the past may hold overlooked insights. Adisa's novel urges readers to confront what fear has denied and reclaim its healing force. Through a tidalectical view—honoring the Caribbean's cyclical rhythms—she dissolves binaries of old/new, black/white, revealing that all religion is magic, and the future, profoundly ancestral.

What seems illogical in Black magic often stems from a Western, science-based lens that relies on linear cause and effect. African-rooted epistemologies reject this divide, viewing the observer as part of the observation. There is no separation between subject and object. Brathwaite's concept of *tidalectics* breaks with linearity and dualism, challenging European dialectical thought (Brathwaite, *Third* 42). European dialectics is historically indebted to Hegel: his dialectical method—often paraphrased as thesis-antithesis-synthesis—operates through *Aufhebung* (sublation), a movement that simultaneously negates and preserves contradictory moments and lifts them into a purportedly higher, teleological unity. That operation implies closure and progressive development, a

forward-moving logic that later European thinkers (from the Young Hegelians to Marx and the tradition of Critical Theory) inherit and rework. That forward-moving logic produces the sense of progress and a kind of closure at each synthesis—a temporary resolution that sets up the next contradiction and movement. Brathwaite rejects this teleological closure: his tidalectic is "the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic . . . motion, rather than linear" (Brathwaite, *ConVERSations* 14), and from the simple image of an elderly woman sweeping sand he formulates the Caribbean tidalectic as "the movement of the ocean she's walking on"—a back-and-forth that links shores and "recedes ('reading') from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future" (34). Hegelian *Aufhebung* works teleologically—a forward-moving sublation that implies closure—whereas tidalectics foregrounds cyclical, ongoing movement. Brathwaite's tidalectic temporality aligns with Kristeva's concept of women's time, which similarly undermines teleological historicity. By theorizing cyclical, affective, and semiotic modes of temporality that run alongside—and sometimes beneath—the linear, symbolic time of institutions, Kristeva supplies a psychoanalytic complement to tidalectics' marine rhythm (Kristeva 187-213, 193). Together, Brathwaite and Kristeva offer tools for thinking knowledge as rhythmic, relational, and ongoing—wave-like motions of becoming rather than the closed syntheses of colonial historicism. Adisa's novel embodies these tidalectic rhythms, treating African diaspora history not as fixed but as a fluid source of imagination, reshaped through radical mothering into a poetics of eroticism.

The title, *It Begins with Tears*, signals that tears initiate the stories to come. Waterways—oceans, rivers, rain, and tears—thread the narrative, carrying both pain and healing. Tears allow characters to confront their wounds and make sense of their histories. This is evident when Ainsworth realizes that "[t]he story was their memory ... the pain that produced tears ... The story was in the first drop of salty tear that was shed for them, that they shed for themselves" (139-140). Also, in the collective healing ritual that takes place at the resolution, Arnella suggests: "Each of oonuh must search out oonuh own place in de river. Let her, de river, talk to you so she can soothe oonuh worries" (214). Weaving Jamaica's sacred rural knowledge with U.S. materialism, this novel explores Kristoff Village's gender divides and the kinship webs that resist capitalist ideals. Each woman is shaped by her sexuality, mothering, or spirituality—elements at the heart of the Black magic of their radical mothering.

Among the women who engage in black radical mothering is Angel, an African American who arrives in the village with her husband Rupert—himself a local now living in New York—only to uncover that Beryl is her birth mother (93-99); Beryl, whose life is marked by rape by an American tourist, resulting in pregnancy and adoption, and who later chooses to mother a baby-girl after Marva

dies in childbirth (225-227, 234); and Jasmine, the Jamaican domestic worker who cares for young Angel on behalf of her white American adoptive parents. Jasmine helps ease Angel's anguish when, at eleven, she discovers she is adopted and not white. Throughout Angel's childhood and into adulthood, Jasmine remains her closest confidante (93-97). Monica, a villager who left home as a teenager and found independence through sex work, is another central figure. Since her departure, she has been mothered by Miss Cotton, the village's elder and revered obeah woman. On returning, Monica falls in love with Desmond—who is married to Grace—and eventually becomes a mother figure to his daughter Althea, after the girl's pregnancy reveals a lack of sexual education (102-105, 202-205).

