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In Between Waters:
Nationalism and Alternative Sovereignty
in Twentieth Century U.S. Virgin Islands Poetry

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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This master's thesis responds to the absence of U.S. Virgin Islands literature from Anglophone Caribbean literary history. I explore U.S. Virgin Islands poetry from the early twentieth century until the 1970s using close reading, historical and cultural analysis. I argue that poets from the U.S. Virgin Islands developed a nationalist literature based on cultural tradition rather than independence because they embraced the possibilities of political and economic progress under U.S. sovereignty. This body of poetry, then, articulates an alternative mode of belonging that allows for feelings of sovereignty to thrive despite the colonial relationship with the United States. Ultimately, U.S. Virgin Islands poetry illuminates how conventional ideas about Anglophone Caribbean literature obscure the complex historical relationships that produced nationalist voices within and beyond empire.

The thesis of Amrey Mathurin is approved.

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Introduction

I discovered Virgin Islands literature only after I left the islands. Imagine, as a child, wondering why nobody cares to represent your life, words and experiences. Although I related to Holden Caulfield's teenage frustrations, empathy was shackled by the cultural and racial differences between us. Although I mused over O. Henry's plot twists, I preferred listening to Anansi's antics occurring in my backyard. Although we, too, sang of America, we knew that we did not share the exact same history and culture as black people on the continent. I yearned to see my world, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, reflected back to me through a book. I believed that the literal would somehow validate my own experience. I wanted to believe that my place in time, my land, and my people had a voice worth listening to. These feelings only got stronger as I became aware of Caribbean Literature. I began to read about these parallel worlds extremely similar to my own, and became excited about writings that placed Caribbean subjectivity at the center. Although I felt as though I lived on *Miguel Street*, these separate realities also diverged from the reality of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Perhaps I noticed that our "nation language" had different ties or that our history of Danish and U.S. colonialism created a Caribbean identity not represented on the page. Moreover, I struggled to find authors, poets or playwrights from the U.S. Virgin Islands in any discussion of African American or Caribbean Literature. This absence led to the questions that formed the basis of this thesis: Does Virgin Islands literature exist? If so, does the literature articulate *Virgin Islandness*? Does the literary nationalism diverge from dominant nationalist visions throughout the Anglophone Caribbean? How has American sovereignty over the U.S. Virgin Islands impacted the national identities that emerge?¹

¹ I am focused strictly on the U.S. Virgin Islands, not the British Virgin Islands. I refer to the U.S. Virgin Islands simply as the Virgin Islands for stylistic purposes.

The master narrative of Anglophone Caribbean literary tradition begins with the emergence of explicit anticolonial texts in the mid-20th century.² Kenneth Ramchand cemented this narrative in his foundational book, *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, published in 1970. He argues that the increase of a literate black population coupled with the stirring nationalist politics allowed for the creation of a West Indian literature (Ramchand 12-38). In the nineteenth century British Caribbean, the colonial policy prohibited illegitimate children, mostly poor blacks, from attending publicly funded schools. For Ramchand, this explains the dearth of black Caribbean novelists during this earlier period. However, he goes on to explain that public education expanded in the twentieth century with the rise in scholarship opportunities for secondary education.

Many of the canonical novelists during this period, such as George Lamming and Kamau Brathwaite, earned scholarships not only to local colonial schools, but eventually to London's colleges. Their migration coincided with the migration of thousands of Caribbean men to England, emblemized by the first voyage of the *Empire Windrush* from Kingston to London in 1948. According to Ramchand, migration allowed these writers to escape the illiteracy of the lower and middle class black Caribbean. The writers became fueled by the nationalist sentiments that swept across the Caribbean in the 1930s and 1940s (Ramchand 49). As an offspring of Garveyism and the Russian Revolution, this popular discontent with the colonial order intensified with adult universal suffrage after World War II (Ibid.). From London, these writers sought to articulate this growing nationalism in the Caribbean through their writing.

² For works that present this genesis narrative of anglophone Caribbean literature, see Rhonda Cobham, "The Background," *West Indian Literature*, Ed. Bruce King (Hamden, Conn: Archon, 1979); Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1970)

Cultural production became a significant terrain to express nationalist visions because British colonialism worked through cultural oppression. In *Modern Blackness*, an examination of Jamaican nationalism, Deborah Thomas contends, “British imperialism was not merely a system of economic exploitation and political domination but also one of cultural control that attempted to socialize colonial populations into accepting the moral and cultural superiority of Englishness” (Thomas 4). Literary representation of the Caribbean nation, then, sought to express culture and values that countered British cultural hegemony by recuperating the African folk tradition demonized under British imperialism. This rise of anticolonial literature linked the creation of this national aesthetic to sovereignty and group consciousness.

The dominant Caribbean literary spaces during this time reflected this emphasis on defining the nation. Kamau Brathwaite and John La Rose formed the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in 1966. They sought to organize Caribbean artists in exile around black radical politics and creating a Caribbean aesthetic (Donnell 18). *Savacou*, a groundbreaking literary magazine emerges out of this moment. The third volume of “New Writing,” published in 1970, contained only vernacular poetry and fiction. This issue ushered in an emphasis on the relationship between Caribbean vernacular and Caribbean nationalism. Writers placed the language of the poor black people at the center of Caribbean authenticity, employing what Kamau Brathwaite theorized as nation language.

“New Writing,” foreshadowed Brathwaite’s vision of Caribbean nationalism grounded in folk language. Brathwaite explores the ability of language to create a wholly Caribbean aesthetic in his 1976 essay, “History of the Voice.” Here, Brathwaite argues that nation language offers a mode of expression out of which an authentic Caribbean voice emerges. Nation language captures the spoken language of the folk, and thus challenges the European emphasis on the

scribal. Through necessity, African slaves submerged their native languages into the imperial languages dominating the region. In the end, although their African languages adapted to the new linguistic environment, its form and syntax remained present in the working class vernacular.

Brathwaite's conception of nation language reflects the master narrative, as it represents Caribbean literature as a nationalist project. The African based syntax opposes the European literary tradition. Nation language allows Caribbean poets to break away from the strict pentametric form that marks European poetry. Brathwaite argues that the pentameter, English poetry's dominant form, carries an experience unfamiliar with the hurricane, which "...does not roar in the pentameter" (Brathwaite 265). For Brathwaite, a Caribbean literary aesthetic becomes a pathway to a national mode of expression. Nation language not only captures the complexity of Caribbean experience, but also confirms the presence of a Caribbean nation. Brathwaite's turn towards the folk tradition, as a source of nationhood, reflects the concerns of writers during this time.

Canonization has reified this master narrative that parallels the rise of Caribbean nationalism and Caribbean literature during this mid-twentieth century moment. Current scholarship continues to challenge this hegemonic narrative about Anglophone Caribbean literary history, what Alison Donnell calls the "nationalist paradigm" (Donnell 10). Scholars question the periodization of this paradigm, its gendered nature, as well as the ways it dismisses middle class cultural productions in the region. Together, this scholarship argues that conventional ideas about Anglophone Caribbean literature obscure the complex historical relationships that produced nationalist voices within and beyond empire.

Leah Rosenberg reassesses the literary historiography of the Caribbean by locating its genesis in nationalist literature produced well before the 1940s. In *Nationalism and the*

Formation of Caribbean Literature, Rosenberg locates the beginnings of Caribbean nationalism in the rise of newspaper culture and previously dismissed texts of the early twentieth century. Similarly, Evelyn O’Callaghan challenges the periodization of the nationalist paradigm by excavating Caribbean women writers from as early as the nineteenth century in *Women Writing the West Indies*. O’Callaghan’s work comes at a time where scholars began to recover the Caribbean woman’s literary voice that the masculine nationalist paradigm silenced. A slew of texts centered on Caribbean women appeared during the early 1990s. Selwyn Cudjoe edited the papers of that first conference in *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (1990). During that same year Carol Boyce Davies and Elaine Fido published the edited volume, *Out of the Kumbla*. These works challenged the masculine discourse of the nationalist paradigm by revealing the contributions of Caribbean women writers. Moreover, these works established the foundational critical works that articulated a theory of reading Caribbean literature written by women.

In *Making Men* Belinda Edmondson challenges the counter-cultural discourse intimated with this literary history, as she argues that Victorian sensibilities influenced the structures of nationalism articulated by the “founding fathers” of Anglophone Caribbean literature. Her following work, *Caribbean Middlebrow*, counters the idea that the middle class Caribbean lacked its own authentic cultural aesthetic by sketching a history of middle class cultural productions in the British Caribbean. Currently, Alison Donnell’s *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* provides the definitive historiography of Caribbean literature. Donnell illuminates the ways that each major analytical shift throughout the literary history has worked to silence certain voices. Although Donnell argues that the nationalist paradigm remains the most dominant

analytical frame, she shows how the movement towards a diasporic paradigm in the 1990s vitiated local voices in favor of Caribbean writers across the black atlantic.

My thesis builds upon this current scholarship by examining the ways literature from the U.S. Virgin Islands diverges from the dominant interpretation of Anglophone Caribbean literary history. Many Anglophone Caribbean authors writing within the “national paradigm,” articulated anticolonial nationalisms that placed African based folk tradition at the center of national belonging, rather than British cultural practices and values. However, the Virgin Islands’ continued colonial relationship with the United States has fostered alternative forms of sovereignty and nationalism in Virgin Islands literature. Since the Virgin Islands remains under U.S. sovereignty, its literature does not fit into the hegemonic framework that equates Caribbean literature with independence and explicit anticolonialism. With the transfer of sovereignty in 1917, memories of slave revolts and peasant uprisings under Danish rule evolved into hope for a future protected by America’s ideals: equality, freedom, citizenship and economic progress. With this, a sense of nationhood developed similar to Knight's conception of Puerto Rican nationalism in *The Caribbean*, where Virgin Islanders, “saw the United States not as the enemy but as a misguided, ill informed, potentially benevolent friend” (Knight 269). Consequently, the literary history of the Virgin Islands does not begin with the same emphasis on establishing an explicitly anticolonial nationalism focused on independence.

Lionel Roberts, a Virgin Islands political leader during the transfer from Danish to United States sovereignty, comments on this apparent lack of drive towards self-determination:

A very unfortunate place is our little island. At the will of Tom, Dick, or Harry it is swayed to compare sometimes with the United States, sometimes with England,

sometimes with Puerto Rico, and every other place under God's sun; but never with itself and the things consistent with and necessary to its own government.³

While Roberts addresses his island of St. Thomas, he was a member of the Colonial Council that represented the entire Virgin Islands during this time. Roberts presents the image of a Virgin Islands unsure of itself because it remains in constant flux. This Virgin Islands is not rooted in space or time, but floats somewhere between or within the colonial histories of the United States, England and Puerto Rico. This location by triangulation shrouds the possibility of a *Virgin Islandsness*. National consciousness becomes submerged as the Virgin Islands can only refer to outside culture and histories. In this view, the liminal space that the Virgin Islands occupies prevents movement towards autonomy. Roberts writes this during a time of oppressive U.S. military rule of the islands in the late 1920s. Within this context, "Tom, Dick and Harry" appear to represent the American colonial forces that governed the islands. With this, it seems that Roberts positions the United States as an antagonist to Virgin Islands self-determination. However, Roberts' actual political actions depict a more complicated relationship.

Roberts did not see independence as the only means towards self-determination, as he worked to expand Virgin Islanders' political rights through legislation and political reform. A 1992 profile of Roberts on the University of the Virgin Islands digital library website details how he spearheaded the creation of the first Virgin Islands constitution, the Organic Act of 1936, after travelling to Washington D.C. to negotiate with the Federal Government ("92--Profile") This first Organic Act expanded suffrage and established a local Virgin Islands government with increased autonomy. Consequently, the initial antagonism in Roberts' quote falls apart, as he uses the colonial system to further the self-determination of the Virgin Islands. Instead of

³ Roberts' quote is taken from Gordon Lewis, *The Virgin Islands: A Caribbean Lilliput* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 357.

establishing an oppositional anticolonial nationalism to recuperate the Virgin Islands sense of self, its national consciousness, Roberts engaged with colonial rule. He envisioned a national Virgin Islands identity coming out of this relationship with imperialism.

