

Introduction: Hegemony in the Fiction of Elizabeth Nunez

by

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Elizabeth Nunez and Rhone Fraser in 2016

In her 2014 memoir *Not For Everyday Use*, Elizabeth Nunez writes that in completing her first novel *When Rocks Dance*, she: “found “a new found respect for my African past, for the beliefs of my ancestors denigrated by the British colonial masters. I came closer than I had ever been to knowing who I am, to knowing myself” (127). Each novel by Nunez promotes “a new found respect for...[an] African past” that was previously “denigrated by the British colonial masters.” In my 2014 interview with Nunez she describes this denigration: “in the colonial education, Africa is barbaric. That’s what you’re taught. What the British say about Obeah and the Obeahman...why denigrate that and not denigrate what ancient Greeks said about going to the Oracle? Isn’t going to the Oracle the same as going to the Obeah man?” (Fraser Interview). Nunez’s novels collectively reverse this denigration of African-derived culture in the Caribbean. Her protagonists demonstrate some development in this specific manner. In the twenty first century, Elizabeth Nunez has innovated what development means for a protagonist, after writing one 2014 memoir and publishing nine novels from 1986 to 2016: *When Rocks Dance* (1986); *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998); *Bruised Hibiscus* (2000); *Discretion* (2002); *Grace* (2003); *Prospero’s Daughter* (2006); *Anna In Between* (2010); *Boundaries* (2011); and *Even In Paradise* (2016). This special issue is dedicated to the fiction of Elizabeth Nunez. Each of these six critical articles within this special issue takes a closer look at her fiction and how she writes hegemony. This introduction will, in conjunction, highlight her historical significance as a novelist and identify the overarching themes of her work.

Redefining Development

The first most glaring theme of Nunez’s work is her redefining development according to what Black psychologist Kobi K.K. Kambon has called an “African worldview” which is defined as a view of the world that “defines human nature relations as interdependent and inseparable” (Kambon 132). This contrasts with the European worldview that Kambon writes is “defined by the basic values of materialism, control, aggression and linear-ordinal ranking conflict and opposition dichotomy” (131). What uniquely defines Nunez’s protagonists is that they seek development according to an African worldview. Her protagonists demonstrate “a new found respect for their African past.” Nunez defines development according to this worldview.

The protagonist Marina Heathrow in *When Rocks Dance*, the daughter of a Trinidadian cocoa planter and an African mother demonstrates development when she learns that the African-derived Caribbean religion of Obeah should not be used for personal material gain. Sara Edgehill, the protagonist of *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, who is the daughter of an upper class Trinidadian family and a student at a Wisconsin Catholic college, demonstrates development when she applies the lessons from her mother and her father about the dangers of gifts from U.S. imperialists and, through Obeah, takes control of her own reproductive health.

Rosa Appleton, a protagonist in *Bruised Hibiscus* who is daughter of a wealthy planter, demonstrates development by relying on the Obeahwoman her mother once scorned, to sacrifice her life and help her friend Zuela realize an independence she never had. Oufoula Sindede, the protagonist in *Discretion* demonstrates his development when he decides that, unlike his role as a diplomat from Africa in hiding ugly truths of colonial dependence, chooses not to hide his feelings for his foreign love Marguerite who reveals the fetters to and the freedom from his traditional African beliefs.

In *Grace*, literature professor Justin Peters demonstrates development when he discovers the key to saving his marriage will not be adhering to any Western standards of manhood, nor literary theory, but by completely putting himself in the position of his wife Sally and seeing himself as, if not more, confined by Western society's gender norms. The protagonist Carlos in *Prospero's Daughter* demonstrates development when he applies the knowledge that his adopted British father Peter gave him, not to conform to British culture, but to completely reevaluate and reject British culture and help his lover Virginia liberate herself from the sexual molestation of her father Peter. The protagonist Anna in the novel *Anna In Between* demonstrates development when she discovered that she had a duty to identify and dismantle colonial ways of thinking and behaving in order to treat her mother Beatrice's breast cancer. This same protagonist Anna in the sequel *Boundaries* demonstrates development when she decides not to neglect the feelings she was socialized to suppress by insisting that the book publishing company she works for publish books by Black authors not strictly according to their commercial value, but also for their literary merit. The protagonist Émile in *Even in Paradise* demonstrates development when he discovers "the price people are willing to pay for freedom" after his love interest Corinne rejects her father's land he promises her if she would distance herself from a poor Black population in Jamaica.

Historical Significance & Overarching Themes

Along with promoting development of an African worldview, a second overarching theme in Nunez's fiction, like none other directly addresses the ways that Western hegemony functions through industries, and promotes an "Anglo Saxon ideal." Her work challenges this ideal in the same literary tradition as the mentor she credits for being the first writer and mentor to tell her that she is a novelist, John Oliver Killens. Of Killens, Nunez said:

I have the original manuscript [of *When Rocks Dance*] with John's handwriting over every page, correcting...John taught me honesty in writing. I believe what he said, that we have a responsibility to the community not only in terms of what we write, but in terms of giving back some of my teaching. So in my Bed-Stuy community, I run a [free] creative writing workshop for residents in that community" (Fraser Interview).