The nemeses of these tender, nurturing figures, are characterized by Peggy, Grace, and Marva, the frustrated married women whose violent revengeful act against Monica raises important questions about gender-based violence and the impossibility of sisterhood within patriarchal structures (130-132). Arnella and Valrie's kinship ties expose the possibility of a co-parenting love triangle and make their neighbors and father wonder when faced with their uncommon technologies of survival. This constitutes an example of "mothering as a queer collaboration with the future . . . transforming the parenting relationship from a property relationship to a partnership in practice" (Gumbs 28). For the purposes of this analysis, queerness is not invoked as identity affiliation with LGBTQ+ communities but as an analytical category: it denotes practices and dispositions that subvert gender binaries and normative gender roles, especially as these appear in forms of communal care and caregiving. Whether as mothers, daughters, spiritual guides, or sexually free women, these characters stand together in the pursuit of dignity and healing, enacting Black mothering through bonds that restore both self and community.

As the narrative unfolds, women undergo transformation and healing through a communal, all-women ritual by the river, tapping into "the maternal power of the water." In Feng's words, "[t]he regenerating and nurturing power of the river water/milk nurses . . . women, into a new life and reestablishes bonds with 'mothers' they were deprived of long before" (149-175, 166). These recovery narratives reveal how sacred rituals—naming, feeling, and performing—help heal sexual trauma and mark a path toward political freedom through erotic agency.

By healing "bodily and mental trauma" and reviving folk rituals, Adisa's novel embodies the "jazz cadence" present in Caribbean narrative, where narrative form conveys the community's essence (165). The "jazz novel," according to Brathwaite, is a narrative that explores a "folk-type community" as an organized whole whereby each character "is felt and seen to be an integral part." Thus, the idea of jazz as an "aesthetic model" leaves behind the exploration of the individual as an alienated figure—in the most existentialist form of Faustian

individual conflict—and embraces a "gestalt/communality" of the society that is mainly articulated "through its form" and "rhythms" (*Roots* 108). *It Begins* weaves women's mothering stories to express a broader concern for Jamaican rural communities rather than individual peasant women.

The prologue opens in Eternal Valley, where Devil and She-Devil—whose quarrels manifest as weather—affect life in Kristoff Village. Adisa creatively rewrites the Jamaican saying, "Rain ah fall, sun a shine, Devil a beat him wife" (Weir-Soley 145) marking not only the weather, but also a moment of tension and contradiction among the villagers of Kristoff Village. In some Jamaican tellings, the proverb shifts to "Devil and him wife a fight," portraying the woman as a fighter, not a victim—a dynamic Adisa powerfully reclaims in her novel. The novel's jazz-inspired structure and parallel worlds highlight the deep connection of nature and human life as part of the same reality. Rain, wife, and Kristoff Village mirror sun, husband, and Eternal Valley—not in opposition, but in synchronicity. This tidalectical, cyclical motion dissolves boundaries, transforming Adisa's novel into an aesthetic expression of Black magic—a tidalectic form central to West Indian epistemology.

In an interview conducted by Adisa,[1] Brathwaite perceives magical realism "not [as] the fantasy realism of García Márquez; it is really based upon notions of *vodoun*, obeah, *konnu*, African cosmology, jazz (multiple representation/improvisation)."[2] For him, it is rooted "in the hard harsh realities of the *Trench Town Rock/*stone road that we have to walk and live in, as people who are still in the chain(s) and chain-gang of slavery, . . . with every day the struggle to survive." Both elements establish for him "a constant dialogue between harsh reality . . . and the light (and life) at the end of that road," in a kind of "symbiosis" that he calls the

> *tidalectical relationship* that we find in diurnal/eternal nature; where and when (space/time continuum) the two things are combined outside *and* inside us; so that the struggle that we constantly have to deal with because of our history, somehow, nevertheless, ends, in some strange way, in what I now begin to call *radiance.*

Brathwaite further suggests that although it is necessary to name the Afro-Caribbean spiritual forces, a more significant step would be for Caribbean people to understand their meaning, to "become comfortably part of that physio-spiritual communication/ celebration (inappropriately called 'worship')." For Brathwaite, this cosmology represents a natural approach to the world, "like breathing, like the food we grow and eat," rather than something "special and exotic." He emphasizes that it should be "natural, not only magical realism." Adisa maintains that existence begins with naming, and that naming must honor the language of the people it represents. Brathwaite similarly sees Caribbean culture and nation

language as "vibration." Adisa's embrace of Jamaican speech and spiritual-natural forces reflects this shared belief in language as cultural resonance.