Roberts' complicated nationalist vision emblemizes the alternative forms of nationalism expressed in Virgin Islands literature. Looking at Virgin Islands poetry written from the inception of U.S. sovereignty in 1917 to the independence era of the 1960s, I argue that poets from the U.S. Virgin Islands developed a nationalist literature based on cultural tradition rather than formal independence because Virgin Islanders saw American sovereignty engendering their own economic and political progress. This cultural nationalism alongside attachment to the American imperial project allowed for "sovereignty within colonialism", an ironic space where imperial ties to the United States spurred an increased sense of sovereignty.⁴ I choose to analyze poetry from the Virgin Islands because it remains closely linked to the history of Black Nationalism and the black radical tradition.⁵ Compared to the hegemonic nature of the novel, poetry provides the space to create new visions being and freedom. Together, the poetry presents a model of Caribbean Black Nationalism and Caribbean literature that is not inextricably linked to anticolonial independence. Rather, this literary history demonstrates the ways that Virgin Islanders sense of sovereignty, as politically autonomous people grows out of an imperial intimacy with the United States.⁶

⁴ I build upon Partha Chatterjee's theorization of sovereignty within colonialism in Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). Chatterjee traces how Bengali anticolonial nationalists first looked to the private or spiritual domain to construct feelings of sovereignty within colonial India.

⁵ I gathered the selection of poetry from the path-breaking anthology of U.S. Virgin Islands poetry, see Alexander Thayer, and Marvin Williams, eds, *Yellow Cedars Blooming: An Anthology of Virgin Islands Poetry* (USVI: VI Humanities Council, 1998).

⁶ Adria Imada explores this phenomenon in Hawai'i, see Adria Imada, *Aloha America*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2012).

The literary history of the Virgin Islands deviates from the dominant narrative chronicling the rise of Caribbean literature. These poets did not find national consciousness solely through nation language and folk tradition, but also through American citizenship. This framework builds upon Deborah Thomas' conceptualization of Jamaican nationalism in *Modern Blackness*. Thomas conceptualizes "modern blackness," as an alternative vision of nationalism created by the Jamaican black working class left out of the dominant multiracial nationalism of the island (Thomas 7). "Modern Blackness" comes out of a process of appropriation and engagement with western modernity and culture, allowing these Jamaicans to claim their own modernity, and also to progress within a society whose dominant form of nationalism has continuously marginalized them (Ibid 22). Thomas stresses the ways that Jamaicans make new meaning out of this cultural appropriation represents a form of self-making. Within this framework, Virgin Islanders do not suffer from false consciousness, but rather resignify imperial constructs in order to establish a sovereign identity that can make a claim to freedom. The Virgin Islands, then, presents an alternative form of sovereignty to the formally independent Anglophone Caribbean. In the end, this thesis aims to illuminate how the Virgin Islands destabilize both Anglophone Caribbean literary history, as well as paradigms of the nation and the postcolonial.

I. Historical Background

Virgin Islanders' acceptance of United States sovereignty directly resulted from the chaos and turmoil experienced under two centuries of Danish colonial rule. Many poor Virgin Islanders became disillusioned after several major revolts failed to free them from oppression. Potential economic and political progress under United States sovereignty provided hope after years of struggle within the Danish plantocracy. Virgin Islands poetry during the first years of U.S. sovereignty reflects these hopeful expectations in the wake of colonial decay. Prominent poets, such as J. Antonio Jarvis, Cyril Creque and J. P. Gimenez, highlighted the ills of Danish peasant life, and argued for American intervention as a way to progress and rise from poverty. Thus, an analysis of Virgin Islands literary nationalism must begin with an understanding of the legacies of black resistance within this colonial history.¹

Seekers of empire juggled control over the Virgin Islands, despite Spain's "right" to settle the islands after Christopher Columbus landed on St. Croix in 1493. England, Holland, France and the French chapter of the Knights of Malta fought for control of the Virgin Islands throughout the 17th century. No European settlement on the islands thrived due to conflict between the colonists. Denmark began their colonization project by settling on St. Thomas in 1672. Attracted by trading opportunities, Denmark established the colony through the Danish West India Company (Bastian 20-21). According to historian Jeannette Bastian in her groundbreaking book *Owning Memory*, St. Thomas quickly became a refugee colony, "a polyglot of nationalities and languages..." (Bastian 21). These "foreign" settlers came to St. Thomas with the skills needed for successful plantation farming, and looked for free labor from

¹ For a comprehensive history of the U.S. Virgin Islands, see Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 1994); On the issue of historical memory and archives in the USVI, see Jeanette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archive and Found Its History* (Connecticut: Libraries University Press, 2003).

the West African coast. In *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States*, premier Virgin Islands historian Isaac Dookhan reports that by 1688, 317 whites and 422 black slaves made up St. Thomas' population ("A History" 70-71). Looking to increase their Caribbean holdings, Denmark established a colony on St. John in 1718 (Dookhan, "A History" 76-77).

The plantation economy developed rapidly, as the soil of St. John suited sugarcane cultivation. By 1733, 109 plantations on St. John brutalized 1,087 black slaves (Hall, "Table 1.1" 5). The first act of resistance for these enslaved people was marronage, which the Danish colonial regime harshly punished. In *A Historical Account of St. Thomas*, John Knox, a Danish reverend and early Virgin Islands historian, recounts that leaders of runaway slaves were "pinched three times with red-hot iron, and then hung." (69). Slaves in St. John responded to their horrific treatment by carrying out a bloody rebellion against the Danish in 1733. Astoundingly, the rebels possessed St. John for six months, fending off Danish numerous attacks until finally becoming overwhelmed.

During the rebellion, Denmark extended its empire, buying St. Croix from France in 1733 (Hall 1). By this time, Danish planters gained more expertise in managing a plantation economy. By 1792 St. Croix became a major exporter of sugar in the Caribbean. The accelerated growth of the plantation economy rapidly increased the number of slaves on the island (Bastian 22). Quickly, "St. Croix became the center of the slave economy in the Danish West Indies" (Bastian 22). However, by the 1820s the sugar industry's dominance ended due to prolonged drought, high costs and outside competition (Dookhan, "A History" 80-82).

In the wake of emancipation of slaves in British colonies in 1833 and further economic decay, enslaved people on St. Croix rebelled in 1848. The St. Croix slave revolt of 1848 remains an overlooked event during "The Age of Revolution." However, obscurity does not reflect the

historical significance of the revolt. This revolt remains striking, as the Danish colonial government abolished legal slavery directly after the enslaved people organized and protested their bondage. Furthermore, the process of the revolt diverges from most other slave uprising during this period. On July 2nd 1848, thousands of enslaved people gathered around Fort Frederick, the Danish military base located on the island's west side town of Frederiksted (Hall 208). They refused to work and demanded their freedom. This initial protest remained disciplined and relatively nonviolent. The enslaved people ransacked the police station and a judge's houses, metonyms of the colonial regime, but did not kill any Danish officials or citizens. Still, these revolutionaries used the threat of violence in order to gain leverage against the Danish's monopoly on arms and weapons.²

In his first person account of the revolt later recorded in Taylor's *Leaflets from the Danish West Indies*, Frederik von Scholten, brother of the Governor-General, recounts this strategic threat of violence in the words of one of the revolutionaries: "Massa, we poor negroes cannot fight with the soldiers, as we have no guns, but we can burn and destroy if we do not get our freedom and that is what we intend to do" (Von Scholten 129). These words suggest that this revolt did not represent a spontaneous and unorganized uprising. Rather, the enslaved people created a plan to exploit the weaknesses of the colonial government without incurring heavy casualties. This siege of the town and threat of incineration forced Governor-General von

² This is a composite of the events from the following sources. For detailed accounts of Danish slavery and this rebellion, see Knox, *A Historical Account of St. Thomas, W.I., with Its Rise and Progress in Commerce ... and Incidental Notices of St. Croix and St. Johns ...* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852) 112-120; Frederik von Scholten, "Stadthauptmand Chamberlain von Scholten's Narrative," in Charles Edwin Taylor, *Leaflets from the Danish West Indies Descriptive of the Social, Political, and Commercial Condition of These Islands* (London: Wm. Dawson and Sons, 1888. Reprint by Negro Universities Press, 1970); Neville Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) chapter 7; Pope Holman, *Cruzan Slavery: Ethnohistorical Study of Differential Responses to Slavery in the Danish West Indies*, Ph.D Dissertation (California: University of California Davis, 1969).

Scholten to legally emancipate the slaves just one day after the revolt began. Ironically, the proclamation of emancipation impelled actual violence, rather than quelling the revolt. After their legal emancipation, many former slaves took to the countryside and attacked white plantation owners and destroyed plantation property.

Violence characterized other “late” slave revolts in the Caribbean, such as the Demerara rebellion of 1823, Sharpe’s 1831 rebellion in Jamaica, and the uprising in Martinique in 1848 (Hall 208). Although these extremely violent revolts had tremendous influence on eventual abolition, they did not result in the immediate emancipation of the enslaved people. Yet, slaves on St. Croix ended their legal bondage through minimal destruction and the threat of violence (Ibid). As the slaves vastly outnumbered the Danish, they could have physically harmed the plantation owners who controlled the labor and bodies. Rather than attack plantation owners, the slaves gathered around Fort Frederik, a symbol of the Danish administration, to demand their freedom (Ibid). According to Laurent Dubois in *Avengers of the New World*, many readings of slave revolts use violence “as a way to avoid confronting the ideological and political significance of the ideals and ideas it generated” (Dubois 5). The initial lack of violence in this case, then, makes the political motivations of the slaves unavoidable. Perhaps the slaves knew that appealing to the colonial government offered them a higher chance of gaining emancipation than committing violence against the plantation owners. However, the terms of emancipation did not satisfy all of the revolutionaries, as the revolt of 1848 began to resemble those earlier and bloodier uprisings in the Caribbean. After the slaves gained their legal freedom, many took to the countryside with their threats of violence and destruction becoming realized (Hall 224-225). Legal emancipation, then, did not encompass their entire set of political goals. The turn to violence suggests that freedom represented more than a legal revision to the enslaved population.

The violence after emancipation illuminates the transformative effects that slave uprisings had on the politics of the enslaved population. The revolt represents a process, rather than an immutable set of desires and ambitions. Turning to violence after committing to nonviolence and achieving emancipation indicates that the initial collective struggle transformed the politics of the enslaved people. The Governor-General's proclamation of emancipation did not go far enough in establishing their freedom. The shortcomings of this proclamation transformed the nature of the revolt, and the political choices available to the rebels. For many of the newly emancipated people, violence became the only way to achieve their desires because of the limits of legal emancipation. Violence, then, informs and expresses the political motivations of the enslaved people.

These enslaved people turned to violence after emancipation because they understood that the end of slavery did not mean the end of white supremacy. They realized that neither ameliorative changes nor emancipation gave them control over their labor and land. The slaves of St. Croix knew that their bondage would continue if the plantation system continued to operate. The Governor's decree of emancipation did not strip power from the white plantation owners, who would continue to own the land as private property and determine the value of black labor. Consequently, these enslaved people did not locate freedom in the law, but rather envisioned freedom as a radical transformation of the island's ideological and physical terrain. They imagined freedom through the destruction of a plantation system that reified and maintained racial hierarchy.

After emancipation, the Danish quickly stifled this process of decolonization by establishing a system of contractual wage labor with the Labor Act of 1848 (Taylor 144).³ The Danish authored the legislation soon after the revolt ended, reflecting a desire to maintain disparate labor relations on the island. According to Pope Holman's ethno-historical dissertation on Danish slavery, the new labor legislation created a contractual system of labor on St. Croix where "the free laborers annually signed contracts with the proprietors of the estates on October 1 of each year" (191). Despite ameliorative regulations, the new labor system became an extension of the reviled plantation system. Laborers became legally bound to the planters for a year after both sides agreed on the contract. Furthermore, harsh conditions continued to burden the laborers, as the planters expected fieldwork from sunset to sunrise. The Labor Act also separated the peasants into three classes of laborers: First Class, Second Class, and Third Class. This system of explicit class divisions came out of the divisions of labor on the plantations, and attempted to prevent solidarity amongst the laborers. In the end, the Labor Act of 1848 reinforced the plantation system, replacing the master with a set of laws.

The conservative approach to remodeling the labor economy proved disastrous for the Danish. Thirty years after the Labor Act of 1848, black peasants organized a violent labor revolt. To the working people, yearly labor contracts represented another form of bondage. Wage labor supplanted slavery, but earnings remained meager and laborers still did not have complete

³ I am using Fanon's idea of decolonization presented in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004). He argues that decolonization requires violence and a collective consciousness cultivated by the rural masses. For Fanon, decolonization remains inherently violent because it responds to the violent terrain that organizes the colonial world. Fanon's theory of decolonization responds to the stagnation of history for the colonized: "Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History" (Fanon 2). The enslaved people attempted to create a new history and humanity devoid of white supremacy. However, the oppressive system of contractual labor resumed colonial history and its power structures.

control over their bodies. Dissatisfied by the unfulfilled promises of freedom, black laborers in St. Croix took to the countryside to burn down the plantations, in what would be called the “Fiyabun” (Dookhan, “A History” 227). Several women led the rebels incinerating all tangible signs of Danish colonial oppression. The slave revolt of 1848 ignited the flames used to torch the island thirty years later. The persistence of white supremacist ideology countered possibilities of freedom through the continued somatic control through the wage system. Therefore, working class laborers continued the decolonization process in order to secure freedom on their own terms.

As a result of the “Fiyahbun,” the colonial administration reformed the structure of labor in the Virgin Islands, effectively ending the viability of a plantation economy. Still, economic decline and social instability marred the post-emancipation Virgin Islands. The whittling sugar and agricultural industry strained under the trade restrictions caused by World War I, despite Danish efforts to recuperate the industry. Consequently, “the islands lost their value as colonial possessions” (Dookhan, “A History” 240). As a result of the accretion of resistant actions of enslaved people and laborers, Denmark desired to sever its colonial relationship with its colony by the late nineteenth century.

Although historians such as Dookhan, Hall, Knox and Jarvis worked to create a narrative history of the Virgin Islands, song and poetry became the chief way that Virgin Islanders claimed and grappled with their history. According to archivist Jeanette Bastian, the absence of a local archive further reinforced the oral tradition as the premier space for making history, collective memory and national consciousness (Bastian 9-10). The Danish colonial government’s growing desire to peddle the Virgin Islands in the late nineteenth century coincided with the relocation of the colonial archive to Denmark. The Danes first began relocating many records to the Danish

National Archives in 1893 and completed the process in 1921, four years after the transfer of U.S. sovereignty (Bastian 27). Furthermore, by the 1950s the records remaining records were sent to the National Archives of the United States (Bastian 30-31). In this context of archival absence, song, poetry and folklore constitute the terrain upon which Virgin Islanders forge their relationship to the past. We see this in how Mary Thomas, or Queen Mary, one of the main leaders of “The Fiyahbun,” becomes immortalized in the memory of Virgin Islanders through a popular folk song:

Queen Mary! Weh you gon go bun?

Queen Mary! Weh you gon go bun?

Don’t ask me notten ‘tall.

Just pass de match an’ oil.

Bassin Jailhouse is weh we gon go bun!

The song begins with the singer invoking Queen Mary through naming and question. The query, “Weh you gon go bun,” shifts temporality, as it makes the singer coeval with Queen Mary. The repeated first line blurs the distinction between past and present by placing the singer in the Queen’s presence. The singer asks Queen Mary what she’s going to do, rather than what she did. This present tense collapses time by resignifying Queen Mary as an active figure not only reshaping history, but also mediating Virgin Islanders’ relationship to the past. The figure of Queen Mary in this song does not narrate nor reenact the past, rather she and the singer experience this past moment as if it occurs in the present moment. In lines 3-5, the singer then embodies Queen Mary in her response to the initial call. Queen Mary refutes the initial call, demanding that we ask her nothing at all. In this moment, she constructs a history grounded in action and embodied experience, rather than narration or written record. Queen Mary’s refusal to

answer the question becomes even more vital in face of the archive's absence. She can only speak through her actions because Virgin Islanders have had little access to any written records of this labor revolt. Moreover, any scribal recording of her actions during that time will always represent an imperfect translation of what she did because it would have been written by the colonizer and in his language.⁴ Instead, Queen Mary instructs the singer to pass her the match and oil, and finally declares the jailhouse, a symbol of colonial somatic domination, as the target for immolation. The word "we" in the final line illuminates Queen Mary's role in shaping the present, as it transforms the singer from spectator to conspirator. With this turn to collective action, Queen Mary offers Virgin Islanders a way to experience the past without the written record or the traditional writing of history. Folk songs like this forge collective memory in the Virgin Islands by allowing the singer to embody or act alongside historical figures. The song sutures the epistemological hole created in the wake of the absent archive, and contributes to a larger collective memory that allows Virgin Islanders to access their past.

This historical recovery through collective memory also produces the collective consciousness that birth national identities. Singers, poets and storytellers created a collective past through a shared language other than the language of the colonial records. Within Benedict Anderson's framework of imagined communities, these artists challenged "the idea that a particular script language offered privileged access to ontological truth, precisely because it was an inseparable part of that truth" (Anderson 52). The oral tradition employed a shared language

⁴ For a more detailed analysis on the impact of language on the Virgin Islands archive, see Jeanette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archive and Found Its History* (Connecticut: Libraries University Press, 2003), 11. Bastian explains that "Danish colonizers did not share their language with the colonized, even though Danish was the official language of all government and court records. Enslaved Africans on St. Thomas and St. John developed a Creole language known as Neggerhollands or Dutch Creole, while English became the lingua franca of trade and commerce. The lack of common language presented additional obstacles for the colonized population, both in initially creating records and later in accessing them." (11)

in order to articulate ontological truth born out of black subjectivity in the Virgin Islands. The artists placed black folk life at the center of this radical epistemology, and created an idea of the nation that did not require support from the Danish administration and their colonial record keeping. Within this space, they intimated, affirmed and defended national identities. In the following chapters, I will examine how poems and songs not only etched out an image of *Virgin Islandness*, but also mediated Virgin Islanders place within the black diaspora and American empire.

II. Danish Colonial Decay and the Makings of Cultural Nationalism in the Early Poetry of

J. Antonio Jarvis and Cyril Creque

Modern Virgin Islands poetry begins during a period of economic and social peril in the early twentieth century. The economic decay of the Danish empire during the nineteenth century, emblemized by the St. Croix Labor Revolt of 1848, worsened the lives of the island's poor laborers. In 1915, D. Hamilton Jackson continued this legacy of labor struggle by forming the islands' first labor union in St. Croix (Dookhan, "A History" 240). Under his leadership, sugarcane cutters and coal carriers held strikes in both St. Croix and St. Thomas with hopes to receive a fair wage (Ibid). These workers inspired the cultural productions of this moment, as they became the subjects of many of the poems of this period. The poor black workers' struggle for expanded economic, political and social rights became a significant theme within the poetic landscape.

Despite these political themes, the poetry written during or about Danish sovereignty remained largely derivative in form. In *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, Laurence Breiner employs Houston Baker's theory of "masking" in African American literature to conceptualize the formal nature of early West Indian poetry (104).¹ According to Breiner early "poetry from or about the West Indies exemplifies mastery of an inherited medium, an almost automatic troping of Caribbean experience with British figurations" (105). This imitation went beyond formal

¹ See Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), 86. Baker responds to criticisms of the Harlem Renaissance that highlight the use of standard literary forms and tradition in much of the writing. For Baker, formal mastery during this time constitutes a form of dissemblance, or masking. He contends, "such masking carries subtle resonances and effects that cannot even be perceived (much less evaluated) by the person who begins with the notion that recognizably standard form automatically disqualifies a work as an authentic and valuable Afro-American national production" (86). For Baker, it is precisely this formal mastery that allows African American writers to later break down traditional literary conventions in order to better capture African American experiences and subjectivities.

mastery, as these early West Indian poets described the West Indies through the lens of traditional and hegemonic English tropes of the landscape, prompting Brathwaite to later declare that “the hurricane does not roar in pentameter”(265).² Still, this imitation of standard forms did not preclude West Indian poets from offering critiques of the tropes of colonialism (Breiner 105). Moreover, this quest to formal mastery marks the beginning of a larger quest to cultural equality, as “the challenger must fight on the champion’s ground before he has his own” (Breiner 107). The subsequent rejection of European form, by nationalist poets such as Brathwaite, relies on the recognition that this early imitation provided.

Virgin Islands poetry begins in a similar fashion, as early poets utilized Standard English and traditional poetic forms even as they critiqued Danish colonialism and placed the poor black laborer at the center of Virgin Islands identity. Breiner asserts, “it was paradoxically the poets who were most self-conscious about establishing a distinctively West Indian poetry who labored to acclimatize highly articulated traditional forms to local use” (113). Early Virgin Islands poets begin to look for an authentic Virgin Islands identity in the everyday laborers of the islands. Poets such as J. Antonio Jarvis and Cyril Creque cultivated a nationalist literature that extolled the cultural tradition that comes out of this legacy of black labor struggle. Their work to extract a Virgin Islands poetry through European form resembles the moments “when Claude McKay and

² For a detailed analysis on how British imperialism used the physical and figurative Caribbean landscape as a tool of oppression see Omise’eke Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010). Tinsley reveals how Europeans worked to invent the Caribbean landscape. Europeans did not only transport enslaved people, but also brought numerous cash crops to cultivate and exploit. Landscape then, reflects colonial empiricism and domination: “if anything in the archipelago has been as constantly, systematically transformed, exploited, contested, and subverted as the colonial invention called Caribbean womanhood, it is the colonial invention called Caribbean landscape” (Tinsley 15). Tinsley contends that the metaphorical and physical representation of the colonial landscape sought to control Caribbean women’s gender and sexual identities. The taming of the wild Caribbean landscape by Europeans stands in for the need to control the desires of Caribbean women. Tinsley implicates the landscape as a tool for reproducing colonial hegemony. Consequently, early West Indian poets reproduced colonial order, as they saw the Caribbean landscape through these oppressive literary tropes.

W.A. Roberts wrote sonnets, or when Jamaican poets during the 1930s produced a flurry of villanelles” (Breiner 113).

In “Coal Carriers,” J. Antonio Jarvis, a premier historian, educator, journalist and poet from St. Thomas, praises these tormented laborers in order to reveal poor Virgin Islanders political aspirations (Williams 49):

The mad moon smiling overhead,
The long road silver gray,
But sombre shadows hold no dread
For workers on their way.
The dim dark hulk along the dock,
Still seen in silhouette,
Must coal at once despite the clock

A schedule time is set (Jarvis, “Coal Carriers” 5-12).

The reliance on rhyme moves the poem closer to lyric. Its musicality reinforces the poem as a praise song, extolling the virtues of the coal carriers. Jarvis uses the sensual diction of shadows and weak moonlight to establish the poem’s romantic tone. On the other hand, “the mad moon smiling overhead” evokes an eerie and unsettling tone for the entire poem. Marvin Williams argues that Jarvis romanticizes the coal carrier, failing “to be critical of the shaping conditions within which the latter struggle” (12). While Jarvis does not explicitly name these larger shaping conditions, the movement of the poem illuminates structures of power, and how the coal carriers respond to oppression within these structures. The apparent alienation and dehumanization of these workers reveal the oppressive conditions of labor.

In his praise, the narrator not only provides access to the unseen life of the coal workers, but also illuminates the underlying irony of their circumstances. The arduous work of coal mining alienates the workers from their emotions and dulls their existence: “But sombre shadows hold no dread / For workers on their way” (Jarvis, “Coal Carriers” 7-8). The necessity to toil has forced them to ignore fears and emotion, escaping into the night without pause. The eerie darkness relentlessly surrounds the coal carriers, yet they continue to work. With the near gothic mood of the poem, Jarvis illuminates the unnaturalness of the work. Still, they must repress any hesitation as they, “Must coal at once despite the clock, / A scheduled time is set” (Jarvis, “Coal Carriers” 11-12). Here, the narrator suggests that the coal carriers realize their exploitation, and that they do not fully control their bodies within this labor system. The schedule time set by the colonizers negates the natural time of the clock, emblematic of how colonization absolutely organizes Virgin Islands society during this time. The irony appears as he contrasts the perverse nature of coal carrying with the workers’ inability to change the conditions of labor. The workers must continue to work within an unnatural and oppressive system of labor that threatens to normalize and obscure larger structures of power. With this, it appears that the narrator points to a fatalism inherent in the lives of the coal carriers because they do not have agency within this colonial system.

However, the coal carriers’ singing at the end of the workday offers a moment of active resistance and agency within colonial domination. The dawn light appears in the final lines of the poems, chasing away the gothic darkness, and bringing the work to an end: “Dim mirage dawn is hailed with song, / The ship can hold no more” (Jarvis, “Coal Carriers” 15-16). This burst into song counters the silence emanated from the preceding lines, and moves the workers towards collectivity. The light illuminates the ways the labor system worked to alienate and silence the

worker. They begin to sing because they remain aware of the structures of power that work to control their bodies through labor. The dawn song is celebratory, and signals the moment of possibility each morning after “the ship can hold no more” (Jarvis, “Coal Carriers 16). The coal carriers reclaim their bodies from the colonizer’s control by singing, and in so doing, become a symbol for the unrealized political, economic and social aspirations of poor Virgin Islanders.