In Adisa's novel, waterways and Orishas merge ecological and spiritual forces into healing technologies that recover Black Atlantic memory. Kristoff Village—tellingly Christ-less—has no pastors, only women who bridge spirit and matter (Feng 165). Their Black magic reunites fragmented realities through earthly rites and speech, countering the metaphysical horror of colonial Gothic. In these practices, decolonization unfolds. Black magic becomes a natural, embodied form of radical mothering—nurturing a community in resistance.

Where Wood Caresses Water: The Sensual Ecology of Adisa's Erotic Poetics

Adisa weaves in Yoruba Ifa beliefs, especially the concept of Ashé—a sacred life force flowing from Olodumare, a multidimensional God who appears through nature and people as "avatars," making "the Sacred tangible" in the everyday (Alexander 299). These avatars appear in syncretic religions across the African diaspora—as Orishas in Brazil, Trinidad, and the Hispanic Caribbean, and as Lwas in Haitian Vodoun. These systems honor nature and language. Those initiated as sons or daughters of a specific Orisha embody their guiding spirits' principles, with female Orishas and Lwas offering maternal comfort, protection, and spiritual guidance.

Arnella, a dressmaker on the verge of childbirth, opens the novel as a mother figure embodying love, beauty, and life. Her pregnancy connects her to Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and sensuality, symbolized by fresh water, golden-yellow, and a fan with a mirror (Eyin and Eugênio 144-145, 155). Oshun's link to female creativity is reflected in Arnella, portrayed as an artist channeling her energy through "quilt making" and "craftwork" (Weir-Soley 108). Through quilting and sewing, Arnella cultivates a matrifocal home—nurturing, expressive, and beautiful. Her modest house, lovingly arranged, becomes a tangible expression of care and the aesthetics of maternal love:

> Sighing, Arnella surveyed the contents of her room. The yellow curtains with frilly lace along the border that were now blowing softly in the morning breeze, she had sewn. Examining them gave her a deep satisfied feeling, as did the sight of the three large wall-hangings made partly from the same piece of yellow cloth. (*Begins* 12)

Arnella's creativity flows through both body and craft—her pregnancy embodying life-giving power, her dressmaking a source of joy. As a priestess in training, she carries the promise of spiritual healing (148).

Her sensual features go beyond self-pleasure and physical complacency. Oshun's daughters exude an "irresistible sensuality and charm," which enables them to seduce others effortlessly (Weir-Soley 172). Channeling Oshun's erotic force, Arnella transcends material limits and selfhood. Her blend of spirit and sensuality emerges as she carries her daughter to the river to meet her lover—a moment that beautifully captures the poetics of eroticism. She took up a path that was "thorny and tedious, but she kept up her fast pace, as if she had a date" (*Begins* 12). In "an opening sheltered by bamboo branches" on the riverbank, she nursed her baby, "lost in the singular beauty of the place," and closed her eyes to feel the wood with all her senses:

> . . . she felt the wood that caught her head at the neck and nestled it; she felt the wood caressing the top of her chest and she didn't dare open her eyes with Baby-Girl still feeding . . . She felt Baby-Girl pull free from her breast, asleep. She could hear the river like a flute tune, and she wanted to suck on the wood, taste its bitter greenness in her mouth, have the wood touch her all over and roll in the moist earth. (*Begins* 190)

This passage layers erotic, spiritual, and ecological imagery. Arnella's journey—"thorny and tedious" yet taken with the urgency of "a date"—signals a move toward sexual and spiritual fulfillment. Nursing her daughter in "an opening sheltered by bamboo branches," she enters a womb-like space where nature, care, and desire converge. "Wood" operates both literally and symbolically—as natural material and erotic presence. Phrases like "she felt the wood that caught her head at the neck and nestled it" and "the wood caressing the top of her chest" evoke comfort and arousal. As Baby-Girl falls asleep, maternal care gives way to erotic solitude. The river sounds "like a flute tune," and her longing to "suck on the wood," to "taste its bitter greenness," reveals a sensual communion with the earth, and not just a human partner.

The next paragraph introduces a masculine presence who appears to merge with nature, personifying the wood itself. "His nakedness was a gift" that draws Arnella into an act of reverence. Their sensual encounter is described in tactile, elemental terms—his "wooden-textured hands" meeting her "fabric palms" in a "greeting to the sun." As they "danced to the rays," his feather-like fingers moved across her body, releasing her milk (140). The merging of sexual, maternal, and natural imagery blurs boundaries between lover, spirit, and earth. Only after the encounter is the man revealed as Godfree, Baby-Girl's father. Wood, linked earlier in the novel to his essence, underscores this connection. The scene blurs sex, breastfeeding, and nature, merging eroticism with care. Through this

riverside union, Arnella channels Black magic—ancestral knowledge rooted in Oshun's fresh waters—and reconnects with the sacred.

Caribbean Kinship and Mothering

Arnella and Valrie share a deep intimacy, including a consensual relationship with Godfree. "Which one a oonuh wan me fi chase you?" he asks. "You have fi chase both a we," they reply, laughing. They kiss him, tease him, and make love "under the ackee tree." Their bond, erotic and sisterly, promises to remain unbroken "forever, together" (*Begins* 69-70) .

Their relationship is an "unconventional and unexploitative" love triangle, "in the sense that it is informed not by his choice but by the women's" (Weir-Soley 143). This reversal questions the traditional assumptions that man is the "principal catalyst for . . . long-term relationships with women" (Spencer 116). Godfree, whose name indicates Adisa's intention to rid her characters of a Judeo-Christian God (Weir-Soley 148), is modelled after Shango, the Orisha of supreme power and sexual virility, a womanizer who dominates fire and is the master of thunder and lightning. The love triangle in *It Begins* echoes the Yoruba legend of Shango and his wives, Oya and Oshun. Shango, Orisha of fire and thunder, was paired with Oya, the fierce goddess of winds and storms, and Oshun, deity of love, beauty, and fertility. Each wife offered contrasting energies—Oya's strength and Oshun's sweetness—balancing Shango's passionate nature.

Influenced by Western norms, Godfree proposes to Arnella, who declines and suggests her sister Valrie instead. For Valrie and Godfree's honeymoon, Arnella is excluded from their hotel room by Milford, their father figure, who rejects Olive's family's unconventional kinship. Yet patriarchy fails: "the Sunday night before they come home, Arnella met them in town and the three spent a glorious day surrounded by each other's love" (*Begins* 112). This may be what Adrienne Rich calls "a lesbian continuum" (Rich qtd. in Weir-Soley172). Although "the blood ties between these two women complicate an overtly sexual reading," by deliberately constructing such a "deep and provocative relationship" between two women, Adisa announces "the antidote to female competition and to the breakdown of communal values" (Weir-Soley 172). By challenging heteronormativity, the author subverts colonial hierarchies and the fragmentation of mind, body, and spirit. Lorde argues that "[a]ll children of lesbians are ours" embracing a socialist model of mothering, where children symbolize the community's foundation rather than personal property ("First" qtd. in Gumbs 23). This clarifies why "mothering is a queer thing" rather than a hierarchical, patriarchal institution (Gumbs 23).

Adisa dismantles hierarchies privileging the secular over the sacred, male over female, heterosexual over homosexual, and divine over erotic. Decolonization,

then, is "to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness … that is both material and existential … and which, when satisfied, can subvert … the pain of dismemberment" (Alexander 281). Thus, the power of the erotic lies in a consensual love triangle that nurtures inner desires and supports grassroots forms of active citizenship (Sheller 243-245). As Lorde states, "[i]n touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (Lorde 57).

This love triangle underscores Adisa's reimagining of the Yoruba myth where Oya, Shango's first wife and warrior equal, is overshadowed by Oshun, his beloved mistress, to suggest the possibility of non-hierarchical sexual and familial bonds (De la Torre 59, 75-76; Eyin and Eugênio 166). Both women share not only the same man but also maternal care of Arnella's Baby-Girl (*Begins* 88). Other acts of mothering also unfold throughout the novel, further challenging conventional kinship roles. When Marva dies in childbirth, Beryl tells widower Ainsworth, "Ah gwane tek care of you daughter fah you" (234), while Arnella breastfeeds the baby: "'… all things made right,' Miss Cotton whispered […] before passing her to Arnella to suckle" (235). The notion of the family as a "school for citizenship," with women as "teachers […] serving a conservative function," is subverted each time Adisa's women resist the public codes meant to discipline private life (Sheller 162).