Cyril Creque, renowned Virgin Islands composer and poet, dignifies these same laborers in his poem by the same name (Williams 57). In his short poem, Creque employs metaphor to naturalize the coal carriers. He compares their labor to the eternal and cyclical qualities of nature:

Black-bathed in an ocean of dignified dust

They greet the worn smile of a glorified day

Co-sharers in toil and co-partners in trust

They sink with the sun at the close of his sway (Creque, “Coal Carriers” 13-16)

Although Creque’s “Coal Carriers” employs the elegiac stanza in its use of rhyming quatrains, the poem dignifies without mourning. Creque describes the coal carriers with a tender tone, defining their experience with light and glory rather than with somber shadows. Working all day with coal covers the laborers in black soot. Creque finds dignity not disgrace through this marking. The narrator does not view the “black-bathed” skin as humiliation, but rather as a symbol of the dignity fostered in communal labor (Creque, “Coal Carriers” 13). While “black-bathed” points to their labor, it also functions as a metaphor that signals their blackness. The black skin of the workers, then, comes to explain why they must continue to work in dust and dirt.

While Creque’s coal carriers do not burst into resistant song, they remain dignified throughout the poem. Their labor does not degrade them, instead it establishes their honor. With

this, Creque resignifies the coal carriers' relationship towards his or her labor. While Jarvis highlights the alienation born out of exploitation, Creque illuminates the ways this same oppressive labor fosters collective consciousness. For Creque, the dignity of this work lies in its ability to strengthen community, as "co-sharers in toil" become "co-partners in trust" (Creque, "Coal Carriers" 15). Working together nurtures the bonds of trust in one another, and eases the burden on any individual coal carrier. Williams correctly argues that Creque "is not so much interested in scrutinizing the conditions of the laborers which he accepts as perhaps unavoidable as he is with unveiling their nobility and the dignity of their work" (12). However, Creque does not simply transform the coal carriers into working class nobility, but illuminates how they formed communal structures to resist the conditions of labor.

It is likely that both Jarvis and Creque chose coal carriers as their poetic subjects because they represent a class of laborer historically at the center of labor struggle in the Danish Virgin Islands. As much as Creque glorifies the laborers, he still points to the harsh economic circumstances: "And jingling pennies their slim purses feed" (Creque, "Coal Carriers" 6). Coal carriers earned consistently low wages during the aftermath of slavery in 1848 to the final days of Danish sovereignty in 1917. This fostered a tradition of labor struggle within this group. Organic labor uprising by coal carriers in the late nineteenth century preceded their formal union organization in 1915. In the tradition of Queen Mary, Queen Coziah led one of the most significant coal workers strike in 1892 on St. Thomas (Perry 45). An online newspaper article reporting on a contemporary reenactment of the uprising describes how Queen Coziah "led hundreds of coal workers, mostly women, down the streets of Charlotte Amalie, demanding pay in Danish currency, not the Mexican silver whose value had plummeted" (Morris, "Spirited Past

Comes Alive in Culture Tour”). The performance of this uprising over one hundred years later illuminates how the figure of the coal carrier informs Virgin Islands collective memory.

Coal carriers also become emblematic of Virgin Islands folk culture. Queen Coziah danced bamboula, and it is likely that the women she led also danced this traditional folk dance (Perry 45).³ This folk practice represents an act of resistance that comes out of the African slave quarters, and becomes an integral part of future labor struggles. Mariel Blake, a columnist for the *V.I. Daily News* writes, “as bamboula dancers, they were the queens of the community, the keepers of the ancestral ways, the fire under the coal pot” (“The cultural importance of the Bamboula”). The coal carriers become so closely linked to traditional dance and song that bamboula dancing and drumming became a focal point of the reenactment of the 1892 uprising (Morris, “Spirited Past Comes Alive in Culture Tour”). The rebels did not dance bamboula without reason, but rather articulated their politics through this mode of expression. The figure of the coal carrier, then, symbolizes the interplay between resistant struggle and folk culture. Both Jarvis and Creque turned to the coal carrier to find a figure that represented a resistant and culturally distinct Virgin Islands identity. Both poets, along with many other early poets, also explored the song and dance so closely linked to the coal carrying tradition.

Poets etched out a distinct Virgin Islands folk culture through poetic representations of bamboula dance. In “Bamboula Dance,” J. Antonio Jarvis extended this idea further, as he sees the dance as a way for black Virgin Islanders to embody their African past:

³ Columnist Mariel Blake writes, “the Bamboula is a cultural dance brought to the Caribbean by enslaved Africans. It is more than a dance. It is a tradition given to us by our ancestors as a way to remain connected to our heritage in the past and present. It was used to express emotions and to convey information. It is a rhythm that thrums in our blood. It was used as a form of worship and a form of protest” (Blake, “The cultural importance of the Bamboula”).

I still can feel, when drumbeat call,

The pulsing blood new rhythms take;

As garment-like refinements fall

Unconscious longings spring awake! (Jarvis, "Bamboula Dance" 5-8)

The beat first impacts the narrator's body, as his blood takes on the rhythms emanating from the bamboula drum. The drumbeat does not travel passively, only to be heard, but actively transforms the listeners. The embodied response to the drumbeat dismantles the "garment-like" colonial refinements that disconnect the narrator from this imagined past (Jarvis, "Bamboula Dance" 7). The clothing metaphor highlights how these refinements attempt to mask the supposed vulgar and savage black body within a white supremacist society. By dismantling these refinements, the drumbeat exposes a blackness that must be hidden within the context of colonisation. When the physical drumbeat uncovers the narrator's unrefined black body, his "unconscious longings spring awake" (Jarvis, "Bamboula Dance" 8). Here, dualism falls apart as the bodily experience determines what the narrator can know. This excavated unconsciousness represents the narrator's ancestral knowledge, as the "drums recall Nigeria play / and drown out later dignities" (Jarvis, "Bamboula Dance" 11-12). With this the narrator again exposes the irony in the ways that black dignities and refinements within colonialism may conceal the past. Jarvis positions the bamboula dance as a cultural practice that resists oppressive identity formation within a white supremacist colonial society. The bamboula dance, then, becomes a way to shed the trappings of colonial identity, offering the dynamism needed to imagine a new identity that welcomes the past.

Creque approaches the bamboula dance with more ambivalence, but ultimately sees the dance as transcending an African past. In his poem “Bamboula Echoes,” the narrator contends that Virgin Islanders have mastered the bamboula dance:

Wake, O African pastmasters, shake yourselves

in jealous dirt!

Did you ever do the dance so well in petticoat

and skirt? (Creque, “Bamboula Echoes” 25-28)

This awakening of “African pastmasters” resembles the awakening of an African unconscious in the previous poem (Creque, “Bamboula Echoes” 25). In both instances the bamboula dance represents a process of rousing the past from dormancy. While Jarvis creates a division between a dignified ancestral past and a whitewashed present, Creque offers a more ambivalent timeline. The sounds of the bamboula drum do not shed the colonial refinements symbolized in the “petticoat and skirt” (Creque, “Bamboula Echoes” 27-28). These “garment-like refinements” do not prevent an African awakening or hinder the dance. Instead, the dancers’ European garments suggest that the dance within this colonial context represents something new. The clothing does not simply refine the dancers, but the dance itself, creating a new dance that makes the African ancestral figures jealous. Creque rejects any seamless continuity between an African past and a Virgin Islands present by illuminating transformation and exchange. Moreover the narrator asserts that this communion and competition with the past remains fleeting: “For the twilight of their echoes soon / in the darkness fades away” (Creque, “Bamboula Echoes” 31-32). Unlike Jarvis, Creque does not position the bamboula dance in opposition to European influences, but rather highlights the transculturation occurring to form a distinct Virgin Islands identity. Still,

both poets look to the bamboula dance and song to conceptualize the parameters of *Virgin Islandsness*.

Creque further praises the cultural tradition of the working class in “Night Song of a Saint Croix Laborer.” A short poem composed of four rhyming couplets, “Night Song” legitimates traditional Virgin Islands folk song. The poem does not employ the traditional musical forms of the Virgin Islands, but becomes a song only in the ways that it continuously points to these traditional forms:

I know no brighter airs Depression craves
That melodies a ripened cane field waves.
Wild-beat nor strum my joy-robbed longing fills

Except from wheels that push the crushing mills (Creque, “Night Song” 1-4)

The narrator wishes to sing the traditional “melodies a ripened cane field waves” in order to cure his bout of depression rising out of his drudgery (Creque, “Night Song” 2). The narrator points to *quelbe*, the traditional music of the Virgin Islands that comes out of the islands’ slave society. According to filmmaker Andrea Leland, *Quelbe* is the music of enslaved people, resulting from the sublimation of West African percussive based music tradition into Danish folk music (Leland, “History of *Quelbe*). Danish planter's, fearful of the communicative power of drumming, forbade enslaved Africans from playing their indigenous music. So, the enslaved people made crude instruments from pipes, hollowed gourds and tin cans, as they “turned to the European colonizers' military bands and social music as models for new instrumentation and melodies” (“Leland, “History of *Quelbe*”). Like his ancestors, Creque’s laborer recognizes song as revolutionary, allowing him to transcend his arduous labor. Creque celebrates this cultural

tradition as a means for poor Virgin Islanders to overcome their diminishing political and economic opportunities as the Danish empire declined.

Quelbe becomes protest music first for enslaved people and then for Creque's laborer. In "LaBega Carousel," a famous early twentieth century quelbe song whose original songwriter remains unknown, workers boycott a carousel owned by a plantation owner who refused to raise wages: "I rather walk, man, and drink rum whole night, / Before me go ride on LaBega Carousel" ("LaBega Carousel" 1-2). The workers employ this traditional musical form to critique a white planter class who do not have cultural access to this black folk music. As a song, "LaBega Carousel" moves from Creque's singular laborer to an entire underclass in solidarity. The singer asks, "Ah yo' hear what LaBega say: / The people ain't worth more than twenty cents a day" ("LaBega Carousel" 5-6). Quelbe allowed "the people," or peasant laborers, to imagine themselves as a community linked through their unifying adversity against the planter class. The use of Virgin Islands vernacular further illuminates how the form itself emerges from the language of the everyday folk. The oral nature of the song reflects the language of its creators and singers. Quelbe, then, offers a poetic form that can capture the spirit and subjectivity of the Virgin Islands people better than the standard verse of the previous poems. Like Queen Coziah's bamboula dance, the quelbe of "LaBega Carousel" demonstrates how folk tradition becomes a source of resistance against economic and political oppression.

The poetry of the early twentieth century Virgin Islands focused on the cultural tradition of peasant laborers in order to ease the harsh realities of Danish colonial decay. The laborers in these poems became dignified symbols of nobility, as actual workers faced worsening economic conditions. Through their characterization of the peasant, Jarvis and Creque saw the unrealized political and economic aspirations of all poor Virgin Islanders. Creque extended Jarvis' praise of

the peasant by highlighting the cultural traditions that maintained their dignity. In this way, the early poetry marks the beginning of a nationalist literature engaged in the creation of a cultural nationalism which privileged the tradition of the poor blacks in the Virgin Islands. Facing deteriorating economic conditions, these poets saw U.S. sovereignty as a means to improve peasant welfare. This hope for economic gain allowed for the development of a national literature that extolled the cultural without becoming anticolonial.

III. “A Pledge Proud Scions Make:” Virgin Islands Poetry and the Turn to United States Sovereignty

In the late nineteenth century, the United States began to search for a strategic location to protect its southern borders against possible threats emerging from the Caribbean (Dookhan, “A History” 248). At this time, the decline in the agricultural economy, particularly in St. Croix, transformed the Virgin Islands into a financial burden for Denmark (Dookhan, “A History” 243). With a decline in revenues, the colonial regime borrowed money from the Danish crown in order to meet the rising public expenditure costs that followed emancipation (Dookhan, “A History” 243-244). After years of negotiations between the two nations, the United States bought the Virgin Islands from Denmark for twenty-five million dollars in gold on March 31, 1917. Most historians see this transfer as a mutually beneficial exchange for both nations.