From Fatherless to Motherful Families

In the Caribbean, men often have 'outside' children—born to women other than their wives—frequently neglecting their first children to support a new family (Brown and Roopnarine 94). Notably, such narratives are often shaped by the father's perspective, casting so-called "outside children" in a negative light—even though it is the fathers who are truly absent from the "motherful" homes these children belong to (Gumbs 30). The absence of the father is also notable in cases when men do not provide for their children from the very beginning, leaving their baby mothers in charge of their offspring, a behavior that, it is said, has certainly enforced the image of men as irresponsible fathers (Brown and Roopnarine 10-11), and that of "female-headed families" as pathological (Gumbs 30).

Possibly shaped by the widespread reality of father absence in Caribbean households—a theme Adisa explores in *I Name Me Name* (2008)—the author emphasizes sisterhood as a form of kinship that transcends blood ties and becomes the foundation for community and survival. These domestic intrusions clearly unsettle the "symbolic" base for the "construction of the nation" that places women "only in the roles of wife, mother, and sister—never as citizens in their own right." For example, Velma gives birth to two daughters, Olive and

Arnella, and denies the presence of a father, silencing the patriarchal structure in favor of a matrifocal parenting model. By foregrounding "subaltern women's voices and actions," Adisa explores "the possibilities for recovering an anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal history submerged in official sources" (Sheller 162). Although the reader is informed of Velma's mysterious relationship with a married man, these intimate encounters are left open to the reader's interpretation and are met with skepticism among the villagers:

> "How you mean nuh man nuh involve?"
>
> "Is fool and stupid and just born you think we is?"
>
> "So me neva know you did name Mary?"
>
> "But even Mary did have sense find Joseph." (*Begins,* 65, 67)

The villagers' skepticism deconstructs the cult of the Virgin Mary, who is said to have conceived through divine intervention, bypassing sex. The villagers' curiosity about Velma's pregnancy is not derisive but intentional—it questions a biblical discourse that opposes the pure Virgin to the impure prostitute, privileging the spiritual over the sexual.

Another detail that disrupts traditional family structures is the revelation that Arnella and Valrie are not biological sisters. Olive, long assumed to be Arnella's mother, is in fact her older sister. Both Olive and her mother, Velma, gave birth on the same day. When Velma fell ill, Olive took on the role of caregiver, nursing both infants as her own (67). This further illustrates how black motherhood in Jamaica is rooted in sisterhood and survival. Arnella and Valrie lived as twins until an overheard argument between their parents revealed the truth:

> "A tired a you damn blasted family. No one know who is who. Is only two picknie me have, so me nuh know why three a call me daddy and me hafi mind three."
>
> Arnella and Valrie was playing hopscotch in the yard and thought Uncle Milford were referring to Milton, their little brother. Certainly he didn't mean them. (68)

Household structures in Kristoff Village mirror those in many Jamaican peasant communities, which have often been labeled "disorganized" by anthropologists for diverging from Western family norms (Besson 36-107; Ajayi 484). However, research on Afro-Caribbean households reveals these structures as expressions of a broader continuum of peasant cultural resistance (Weir-Soley 173). Uncle Milford embodies patriarchal, colonial values rooted in a Judeo-Christian

worldview that rejects non-traditional families. In contrast, Kristoff Village's narrative is shaped by a matrifocal network of Black women who mother, nurture, and heal through mutual support.

Where Water Meets Other Water

Adisa counters the Virgin Mary's cult by reviving Erzulie, Vodoun goddess of sexual and spiritual wholeness (Weir-Soley 7-8). Monica—a former prostitute entangled with a married man—is irresistibly drawn to blue, red, and pink, the emblematic colors of the Lwa Erzulie (*Begins* 27, 31). Erzulie is "a model of black female subjectivity that would reconnect sex and God-consciousness, spirit and flesh, in the making of a nonidealized, possibly self-contradictory, assuredly self-seeking, folk-directed, black woman whose ontological motivation is a divine quest for wholeness" (Weir-Soley 7-8). Her main traits reflect those of "women during slavery—whether white, or mulatto mistresses, negro servants or mulatto concubines, in their vexed class and color connections." Monica embodies a form of women's survival, using her body and sexuality to gain status and goods, while evoking "a memory of slavery, intimacy and revenge" rooted in a past where "men and women, black and white, found themselves linked in the throes of power and domination" (Dayan 11).

Erzulie dismantles the mystifying split that casts "women into objects to be desired or abhorred," embracing diverse forms of womanhood. After all, "[t]he ideal of woman, pure of stain, fixed on her pedestal, is only possible in the male imaginary because of the invention of a dark, debased sister" (Dayan 8). Adisa rewrites the myth of Erzulie to challenge the virgin-prostitute binary, recasting the maternal figure through Monica with traits that offer women strength, peace, and full recognition of their humanity.

Monica's affair with Desmond sparks violent retaliation from his wife Grace and her friends, who

> shoved her into the bedroom, pushed her on the bed. They wound rope around her wrists and ankles, attached the pieces around her hands to the window levers so she was spread across her bed, and the pieces attached to her feet to the closet door. … Then they closed in on her and one of them smeared her face with pepper, pushed pepper up her nose. They flung her dress over her head and ripped off her panties. One of them shoved her pepper fingers as deep into her womb as they could reach until the cup of chopped peppers was empty and her fingers were on fire. They didn't say anything then. They didn't look at her or one another. They couldn't hear her scream in her head or see her tears sealing her eyes. As they left, they turned on the television and lights and pulled the door shut behind them, leaving her to go silently mad. (*Begins* 131)

In a private conversation I held with the author about her novel, Adisa clarifies that the attackers—whose Christian worldview frames marriage as a form of ownership—are unsettled by Monica's conspicuous sexual autonomy and her refusal to conform to patriarchal norms, including the taboo on relations with married men. I read this to mean that Grace considers her husband as property and therefore casts Monica as the usurper, prompting Grace and her friends to punish Monica, even though Desmond is the actual adulterer. Their response is not merely violent but performative: in a punitive act intended to reassert dominance and produce public humiliation, they force pepper into her orifices, causing her an endless pain they deem deserved. Elina Valovirta borrows Ahmed's explorations on shame to explain how, in these women's view, "Monica's shamelessness becomes a shame for which she needs to be punished" (Valovirta 91). This act functions as gendered torture and communal policing, expressing what Adisa calls "patriarchal self-hatred," "women who felt powerless and accepted patriarchy and therefore wanted to hurt a woman who was independent sexually and independent in terms of free from the patriarchal reins." Read with a sociocultural lens, the assault stages how sexualized violence operates both to restore male prerogatives and to discipline female transgression, producing long-term corporeal and psychic harm while signaling communal boundaries of acceptable femininity. In *Allí abajo de las mujeres* (2025) Trifonia Melibea Obono stages a ritualized episode of communal humiliation in which young girls are bound and subjected to a violent punitive practice using pepper; this illustrates how acts of aggression are mobilized as a form of patriarchal policing and internalized self-hatred:

> La olla del picante más obsceno —odó— se colocó delante de nosotras.
>
> Varias mujeres nos ataron de manos.
>
> Las mujeres nos abrieron las piernas.
>
> El picante tenía una dirección: las vulvas, nuestras, de las niñas de la cuadrilla, incapaces de conocer el lugar de la mujer en el mundo fang (212).[3]

This depiction exemplifies the reproduction of patriarchal violence enacted within the Fang ethnic group, where women sometimes become agents of coercion against other women in Equatorial Guinea.

Medico-legal and journalistic reports document and denounce the forced vaginal insertion of capsicum (chili) or other irritants as a form of torture and punitive sexual violence against girls and women (Dorji *et al*.; Amnesty International; "Three" ; "Harig"). To my knowledge, Adisa and Obono are the only novelists to fictionalize this form of punitive genital violence. Adisa told me privately that she did not originally intend to depict a documented practice —she experienced the episode in her writing as a kind of "genetic memory"—to

denounce systemic violence against women, but that, after publication, interlocutors corroborated its occurrence: a Jamaican soldier informed that comparable punishment had been used against prostitutes, and a Nigerian reader reported hearing of similar incidents in her community (Adisa, 26 October 2025). Obono, by contrast, frames her fiction as testimonial and positions her novel as an explicit artistic instance of that practice among different African communities and beyond.