However, understanding the role that the labor unions played in the transfer reshapes the meaning of American sovereignty in the Virgin Islands. Historian Gregory LaMotta argues that the nascent labor unions pressured Denmark to sell the islands: “the fledgling labor movement demanded that the islands be sold to the United States unless Denmark took immediate steps to improve living conditions in the colony” (LaMotta 178). The labor unions, then, impelled the transfer as part of the ongoing labor struggle. Within this context, American sovereignty does not represent an invasive force placed upon the islands, but rather it becomes the political will of the black working class. This places the Virgin Islands working class laborer at the center of Virgin Islands political identity. These laborers did not call for American sovereignty because of false consciousness or hegemonic domination. Rather, they engaged with empire to achieve economic and political progress. In this chapter, I argue that Virgin Islands poetry, in the wake of the

transfer, reflects this nationalist vision that sees an engagement with American empire and cultural authenticity as the basis for Virgin Islands sovereignty.

It appears ironic that these laborers would place their hope in a United States that continued its own national tradition of black subjection during the Jim Crow Era. The Danes even cited American racial violence in attempts to prevent the union from clamoring for transfer (LaMotta 192). Although rising migration made Virgin Islanders already well aware of rampant racism in the United States, they “preferred to chance American rule rather than continue under Danish misrule and neglect” (LaMotta 192). Virgin Islanders developed the idea that the African American community, particularly in New York, had more economic opportunities than that provided under Danish rule. In an article in *The Herald*, the official newspaper of the St. Croix Labor Union, Adolpho Sixto, a Virgin Islands business owner, articulates this notion of potential black prosperity in the United States: “The Danish West Indian dwells in the United States by the thousand...our men and women are found as doctors, lawyers, nurses, electricians and are not denied an existence because of colour” (qtd in. LaMotta 192). While the validity of Sixto’s claims remains questionable within the context of anti-black racism and violence in the United States, his comments demonstrate how this idea existed in the Virgin Islands imaginary. Consequently, union leaders framed this struggle and the resulting visions of belonging and citizenship in explicitly transnational terms.

Union leader, David Hamilton Jackson, saw transnational black solidarity as a powerful force against oppression from the white establishment on the islands. An article in the *The St. Thomas Bulletin*, reveals how Jackson turned to transnational black solidarity to further inspire the striking laborers: “He told the people to maintain the strike against the utmost pressure, and advised them to eat bush and sleep in tents if other means of living be taken from them. If the

Danish government won't help, the 10 million negroes in America will" (qtd in LaMotta 188). Jackson inspired the strikers to hold their ground despite the dire conditions they faced. He replaced mistrust in white estate owners ameliorating black suffering with faith in the liberatory possibilities of this transnational black solidarity. With this, Jackson conceptualized a vision of transnational black belonging that allowed for black Virgin Islanders to progress and make claims to modernity. Through this appeal to American sovereignty and transnational black solidarity, Jackson and the union members challenged the dominion of the racist Danish colonial regime, and conceptualized an alternative vision of national belonging that would enable black progress.

By forcing Denmark to sell the islands, these working class laborers expressed their desires for American citizenship and transnational blackness. Although their struggle for transfer initially resulted in the installation of a racist military government, these activists continued to struggle for full citizenships and expanded rights under American sovereignty. Their continued struggle reveals how this new imperial relationship remained a process of constant negotiation, rather than an immutable and calcifying force. Poets continued to look to the native working class laborer in their attempts to articulate a distinct Virgin Islands identity. As a result, the nationalist discourse articulated in the writing reflects the vision of nationalism conceptualized by the Jackson and the labor unions. Major poets, Cyril Creque and J.P. Gimenez, saw American imperial rule as a way for poor Virgin Islanders to overcome socio-economic boundaries that dominated the Danish class system. At the same time, the poetry resists the displacement and domination that American empire brings by turning to nation language and a poetics of indigeneity.

Creque captures the hope that U.S. sovereignty brought to many Virgin Islanders in “Memories of Transfer Day.” Virgin Islanders’ hopes for expanded citizenship rose along with the United States flag, as they watched American soldiers hoist it high atop the main government building in St. Thomas on March 31, 1917. The poem reveals a cathartic moment that ultimately symbolized hope for many Virgin Islanders:

Strains of the Danish national anthem

Move many to tears.

Peal of the American

Creates a strange dream

In the afterglow. (Creque, “Memories” 6-10)

On the surface, the tears flowing from the eyes of Virgin Islanders seem to reflect remorse as Denmark relinquishes sovereignty. However, the poem's lateral movement, mirroring the transfer of flags, reveals that these tears signal hope after sadness. Creque evokes sound to contrast the end of one empire with the rise of another. The Danish national anthem strains under the decay of empire and the growing distrust between Virgin Islanders and the colonial regime. As Denmark’s empire fades, its anthem loses the power and influence it once had. However, the poem refuses to dwell on this imperial loss. Through swift lateral movement, Creque juxtaposes the weakened Danish national anthem and the falling tears with the emphatic sounds of the United States anthem. The word “peal” evokes the reverberating sound of the American anthem, as it overwhelms the fading Danish melody (Creque, “Memories” 8). The sounds of the American anthem elicit a “strange dream” that lingers in “the afterglow” (Creque, “Memories” 9-10). Here, Creque points to the foreignness of the American dream that links freedom to individual prosperity and liberty. This national ethos remains strange because it must adapt to the

new geographies of the (neo)colony. Moreover, the dream must still contend with the Danish ethos that lingers in an afterlight glimmering throughout the landscape.

Creque's use of sound and light creates a sensual geography where an imperial ethos interacts with individual desires of belonging, hope and remembrance. The tears, then, come to symbolize both the hope in a future protected by America's ideals and a cathartic release over Denmark's departure. Although, the Danish colonial project harshly oppressed poor Virgin Islanders up until its demise, the Danish way of life had become ingrained in Virgin Islands society. Still, the possibilities of American citizenship represented an opportunity for these Virgin Islanders to overcome the hardships of Danish rule. In this context, the United States assumes magnificence as "Old Dannebrog sadly descends / Old Glory gladly ascends" (Creque, "Memories" 1-2). However, Virgin Islanders did not simply bow down to this glory.

Poet and songwriter, J.P. Gimenez illustrates the ways that this new imperial relationship reflects a process of constant negotiation between Virgin Islanders and the United States, rather than an immutable condition. Born in St. Thomas in 1899, his poetry represents the hybridity of the Virgin Islands--writing in English, Spanish and Virgin Islands vernacular (Williams 65). In "American Virgin Islander," Gimenez explores how Virgin Islanders envisioned the shift in nationality, from Danish to American. Gimenez points out how this shift had to contend with an already established working class morality in the Virgin Islands:

He hates all deceit—

The liar and cheat.

He ne'er stoops to servility.

His heart can't be won

With praise nor with gun,

But just by sincerity (Gimenez, "American Virgin Islander" 19-24).

The narrator describes the integrity of the islander, as he rejects the duplicity of "the liar and cheat" (Gimenez, "American Virgin Islander" 20). Gimenez demonstrates how the morality of the native engenders resistance against the deceit and bondage of empire. Gimenez's Virgin Islander rejects the Danish pressure for imperial loyalty because "his heart can't be won / with praise nor with gun" ("American Virgin Islander" 22-23). The nobleness of this Virgin Islander overcomes any threat of force and recognizes imperial deceit. The narrator then reveals that sincerity remains the only method to gain the Virgin Islander's loyalty. Gimenez's Virgin Islander does not lie prostrate in the face of empire, but actively shapes the boundaries of this imperial relationship.

Within the context of the transfer, this serves as a warning to American empire. Gimenez demonstrates that the American colonial regime could not simply enforce its will, but had to act within the moral schema already set by the islanders. Gimenez's American Virgin Islander desired sincerity and "the extension of the franchise and United States citizenship" (Dookhan, "Search for Identity" 2). Many expected this new American status to increase their political and economic agency. However, the United States placed the islands under naval rule, and had little regard for the black labor struggle that made American sovereignty possible. As a result, the initial air of anticipation seen in the poetry quickly wilted.

The United States purchased the islands not to expand its empire under the guise of Manifest Destiny, but strictly as a military outpost to protect the country's interest in the region from German intervention (McMahon 112). These military ambitions led the United States to establish a military, rather than civilian, government to rule its new possession. The naval government did not work to expand the citizenship rights of Virgin Islanders, and so, Virgin

Islanders' national status remained ambiguous—protected by the U.S. government, but denied the civil and political rights of U.S. citizens (Dookhan, “Search For Identity” 3).

The naval government blamed the Virgin Islands working class for the islands' destitution. At the time of transfer, the islands remained ravished by economic downfall and contentious labor disputes occurring over the final twenty years of Danish rule. Shortly after transfer, Rear Admiral James Oliver, the first naval governor of the islands, implemented several social policies to improve healthcare access, education, and poverty on the islands (McMahon 114-115). Despite these ameliorations, Oliver contended that a lazy working class propelled the islands' poverty and apparent social degradation: “the evil results of this lack of desire to work are wide in their scope leading to bad sanitary conditions in their houses and general uncleanliness, petty [sic] larceny and a bad example to children raised in the midst of it” (qtd. in Boyer 83). Oliver saw this supposed laziness as a moral shortcoming that manifested as filth and spurred antisocial behavior.

Moreover, the naval commander viewed the actions of the black working class as apolitical—having no relationship to the formal labor struggle. However, as historian Robin D. G. Kelley argues in his path breaking book *Race Rebels*, “politics is not separate from lived experience or the imaginary world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things” (Kelley 2). The military rulers saw acts such as footdragging, theft, disregard for property and drinking rum as simply immoral. However, these acts formed the terrain of black working class resistance in the islands, responding to the same conditions that motivated the more formal working class labor struggle. By castigating the black working class, the naval administration seized the role of imperial antagonist.

Virgin Islanders remained disenfranchised—unable to hold the Navy administration accountable for their policies. The Virgin Islands Colonial Council, which recommended policy to the naval administration, represented only members of the land-owning class. Even so, the naval Governor dissolved the Colonial Council several times because of its failure to support his own policy proposals. Although these policies improved social welfare, “the intent was to bring the blessings of a just and helpful government to an ignorant and uneducated people, in a missionary spirit, in order to advance them ‘in the scale of civilization’” (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 4). The naval policies assumed Virgin Islanders’ backwardness and savagery. Through its autocratic control, the naval administration did not approach Virgin Islanders as equals under the ideals of the United States, but rather as people outside of modernity.

The poetry written during the first decade under naval rule reflected the growing frustrations of poor Virgin Islanders who suffered from political aphonia. Gimenez grappled with this growing disillusionment in “How Things Change.” In the poem, he vilifies the naval administration for its policing of the islanders. Virgin Islanders became disappointed as change in sovereignty did not lead to political progress, but only military occupation. The poem elicits a growing nostalgia for Danish rule because of this disappointment in the United States:

How tings change in dis land o' mine,

Taint nottin like de Danish time.

In de barrox now you can't be seen,

Les you ask consent from de marine.

But befo time—you could go dere wid ease

An get big can o' poke an pease (Gimenez, “How Things Change” 1-6)

Here, Gimenez reveals a shift in imperial intimacy as he contrasts the strict American marines with the relaxed Danish soldiers. The narrator underlines the tyranny of the naval administration through its control of the movement of Virgin Islanders. Therefore, the transfer of sovereignty transformed the spatial boundaries of the islands. The marines in the poem have restricted Virgin Islanders from visiting the military barracks where they would previously go to get food from the Danish soldiers. For the narrator, this shift in terrain signifies hostility from an arrogant military and the erosion of a less oppressive colonial geography during Danish rule. The nostalgia for Danish empire builds as the narrator remembers the Danish soldiers as benevolent and welcoming: “In de night gendarme kep wan big spree / An incite all me friends and me” (Gimenez, “How Things Change” 7-8). In this memory, the narrator parties alongside the Danish gendarmes, establishing a narrative of colonial benevolence during Danish rule.

When juxtaposed with the contentious history between Virgin Islanders and the previous Danish regime, this nostalgia goes beyond imperial intimacy, offering a strong critique of American military rule. The oppressive and exclusionary military government transformed the narrator’s relationship to the Danish past, as his memory starkly diverges from the violent history between Virgin Islanders and the Danish regime. In fact, David Hamilton Jackson created *The Herald* to document “the wrongs suffered by black majority, including police brutality, frequent abuses of the work contract system, and repression by the authoritarian political system” (Boyer 80). For Jackson, violence and subjection characterized the relationship between Danish colonizers and the black working class during the aftermath of slavery. Within this context, the nostalgia for a Danish past suggests that Virgin Islanders experienced much worse treatment under the naval government. By remembering feelings of belonging and inclusion within Danish

colonialism, the narrator highlights the stark divide between the naval government and the Virgin Islands people.

Gimenez's use of Virgin Islands vernacular further illuminates the fissures between the military government and the Virgin Islands people. Since Virgin Islanders did not have access to Danish, the language of the colonial regime and bureaucracy, they developed a creole based on the English lingua franca. In this way, the use of vernacular reveals the cultural linguistic form that allows for "total expression" unmarred by American linguistic norms (Brathwaite 273). This language becomes a way for the narrator to highlight his authentic *Virgin Islandsness* in face of the imperial other. Unable to speak this nation language, the white naval administration lacks any cultural authenticity. The vernacular, then, highlights the difference between the military occupiers and the Virgin Islanders. Consequently, the cultural linguistic form engenders a political subjectivity grounded in difference and ideas of cultural authenticity. Through this language, the narrator becomes native and makes a claim to the spaces that the military control and restrict.

Nation language allows Virgin Islanders to make a claim to the very land that gives rise to their language. Thus, nation language resists the exclusion and displacement of the native resulting from United States military occupation. Gimenez uses the vernacular in this way to highlight how the cultural and political are not distinct, but dynamically inform each other. Ultimately, this folk culture, simultaneously articulated in the bamboula dance and quelbe music, provides the basis for a distinct Virgin Islands political subjectivity and a sense of belonging outside of empire.

U.S. military rule fueled tensions between folk culture and formal politics. Formal political oppression threatened to dismantle the folk culture that articulated the political

imagination of the black working class. In “Talking ‘Bout XMAS in De Virgin Islands,” Gimenez demonstrates how the Prohibition era weakened the traditional Christmas celebration in the islands. The narrator sings: “Dey ain’t no mo Chrismus in dis lan. / Since dat dere Pro-hi-bi-tion come, / Ever blessed ting gone bum” (Gimenez, “Talking ‘Bout XMAS” 1-3). The narrator blames the Prohibition laws for undermining the cultural tradition associated with Christmas in the Virgin Islands. In the first line, the narrator does not mean to suggest that Christmas is no longer observed. Rather, the absence stems from the weakening of the cultural traditions that shape how Virgin Islanders observe the holiday. Folk drinks, such as guava-berry and bay rum, became outlawed during Prohibition. During military rule, the United States still refused to extend citizenship and suffrage to Virgin Islanders, yet Federal laws still governed their actions. Thus, formal political repression manifested as an attack on black folk culture. Virgin Islanders became frustrated with the paternalistic and racist agenda seen in the policies of the naval administration and federal government. In turn, working class Virgin Islanders continued their tradition of resistance in order to gain expanded political rights.

Historical narratives have focused too much on the possible economic and geopolitical factors that influenced political change in the islands, and in doing so elide how working class Virgin Islanders shaped their own political destiny through grassroots organizing. For example, Stephanie McMahon argues that the United States expanded political rights of Virgin Islanders in 1927 and ended military rule in 1931 in order to ease the economic burden that the islands

placed on the federal government.¹ According to McMahon, the cost of sustaining the islands, which generated little revenue of their own, became unbearable for the federal government. Members of Congress simply saw increased political rights as a means to legitimize taxation and increase revenues in the islands. A member of the Treasury Department supported McMahon's claim, as he said, "if you give them citizenship, I think they would be willing to pay taxes" (qtd. in McMahon 123). Still, this history from above locates political development solely in the formal institutions of the nation--state, rather than in the often-unconventional political actions of the working class.

While McMahon provides compelling evidence that supports her claim that economic circumstances forced political change in the Virgin Islands, she fails to examine how Virgin Islanders activists propelled these initial reforms. The oppressive naval regime prompted Virgin Islanders to form grassroots political organizations, both in the islands and states, which struggled for political change. Two major political parties came to prominence in the islands during naval rule: The Republican Club and Progressive Party (Dookhan, "Search for Identity" 11). These parties organized Virgin Islanders who opposed the naval administration, and articulated a political vision for the islands.

Both parties asserted that navy rule actively impeded the possibility of expanded political rights for Virgin Islanders. These political parties, along with the rising labor unions, used

¹ For a detailed account of the specific political changes occurring in 1927 and 1931, see Isaac Dookhan, *A History of the Virgin Islands of the United States* (Jamaica: Canoe Press, 1994) chapter 15. A 1927 "congressional enactment granted United States citizenship to several categories of Virgin Islanders. These included all natives of the islands and residents on and after January 17, 1917, and those who had removed to the United States and Puerto Rico before or after January 17, 1917, who had not become citizens of any foreign country. A further Act of Congress passed on June 28, 1932 filled any gaps that might have been left in the 1927 Act (Dookhan 275). In 1931, a civilian government replaced the naval administration, but Virgin Islanders still did not have suffrage (Dookhan 278).

newspapers to articulate and spread their platforms.² The Progressive Party “advocated ‘a new economic system’ and the removal of ‘all obstructive and objectionable features’ in the existing form of government,” while the Republican Club called for “United States citizenship, lowering the voting age to 21 years, the abolition of property and income qualification for voters and the removal of appointed members from the Colonial Council” (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 12). Both these parties linked political progress to economic reform, citizenship, and the right to select representation. This political platform countered the autocracy of the naval administration. Other organizations, such as the Active Citizens’ Committee, did not reflect formal political parties, but rather offered more organic community based spaces where Virgin Islanders could imagine new political visions together (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 12).

News of this movement traveled to the sizeable Danish West Indian community in Harlem and prompted the formation of several grassroots organizations that took up the struggle in the city. The most prominent of these organizations were: The Virgin Islands Committee, The Virgin Islands Protective League, and The Virgin Islands Congressional Council. Each of these organizations brought awareness to Virgin Islanders’ oppression under the naval administration. Moreover, they demanded political change through citizenship, democratic representation and economic reforms (Dookhan, “Search For Identity” 17). Casper Holstein, brother-in-law of labor leader David Hamilton Jackson and a prominent Harlem mobster, strengthened the growing

² The print history in the Virgin Islands becomes essential to understanding this moment after transfer. A slew of black radical newspapers, such as *The Herald*, *Emancipator*, and *St. Croix Tribune*, arose to support the nascent oppositional political parties, as well as the seasoned labor movement (“Search for Identity” 12). The plantocracy formed its own newspapers in order to combat these resistant publications (“Search for Identity” 12). Together, these newspapers created the terrain upon which contesting visions of belonging, identity, politics and labor relations vied for prominence. For more about the significance of newspapers during this moment see Isaac Dookhan, “The Search For Identity: The Political Aspirations And Frustrations Of Virgin Islanders Under The United States Naval Administration, 1917-27,” *Journal Of Caribbean History*, 12 (1979) 11-12.

movement in Harlem by bringing these organizations together as The Associated Virgin Islands Societies of New York (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 17). Although each organization maintained independence, they could more easily coordinate their actions and positions through this central organization (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 17). Under the aegis of The Associated Virgin Islands Societies, these organizations urged “all patriotic...Americans to call upon the Congress and the President of the United States to abolish the naval administration and introduce civil government in the Virgin Islands, and to grant citizenship to all Virgin Islanders in the United States and Virgin Islands” (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 17). The political goals of these Harlem based organizations grew out of the political parties and labor unions in the Virgin Islands. The struggle to expand political rights for Virgin Islanders, then, did not remain stuck in the islands, but spread to Harlem, contributing to a larger story of Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth century New York.³

Eventually, this grassroots movement in the Virgin Islands and New York gained the support of the ACLU and pressured congress to extend citizenship to natives, install a civilian government and “to secure measures designed to promote the economic and political reconstruction of the Virgin Islands” (Dookhan, “Search For Identity” 16). Furthermore, activists interacted intimately with the U.S. government through congressional testimonies, letter writing campaigns and individual meetings. David Hamilton Jackson, whose labor unions initiated this movement, even “had a personal interview with President Coolidge to explain the causes for

³ For a definitive account of Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth century New York see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1998). James explores the reasons for the high proportion of Afro-Caribbean people in black radical movements in the United States during the early twentieth century. He offers an extraordinary contrast of race and class constructs in the Caribbean and the United States, and argues that differences in these constructions propelled Afro-Caribbean migrants to join black radical organizations in higher proportions.

political deadlock in St. Croix” (Dookhan, “Search for Identity” 14). This history of the grassroots movement shows how Virgin Islanders agitated at the highest levels of government. The movement’s success stems from its feverish spread from the local to the intranational, as Virgin Islanders in the states could appeal more directly to the Federal government.

This grassroots political movement succeeded in creating change across the Virgin Islands. In 1927, Congress expanded citizenship to Virgin Islanders who lived in the islands, Puerto Rico or the United States after transfer (Dookhan, “A History” 275). In 1931 Congress replaced the naval administration with a civilian government, and a year later revisited the 1927 measure to expanded citizenship to those left out of the original decree (Dookhan, “A History” 275). In 1936, Congress passed the first Virgin Islands constitution, The Organic Act. This local constitution established a local representative government separated into two municipalities: St. Croix and St. Thomas / St. John (Dookhan, “A History” 279). Each municipality had its own legislative council that passed its local laws. However, these legislative councils also met once a year to create legislation for the entire Virgin Islands (Dookhan, “A History” 279). All literate Virgin Islanders over twenty-one, including women, became eligible to vote for the members their representative council. However, the United States President retained the right to appoint the governor, the executive leader of this new government (Dookhan, “A History” 280).

These political victories invoked a renewed sense of faith in American empire. Virgin Islanders experienced an expansion of political rights largely unforeseen in the Caribbean. This new constitution “brought the Virgin Islands to the forefront of political and constitutional development in the West Indies” (Dookhan, “A History” 281). This political development made Virgin Islanders believe that they could achieve their own sense of sovereignty under United

States rule. Cyril Creque's "We Laud the Living Hour" captures this renewed sense of hope that came with political progress:

To greater good in store

We turn both heart and hand:

A pledge proud scions make

For love of motherland (Creque, "We Laud" 9-12)

Creque imagines a Virgin Islands united under American rule. The narrator expresses pride in the act of pledging allegiance to the United States. After successful political change, the American flag once again represented hope. By the 1940s, Virgin Islanders saw a future uplifted by American capital and expanded political agency. This "greater good in store," the potential for continued development, instilled new meaning into this pledge. This symbolic gesture, occurring daily in schools and at the beginnings of large gatherings, became a way for Virgin Islanders to imagine themselves as a collective based on the increased autonomy that came with American citizenship.

Here, Creque's use of "we" signals an approach to nationhood and collective consciousness (Creque, "We Laud" 10). Virgin Islanders as "scions" assumed a filial relationship with the United States that transcended the patriarchal tyranny of the earlier naval administration (Creque, "We Laud" 11). The narrator also envisions the United States as "the motherland." This language of kinship naturalizes this imperial relationship as an inheritance, genealogy or lineage. The feelings of sovereignty expanding under United States rule allow the narrator to resignify this imperial relationship as kinship.

The poetry emerging out of this moment of transfer creates what theorist Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community" (Anderson 1). Virgin Islanders developed "an

imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 5). Political progress during United States rule spurred feelings of sovereignty within Virgin Islanders, while cultural tradition limited the size of this burgeoning nation. Consequently, unlike much of the Anglophone Caribbean, nationalism did not mean independence in the Virgin Islands. Visions of the nation articulated in the poetry of Creque and Gimenez became tied to the political development occurring under United States rule, and the folk culture of the black working class. However, in the years to follow, the rise of global black consciousness, exploitation and displacement by the tourist industry and American cultural hegemony challenged this vision of nationhood.

IV. “But Where is the Native?”: Cultural Sovereignty in mid Twentieth Century Virgin Islands Poetry

By the 1950s, Virgin Islanders became economically displaced by an emerging white continental business class that further propelled the Americanization and economic progress of the islands (Lewis 193). This infusion of capital and industry into the islands spurred “an era of unprecedented prosperity” during the 1960s (Harrigan and Varlack 401). The growing demand for labor attracted West Indian laborers from the lower British and French Antilles, migrating to the Virgin Islands in search for their own economic progress (Ibid 404). Most of these laborers were classified as legally resident aliens, creating a life without the benefits of citizenship. As a result, these migrant laborers suffered from “some of the most flagrant living conditions existing anywhere under the U.S. flag” (Lewis qtd. in Harrigan and Varlack 404). These laborers competed with Virgin Islanders for jobs, social services and space. Consequently, Virgin Islanders experienced displacement at both the top and bottom socio-economic strata.