Intrafemale sexual aggression problematizes the binary of male perpetrator/female victim by illustrating how women can become agents of patriarchal violence. Such scenes expose the extent to which patriarchal logics are institutionalized and internalized, producing perpetrators and victims across gender lines and foregrounding sexualized violence as a systemic, rather than purely individual, phenomenon.[4] In *It Begins with Tears*, the violation of the female body functions as a structuring motif that exposes how shame and punishment are manufactured by patriarchal and colonial power. Adisa stages this through intracommunal violence—women's assault on Monica—and through sexual predation in Beryl's case by an American tourist; the latter is treated more fully in my thesis (Serna-Martínez, *Mapping* 250–259).

Monica's collective healing begins when Miss Cotton, stirred by a dream vision of her agony, comes to her rescue. Beryl, Angel, Velma, Miss Dahlia, Olive, Valrie, and Arnella are also compelled to help, and their empathy toward Monica's grief is notable: "They all ached. The crime was too violent for words. The lips of their vaginas throbbed in sympathy, their wombs ached, and their salty tears left stain marks on their faces" (*Begins* 136). The women's shared bodily pain—where "a violation against one woman" becomes "a transgression against all"—opens space for the final rituals of "private and collective cleansing" (Feng 167). Healing rituals in the novel allow pain to be named, shared, and transformed. These include "rituals of forgiveness," "rituals of physical and emotional healing," and "rituals of communal and individual cleansing following physical violence" (Spencer 108).

Ahmed's politics of pain is evident in Adisa's novel, where a character's trauma impacts the wider community. Mothering involves empathizing with others, sharing their suffering, and ensuring their stories are not forgotten. Ahmed insists that the "stories of pain must be heard" because "forgetting would be a repetition of the violence" (Ahmed 34, 33). This explains Arnella's exhortation to Monica "Call dem out. Name dose who peppa you. Name dem; dem not you sistas" during the healing ceremony at the river (*Begins* 215). Pain is understood as "a contingent attachment to the world," not an emotion that leads to catharsis or personal emotional release (Francis "Last" 162; *Fictions* 8, 47). Exposure to these intimate stories of pain encourages readers to connect with "the world of other bodies." These stories move the reader emotionally, drawing them towards other

bodies. After all, the word 'emotion' etymologically means "to move or to move out" (Ahmed 28, 11).

With Valrie caring for Baby-Girl, Arnella steps beyond the domestic sphere to help Monica. Her healing is tender and embodied—kneeling beside Monica, she releases milk from her breast onto her "swollen inner thighs and blistered vaginal area" (*Begins* 149). Arnella's flowing milk channels the healing force of Oshun, the river goddess. But this fluid care transcends gender. Desmond also nurtures Monica with love and tenderness through oral sex, "he bent to slowly lick the remaining pepper from the folds of Monica's labia and the mouth of her vagina" "blow[ing] his love-breath" and tracing "every fold" of her wounded body with his tongue, imagining "he felt her healing under the moist attention."

In this scene, the patriarchal role of women as pleasure-givers is reversed. Monica receives oral sex as an act of care, guided by Desmond's belief that "his love was strong enough to make her well" (157). Additionally, he feels responsible for Monica's pain, because "as a married man, Desmond was himself the actual adulterer" (Valovirta 149). Desmond knew Monica suffered because he had not had the courage to leave his wife: "Last night he had failed to come home because he hated confrontation, but his action had left the way clear for someone to attack and deeply hurt his love." Thus Monica— "the perpetual giver whose body can be used by men at will" (*Begins* 156)—transforms into a lovable person. She has been sharing intense erotic feelings with Desmond, and through this, "the power of each other's feelings" has been awakened between them (Lorde 58). The confluence of waters, echoing both oral sex and river merging, symbolizes healing and renewal. At the river, secrets surface. Desmond's gentle use of saliva on Monica's wounds fuses sensuality and care, embodying tidalectic, erotic-spiritual healing.