Virgin Islanders simultaneously presented themselves as both natives and Americans in order to make claims to the island and challenge the economic domination of the white business class and the presence of a migrant underclass. Virgin Islanders glorified a cultural authenticity that the white business class lacked. This access to folk culture legitimized Virgin Islanders claim to the land, and prevented whites living on the islands from becoming “true Virgin Islanders” (Lewis qtd in Harrigan and Varlack 404). “In order to elevate themselves in face of these non-native West Indians, often derogatorily called “down islanders,” Virgin Islanders “adopted the spirit of American cultural imperialism” (Lewis 261). Virgin Islanders used their status as American citizens to elevate themselves above the West Indian migrants coming from

the British and French Caribbean. Thus, American citizenship became the signifier that maintained the hierarchy between Virgin Islanders and the immigrant West Indian population.

The reaction of Virgin Islanders to the rising white elite and West Indian underclass worked to stratify Virgin Islands society. Virgin Islands society became segmented as West Indian laborers were forced to the bottom, poor and middle-class Virgin Islanders occupied the middle, and white elites and a few black Virgin Islands elites reigned at the top. Nationality, ethnicity, race and class not only mediated this segmentation, but also established the terms of a complex and resistant Virgin Islands identity. Poor Virgin Islanders, the most threatened by the influx of West Indian laborers, avoided the bottom stratus by regarding the British colonial background of the West Indians as “inferior to the American background” (Lewis 235). The cultural continuities across the Caribbean led Virgin Islanders to use American citizenship, rather than cultural authenticity, as the class signifier that separated them from the West Indian migrant laborers. In contrast, Virgin Islands elites envisioned cultural authenticity as a means for upward mobility into a business class dominated by white Americans. Consequently, a Virgin Islands identity based on cultural authenticity and the inheritance of American citizenship formed in order to conserve and bolster social status. Despite efforts by Virgin Islanders to carve out their social milieu, tensions between the groups continued to escalate. This chapter argues that Virgin Islands poets respond to the threats of physical and economic displacement by recuperating the figure of the native in order to reclaim the islands from those perceived as outsiders.

This new generation of poets grew up into a Virgin Islands that offered an increasing amount of self-governance to its people. By the 1950s, “there was a growing trend towards greater participation by Virgin Islanders in local affairs” (Dookhan, “A History” 290). This demand for even greater political participation led to the revision of the Organic Act, the Virgin

Islands constitution, in 1954. The Revised Organic Act simplified the legislative body of the Virgin Islands, extended franchise to non-English speaking citizens, and strengthened the local tax code (Dookhan, "A History" 291-292). All these revisions empowered Virgin Islanders as political actors and citizens. Moreover, U.S. Congress relinquished its ability to invalidate laws passed by the Virgin Islands legislature that did not directly conflict with congressional laws concerning the islands (Dookhan, "A History" 291). Laws now became solely judged on their constitutionality, and any challenges to Virgin Islands law would follow the judicial process. This increase in autonomy culminated with the passing of the Elected Governor Act of 1968, which enabled Virgin Islanders to elect their own governor who, up until then, was an appointed leader of the government. So, poets of this period grew up in this contradictory space of increased political economy in the face of rising social and economic displacement. Although Virgin Islanders experienced political rights unforeseen in the region, they "appeared more like a dwindling audience in attendance at a perpetual drama being acted out by the ever-increasing players from the continent and Caribbean islands" (Harrigan and Varlack 405).

Accordingly, the social pressures felt by Virgin Islanders sandwiched between the white business class and the black immigrant labor class mitigated the sense of hope grown out of the extension of political freedom in the islands. Through their poetry, middle class Virgin Islanders explored feelings of cultural and economic alienation under U.S. colonialism. As a result, the poetry becomes more critical of the colonial project. Still, these poets protested their displacement by celebrating the culture of the native and her claim to the land, rather than independence, which represented a step backwards in face of increasing autonomy of the Virgin Islands government. Although it did not call for independence, their poetry subverted colonial rhetoric by elevating the culture of the native above the values of the metropole.

Althea Romeo-Mark, a poet born in Antigua but raised in St. Thomas, presents cultural resistance as a tool against an increasingly American Virgin Islands. In “New Clothes/New Mind,” she explores the ways Virgin Islanders navigate across social and cultural boundaries. The poem depicts the changing nature of Virgin Islands identity in its incorporation of American cultural norms. Although the poem's protagonist participates in American corporate culture within the islands, he looks to invoke a perceived traditional culture in order to stabilize the schizophrenic nature of being an American Virgin Islander:

Hot, choked and sweating

In my tie and coat,

I'm going home

To slip on my dashiki.

I'm a revolutionary

After my office hours. (Romeo-Mark 2-7)

The protagonist exposes the oppressive nature of the corporate culture that becomes an extension of the dominant white business class. The requirement of formal business attire, a “tie and coat,” despite the immense heat evokes the irony inherent of imposing American cultural values onto Virgin Islands (Romeo-Mark 2). The way he must represent himself in the workplace becomes the main source of oppression, culminating in physical signs of anxiety. His work clothes remain impractical relative to the environment around him.

Still, the protagonist does not boldly resist this irony by wearing more comfortable or traditional dress at work. Rather, he waits until he goes home to undress into his dashiki—a traditional West African garment. In his dashiki, the protagonist repatriates to West Africa, rooting Virgin Islands culture to inherited West African legacies that predated United States

sovereignty. The dashiki in the poem elicits a specific form of cultural nationalism invoked and produced by black nationalists in the United States. This reflects the rise of Black Power ideology in the Virgin Islands during this time as another response to growing displacement (Harland and Varlack 405). With this, the protagonist engages with a black diasporic imaginary of a lost African tradition and culture. This (un)dressing becomes more than aesthetic as it articulates a shift in identity through self-representation. The title, "New Clothes/New Mind" suggests that dress enables him to express his identity as both American and Virgin Islander. These nationalities, then in the early 1970s, emerge not in direct opposition but intertwined, each providing social cache in the Virgin Islands' "vertical mosaic" (Lewis 154).

The enjambment of his declarative lines reveals the ambivalence inherent in this resistance: "I'm a revolutionary / After my office hours / Check me out for advice" (Romeo-Mark 6-9). The office worker declares himself revolutionary only after slipping on his dashiki, which he wears only after he finishes work. The protagonist, then, chooses not to completely distance himself from American cultural norms in the workplace, and remains uninterested in destroying the imperial framework that engenders his economic progress. Rather, the protagonist protests against the displacement of traditional culture as the islands become more Americanized: "We will talk about/ Changing the islands/ And/ Retaining our culture" (Romeo-Mark 10-13). The poem culminates in this ultimate irony. The protagonist's revolutionary project aims to retain a sense of traditional culture within the islands, which becomes possible through cultural artifacts such as dress, language, music and dance. Here, the revolutionary works to create change within the system established during U.S. sovereignty, rather than uprooting the entire system itself. As the protagonist looks to protect "our culture," the poem moves towards cultural collectivity. In the end, cultural nationalism becomes the dominant response to feelings of native displacement

in face of American cultural influences. Like poets across the West Indies, Virgin Islands poets of this period held the native accountable for retaining traditional cultural forms: dance, language, music and lore. However, these similarities end as Virgin Islands poets deployed the figure of the native not only to challenge white imperialism but also to castigate black migrant laborers. So, this figure of the native is tied to specific cultural traditions that exceed blackness.

Virgin Islanders faced another problem as American tourism sought to commodify both the culture and islands. In “Sun of St. Thomas,” Bertica Hodge, a poet and educator from St. Thomas, ridicules the commodification of Virgin Islands culture in order to satiate tourists’ need for cultural consumption. Through parody, Hodge implicates the natives selling their diluted cultural forms in order to please tourists. The poem foresees a St. Thomas whose people only have value because of their relationship to the sun:

And the people

Sell sun

Sun and rum

Fun in the sun (Hodge 15-18)

This short stanza deftly problematizes the reductive nature of the neocolonial tourist industry. Hodge begins with the collective, “the people,” which recurs throughout the poem (Hodge 15). Yet, the poem refuses to humanize this group as they only come alive in the sun’s presence: “And the sun strikes on the dead/ To awaken what’s left/ Of the inhabitants” (Hodge 1-3). The people depend on the sun for life, rising from the dead in its presence. Hodge’s hyperbole parodies the capitalistic relationship between nature and the native that develops as a response to the invasive tourist industry. Once enlivened, the people “sell sun/ sun and rum,” and have no other aspirations (Hodge 16-17). The short lines following “the people”, the stanza’s subject,

imply that this selling of the sun remains all that they do. The repetition of sun not only in this stanza but throughout the entire poem reinforces the sun's control over the livelihood of the people. Although they "exploit the sun," they become dependent on its commodification (Hodge 14). Hodge employs cliché, "fun in the sun," to mirror the commercial packaging necessary to sell the islands to tourists (Hodge 18). In conjunction with the cliché, the simple rhyme scheme pushes the stanza toward advertisement or jingle. "The people," then, only function to maintain this commercialized narrative of St. Thomas as a place only for "fun in the sun." Hodge's parody reflects the anxiety felt among poets who believed that the growing tourist industry in the 1970s threatened to attenuate local culture. The poem serves as a warning to "the people" of the possibility of cultural displacement in order to meet the demands of the tourist industry. Poets responded not only to this cultural displacement but the economic and physical displacement also taking place on the islands.

By the 1970s access to land and housing began to reflect the social hierarchies under American sovereignty. The gated communities and lavish homes of the business class offered a perverse contrast to the numerous public housing projects arising across the islands. Isidro Gomez Jr. explicitly castigates the physical displacement of the native in "American Paradise (but for whom?)." Gomez searches for the native as the islands continue to develop:

Towering condominiums;

Restricted beaches;

Tourist-beaten streets;

Golden sunsets—

But where is the native? (Gomez 1-5)

Gomez begins by listing physical features within a Virgin Islands flushed with American capital. As a list, each line becomes inexorably connected to the previous line. Although the lines, or fragments, each elicit meaning, the purpose of the stanza becomes evident only through the ways the fragments work together. The absence of people in the “towering condominiums” (Gomez 1) of the first line becomes apparent when “restricted beaches” (Gomez 2) follow. Gomez raises the question about access as he juxtaposes these two physical places. The beach becomes restricted only if it keeps certain people out. Those on the periphery of the beach will also be outside of the condos. Gomez continually silences the marginalized in order to emphasize their absence and illuminate those with access to the entire island. The poem swiftly moves to the “tourist-beaten streets” and “golden sunsets” that mark the islands (Gomez 4). Tourists, then, through their wealth, have access to the physical beauty of the islands. In these two lines, Gomez intimates island luxury that remains open to only a select few. The silence of those restricted from enjoying this luxury continues until Gomez evokes the native in the final line. By asking for the native, Gomez vitiates the idyllic images associated with island luxury. As Gomez searches for the native he accentuates their displacement by these luxury condos, beaches and tourists.

The missing native works as a counterpoint to the images of privilege and access in the poem. Furthermore, the absence of the local creates irony when juxtaposed to “American Paradise,” the poem’s title. The Virgin Islands represent paradise only for the wealthy, and their Eden can only be sustained through the displacement and marginalization of the native. Gomez finds an answer to his question by the final stanza of the poem: “I am a native/ and I want a darn/ big piece of the pie” (Gomez 16-18). Here, Gomez suggests that the native should move from the periphery to the center, enjoying the luxury of the island’s wealthy. Gomez does not call for

an end to American neocolonialism or Virgin Islands independence. Rather, he wants to integrate the native into the existing system, creating a more equitable Virgin Islands.

Habib Tiwoni, a poet and visual artist from St. Thomas, extends Gomez's search for the missing native in "Pon Top Bluebeard Castle Hill." The protagonist in the first poem reminisces on the "ruins of adolescence" atop Bluebeard Castle Hill (Tiwoni, "Pon Top" 2). As he looks to the past, he remembers his adventures traversing the hill's wilderness: "in the jungle I was king/ to me the burds came daily to sing" (Tiwoni, "Pon Top" 14-15). As king, the protagonist lays claim to the hill which the acquiescence of the birds legitimate. The pastoral diction vividly describes the flora and fauna he encountered on his numerous ascents to the crest. He uses the traditional names for the wildlife, signaling his nativity and connection to the landscape. Vernacular emerges to further solidify the protagonist's claim to the land, suggesting that language and landscape remain intimately intertwined. Through this cultural knowledge, a traditional connection to the wildlife and dialect, the protagonist charts an alternative resistant geography that allows him to imagine himself as sovereign.