The title suggests healing begins with tears—bodily traces of past wounds—signaling the scar and the body's power to break psychic numbness (Serna-Martínez, "Affective" 17). The "ritual of female sympathy" that occurs when the women bathe in the river is what breaks the "persistent 'latency'" of "unspeakable memory" and opens "access to the past." It is along these lines that the ritual "attain[s] the form of narrative memory" (Feng 168). Once the story is released, like tears joining the river of communal history, personal trauma can be healed and decolonization from below begins. Alexander personifies the ocean as a female force that resurfaces memories submerged by history. Thus, the "Ocean . . . will reveal the secrets that lie at the bottom." The ocean, then, "will call you by your ancient name" thus impelling you to answer because you have not fully forgotten, because "[w]ater always remembers" (Alexander 285).

The healing takes place in the River Mumma, which, in addition to being a physical location in the novel, is also the spirit of the river in Jamaican peasant tradition, having traits from both Oshun and Yemoja (Weir-Soley 176). The ritual

ceremonies enacted in the river evoke a series of erotic, sensual experiences, like "the warm water that was like expert hands massaging their bodies" (*Begins* 215). The river ceremony allows women to confront their pain by naming it. There, Monica will call out the names of the women who peppered her, and Beryl will also name her story of rape she had secretly kept for herself out of shame (*Begins* 224-225, Serna-Martínez, *Mapping* 250-259).

Adisa's recognition of the power of the erotic as a source of female resistance is aligned with Lorde's affirmation that women must acknowledge their own erotic power in order to become, not only sexually and sensually whole, but also spiritually and emotionally balanced (56). As Adisa herself conveys,

> my first objective in this novel was to look at healing and to try to understand why there is so much pain among black people apart from the issue of slavery . . . we have not healed from slavery because we have not done any rituals; . . . In all cultures, not just African cultures, whenever there is some kind of trauma there is a ritual performed to bring back balance to the community. But many of us black people in the new world have not practiced any kind of rituals. (Spencer 108)

Adisa's portrayal of African diasporic spiritual practices reflects a clear decolonizing agenda, showing how sexual and spiritual healing rituals foster sisterhood and inclusive community ties. Black magic, depicted as a grounding, accessible force rather than supernatural, is naturalized through its healing role in the characters' lives. Adisa crafts a poetics of eroticism in which women and men transform themselves and others through radical mothering—a queer, decolonizing practice that transcends kinship and gender norms. As Gumbs and others affirm, women of color redefine mothering while highlighting our fundamental interdependence: "we need each other to survive." This inter-dependence, this need of mothering figures, elevates mothering not as a biologically determined practice, but as a "liberating practice" that can decolonize Jamaican rural communities and "thwart runaway capitalism" (Gumbs *et al.* xv).

Read together, Brathwaite's tidalectics and queer theory clarify why Adisa insists on non-teleological histories and non-binary epistemologies. Both formations decenter linear causality and fixed categorical identity, privileging relationality, temporality as rhythm, and knowing as embodied practice. In this register, radical mothering emerges as an explicitly queer practice—a political mode of care that exceeds biological kinship, reworks gendered expectations, and stages collective survival through caregiving, cooperative labor, and ritual repair. Complementarily, natural realism functions as a tidalectical phenomenology of healing: Adisa naturalizes spiritual practice and Black magic by showing how

embodied rites, waterways, and orisha cosmologies operate as repeated, wave-like techniques for remembering and restoring communal life. Together these registers displace teleological synthesis. History and healing are not trajectories toward a single end but ongoing, plural choreographies of repair, memory, and resurgence. In *It Begins with Tears*, then, wounds do not close into silence; they become currents—flowing through the wound—where radical mothering and natural realism enact decolonizing practices of regeneration.

Notes

1. Opal Palmer Adisa, interview with Kamau Brathwaite, New York, April 18, 2006, transcript provided to the author by Adisa; references are from an unpublished, unpaged version of an interview later published in *The Caribbean Writer* no. 23 (2009).

2. *Konnus* are fragments of the carnival tradition in the Caribbean, "the konnus that we know throughout Plantation America are the visible publicly permitted survival ikons of African religious culture" (Brathwaite, "Alarms" 90-91). For further views on Obeah in literature, see Janelle Rodriques, *Narratives.*

3. My translation: A pot of the obscenest spice—*odó*— was placed before us. Several women bound our hands. These women forced us apart. The pungent mixture was aimed at a single target: the vulvas, ours, those of the girls in the gang, unable to know a woman's place within the Fang world.

4. For more about GBV and representation, see Karen Boyle, "What's in a Name?" and Sinalo and Mandolini, *Representing.*

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