The poem takes a surprising shift in the final stanza as the protagonist spies a newly placed barrier: "until the senses awoke one day/ and saw their selfish signs/ "no trespassing" (Tiwoni, "Pon Top" 25-27). The protagonist realizes the end of their reign as king through this "no trespassing" sign. This moment of epiphany, the awakening of senses, indicates the native's first awareness of his own displacement. Through privatization, the native has been usurped, losing his or her access despite cultural knowledge of the landscape. The hill will now become the site for the "towering condominiums" that Gomez alluded to.

Tiwoni arrives at a more militant response to this displacement than the previous poets in "The Eroticism of Imperialism." He diverges from the ironic parodies of the previous poets to an

understanding of displacement framed by sexual violence: “Virgins no more, they bow/ To do the blow job of monopolies/ Who suck raw materials from/ Between their sun-kissed legs” (Tiwoni, “Eroticism” 11-14). The displacement of the native becomes articulated as sexual defilement. Tiwoni’s disturbing gendered language posits the native as prostrate, succumbing to the sexual desires of the foreign continental. Syntactically, Tiwoni implicates the natives in their own abuse through the use of the active voice, which suggests agency. Here, the act of bowing, even out of economic circumstances, becomes a choice. The “monopolies,” an extension of the burgeoning white business class, simply extract from the island. However, without the complicity of the native this extraction would cease. Tiwoni amplifies the response to native displacement through the violent language in the final stanza:

Islands, listen to your native son
He speaks of miscarriage and death
That must surely come to the
Neo-colonialists, the
Germs of tourism (Tiwoni, “Eroticism” 22-26)

The native son takes aim not at U.S. sovereignty, but at the “germs of tourism.” The displacement of locals through restrictions and privatization of land results from the needs of the nascent tourist industry. Tiwoni evokes “miscarriage and death” as he seeks to end the power disparity between tourist and native. Still, the poem evades the question of independence as Tiwoni remembers that his “islands were once Virgins,” despite the harsh legacy of European colonialism that began with Columbus’ landing through Danish rule. So, Tiwoni’s discontent stems from this specific manifestation of neocolonialism, rather than U.S. sovereignty itself. At this point, through the increase of local autonomy, Virgin Islanders could implement changes to

land use, wages, and even the tourist industry. Legislation became a more realistic and efficient avenue for change than outright independence.

This poetry from the mid twentieth century cements the formation of a Virgin Islands nationalist literature which privileged the cultural tradition of the displaced native. The figure of the native Virgin Islander stands in contrast to the North American and West Indian immigrants on the island. Poets subverted and repaired colonial rhetoric by representing nativeness as a source of pride rather than savagery. Gomez and Tiwoni searched for the native “lost” through the island’s economic development, (re)placing the native at the island’s center. At the same time, Romeo-Mark’s characterization of the native as hybrid shows the ways that American and Virgin Islands identity began to meld during this period. This poetry, although critical to the economic effects of neocolonialism, hardly threatens to end U.S. sovereignty. The poetry becomes anticolonial without calling for independence in the ways it recuperates the native’s literary representation.

Conclusion

Twentieth century Virgin Islands poetry forms a nationalist literature based solely on retaining culture, rather than gaining formal independence. This mode of nationalist literature emerges because Virgin Islanders embraced the possibilities of economic and political progress under U.S. sovereignty. The historical legacy of Danish colonialism provided a stark contrast to the possibilities that United States sovereignty elicited. However, Virgin Islanders first experienced a racist and tyrannical military regime while under naval rule. Still, political activists led a grassroots movement that eventually succeeded in expanding political rights to Virgin Islanders. The hope found in the early poetry became a reality for later poets born into a Virgin Islands with a semi-autonomous local government. Over this period, the people came to understand themselves as both American and Virgin Islander. These identities, initially opposed, became part of a continuum in which Virgin Islanders understood themselves.

Consequently, nationalism in Virgin Islands poetry during this period did not focus on establishing an independent nation-state. Rather, writers sought to establish an authentic Virgin Islands cultural identity that incorporated American citizenship. Virgin Islanders responded to tensions between their white American compatriots by flaunting their cultural claim to the islands. The poetry during this period continually exalts this native culture, restoring the native to the center of Virgin Islands society in moments where tourism and immigration threatened his or her existence.

Understanding Virgin Islands literature in these terms will redefine the master narrative that equates nationalism in Anglophone Caribbean literature with independence. This conventional idea about Anglophone Caribbean literature obscures the complex historical

relationships that produced nationalist voices within and beyond empire. Virgin Islands poetry represents an unexplored literary archive that offers alternative modes of belonging and illuminates the impact of non-British empire on the literary production of the region. Poets from the Virgin Islands sought to establish an alternative sovereignty that could flourish within a colonial relationship. Poetry from the Virgin Islands, then, represents another set of possibilities of belonging and autonomy for the non-sovereign. This writing exceeds the paradigms of Anglophone Caribbean literature, which emphasizes sovereignty with an independent nation-state.

Both the poetic and political history of the Virgin Islands in the twentieth century illustrate a lack of mass movement towards independence. However, poets, activists, and laborers picked up the baton passed from the 1848 enslaved revolutionaries and then to the 1878 labor rioters led by “Queen Mary.” This legacy of political struggle, although not articulated in terms of independence, continued throughout the twentieth century. Virgin Islands poets joined this long history of struggle, and created a new terrain upon which to fight for political and economic progress. Poets such as J. Antonio Jarvis and Cyril Creque used this cultural and literary terrain to articulate a resistant Virgin Islands identity. Their poetry worked to reconcile American citizenship with Virgin Islands cultural tradition not only to bolster their claim to the land, but also to create an identity that remained whole within the jaws of empire.

Marvin Williams describes his anthology of Virgin Islands poetry, *Yellow Cedars Blooming*, as an excavation (Williams 1). I contend that this anthologizing of Virgin Islands poetry represents more than a physically grueling act, but more importantly, a political act. This anthology, an acknowledgment of the literary contributions of Virgin Islanders, questions the overwhelming absence of Virgin Islands writing in the Anglophone Caribbean literary

landscape, challenging the notion that “there is no Virgin Islands poetry” (Ibid). Bringing this poetry into the Virgin Islands education system becomes the next logical extension of this unsilencing, as the Americanization of the islands threaten to silence the islands' significant literary history.

As long as Virgin Islands writing remains outside of school curriculum, the American education system established on the island will continue to engage in a cultural colonial project. Frantz Fanon describes this cultural colonialism project as a mother “protecting the child from itself, from its ego, its physiology, its biology, and its ontological misfortune.” (Fanon 149) Future Virgin Islands writers need to understand their literary inheritance in order to create writing that continues to give voice to Virgin Islanders and *Virgin Islandsness*.

Tiphonie Yanique is one such writer who succeeds in representing the complexities of the Virgin Islands and its people. After her first collection of short stories, *How to Survive a Leper Colony* (2010), garnered much praise, Yanique published her first novel, *A Land of Love and Drowning* in 2014. The novel follows the Bradshaw family from St. Thomas over the course of the twentieth Century. Yanique’s choice to begin the story on the eve of transfer not only signals the continued significance of this moment in the Virgin Islands imaginary, but also situates her alongside the poets who grappled with the impact United States sovereignty had on Virgin Islands identity. Yet, Yanique challenges the transfer as the origin or root of Virgin Islands identity, the moment from which progress springs forth.

The opening scene of the novel subverts this origin story. Owen Bradshaw, ship captain and family patriarch, watches a visiting American scientist use a little girl to conduct an electricity experiment. The scientist bounds the girl and threatens her with punishment if she does not hold a metal ball during a tropical storm. She reluctantly holds the ball and her

hairs raise from her body, signaling progress to the onlooking islanders: “‘Christ, have mercy.’ This is what the Christians whisper. The Jewish and Muslim men for whom these islands have been a refuge, mutter “Oy Gotenu” and “Allahu Akbar” under their breaths respectfully. Yes, America will bring us progress. Here is progress before us” (Yanique 5). Although this command of electricity shocks the crowd of men, the novel suggests that the promise of individual progress inspires an even deeper awe. The crowd sees their own economic and political gains under United States sovereignty in this experiment. Yanique suggests that this vision of progress had an almost universal appeal in the islands, permeating the religious and racial divides that organized society.

However, this scene challenges the so-called progress of empire through its irony. The men’s individual desires erase the gendered violence that makes the experiment possible. The crowd chooses not to see how this progress relies on possessing the girl’s body through the threat of violence. Here, Yanique not only illuminates the relationship between scientific progress and the domination of black women, but also foreshadows later moments in the novel where the white Navy members make claims to the bodies of the islands’ women. Again and again, Yanique reveals how transfer impacts the lives and bodies of the islands’ women in ways not considered by the poetry. *Land of Love and Drowning* challenges our measure of progress by highlighting the somatic and geographical exploitation that came with United States sovereignty.

Yanique further complicates transfer by presenting the competing nationalisms that the moment produced. Whereas poets such as Cyril Creque sought to reconcile American sovereignty with Virgin Islands identity, Yanique presents Americanness and *Virgin*

Islandsness as always in strife. In a scene that echoes Creque's poems about the moment, Yanique reimagines transfer to show the beginnings of rival nationalisms on the islands:

But watch, they have a few who dye up their white dress until it bright yellow.
Them protesting. For real, protest! Yellow is the color of we island—sunny. In
America, yellow mean coward. But nor for we. Yellow mean brash. Yellow
mean happy and free. These in yellow want we to stay Danish or go join the
British Virgin Islands or even be independent like everybody saying going to
happen with Puerto Rico (Yanique 11).

With this, *Land of Love and Drowning* revisits the moment of transfer and replaces the somber of Creque's "Memories of Transfer Day" with outright protest. These women wear yellow as a challenge to United States Empire even though "they done lose," and cannot prevent the transfer (Yanique 11). Yanique diverges from the ambiguous representations of transfer as at once celebratory and mournful. She imbues colorful resistance in order to complicate its status as the root of Virgin Islands identity, illuminating other possibilities and alternative modes of belonging developing at the same time. This re-envisioning of Transfer Days places the Virgin Islanders at the center of history, rather than onlookers watching the flags fall and raise. It makes sense that Yanique chose Anette, Owen Bradshaw's youngest daughter, and self-proclaimed "historian of the family" to narrate this scene (Yanique 9). Anette tells her history in a sweet vernacular that signals an originary Virgin Islandsness before American sovereignty. Her vernacular allows her to tell the true story of the islands, offering a historical narrative of the islands outside of the immense silence in United States history and the distorted representations in tourist propaganda. Anete understands the significance of her narration, declaring, "but history is a kind of magic I doing here"

(Yanique 8). This magic pushes aside a (literary) historiography that ignores the Virgin Islands to conjure an alternative and fiercely resistant history embedded within the land and people. Like Anette, Yanique is also invoking a similar magic with this novel.

Contemporary Virgin Islands writers, like Yanique, have a rich literary tradition to draw upon as they articulate what it means to be a Virgin Islander today. Although these contemporary writers inhabit a Virgin Islands that faces a new set of challenges in the twenty-first century, issues surrounding United States sovereignty, native culture and regional tensions still persist. Virgin Islands poets, in the twentieth century, grappled with those issues and constructed a national identity that engendered a sense of sovereignty despite the islands' colonial status. Their poetry did not envision the United States as savior, but rather, as a means to claim modernity and freedom. The evolution of this poetry, both in form and content, over the twentieth century challenges the notion that U.S. Empire represents a totalizing force that immobilized black people on the islands. Instead, this poetic tradition reveals how U.S. Empire in the Virgin Islands represents a constant negotiation. Poets capture the modes of resistance that Virgin Islanders employ in order to challenge United States authority and ensure their economic and political progress.

This thesis has aimed to tell the story of the Virgin Islands, a narrative that eludes Anglophone Caribbean literary tropes or postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The literary, social and cultural history of the Virgin Islands destabilizes these existing paradigms, and demonstrates the importance of considering the particularities of smaller islands in the Caribbean. Placing the particular predicaments, geographies, histories and peoples in the smaller islands at the center of theory and analysis has the potential to radically transform our understanding of the region.

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