Killens had a constructive influence on Nunez's first novel's structure and, to some extent, on one of her overarching themes of exposing an "Anglo-Saxon ideal." Killens's colleague Lloyd Brown first articulated this "Anglo-Saxon ideal" that Nunez writes against. In the March-April 1951 issue of the *Masses and Mainstream* periodical, Brown wrote what Mary Helen Washington called "one of the central texts in African American literary history," an article called "Which Way For the Negro Writer?" Brown argued in this article that "the production and consumption of black literature was controlled by white capitalists and therefore that black writing was subject to their categories" (Brown qtd in Washington, 44). Nunez herself in a 2016 *Poets & Writers* article entitled "Widening the Path" speaks to the current reality of these marginalized categories of Black writing when she describes her disagreement with the cover of her fourth novel *Discretion* published in 2002. She questioned why the publisher's original cover for this novel had "a Black girl with dreadlocks gazing woefully into the far distance," when the novel has nothing to do with a young Black girl, but with "the conflict between our personal desires and the public good" (Nunez "Widening the Path"). Nunez said her editor gives her this answer: "let them think this is another girlfriend book and see how they respond to the challenge of reading literary fiction." Nunez said that she was "doubly offended" for herself, "for readers of novels by Black writers," and that in that response, the editor was confirming "the publisher's expectations of the literary tastes of Black readers" ("Widening the Path"). She concludes in from this exchange that "the publishing industry must change if we are to have a safer world, and that change must begin with the gatekeepers in the industry—those who determine which books will be published and which will be promoted."

Brown writes that "so called inferior cultures must be remolded to conform to this Anglo-Saxon ideal." Nunez's work suggests that the reason the book publishing industry must change because it still promotes what Brown has called "Anglo-Saxon ideal." This ideal has dramatically influenced the publication of novels by Black writers throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries, and especially during the McCarthyite period of the 1950s where works by novelists that were deemed too sympathetic to Communism would not be published. Journalist Betty Medsger is a writer who helped challenge "the Anglo-Saxon" ideal by working with the Citizens Committee to Investigate the FBI to publish the details of the COINTELPRO program that sought to end Black organizations and ultimately promote an "Anglo-Saxon ideal." She writes that during McCarthyism, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) collected files on various writers intended to police their artistic content as "subversive" or too sympathetic to Communism. Medsger wrote that publishers such as Alfred A. Knopf had FBI files and in one of Knopf's files was the record of a loyalty check written by the FBI when he was nominated to be on the advisory board of the National Park Service (Medsger 353). Certainly Knopf's loyalty to the FBI and Hoover's conservative interpretation of being "subversive" conformed on some level to what Brown called "the Anglo Saxon ideal" that stereotypes a Black reading audience up to the twenty first century as those that only read "girlfriend," books according to Nunez.

As far as what is published by Nunez, her work has not been heavily subjected to following an “Anglo Saxon ideal” the way that other novelists were subjected to, under Knopf who received a check for their loyalty to the FBI. No other novelist than Elizabeth Nunez is aware of this. No other novelist presents a more sophisticated critique of “this Anglo-Saxon ideal” in their novels.

An overarching theme in Nunez’s fiction is this determination to expose and challenge the assumptions held by different industries that make up Western hegemony. No published novelist is more critical of the function of industry than Elizabeth Nunez. Her protagonists define their development according to an African worldview that challenges an Anglo-Saxon ideal. Two of her protagonists also make fateful decisions regarding the well-being of the Black community in the United States. Their fateful decisions ultimately challenge the assumptions held by industries that promote Western hegemony. In her second novel *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, Catholic college student Sara Edgehill rejects a scholarship when she discovers the ensuing struggle for civil rights and demands that her scholarship be given to Milwaukee born Black students instead of foreign born Blacks like herself. In her eighth novel, *Boundaries*, book editor Anna Sinclair believes that books “are our defense against those who would lead us like lambs to the slaughterhouse” (Nunez *Boundaries* 219). Anna believes, like Nunez herself, that it is her duty to deploy books to prevent young Black children from being led to the slaughterhouse of several dead end issues that plague Black children today like the school-to-prison pipeline. Anna reaches this developed view in part due to the interactions with her friend Paula, whose belief, from the novel *Boundaries*, represents a dynamic that pervades Nunez’s work up to her latest novel *Even In Paradise*: “Paula not bulging on her conviction that the rights of the community must have priority over the rights of the individual” (80). Paula’s presence in Anna’s life encourages her to move and to act on behalf of the community and not the individual.

This is the same effect that Sara’s classmate Courtney has on Sara in *Beyond the Limbo Silence* even though Courtney does not ultimately agree with Sara’s dramatic decision to refuse her scholarship. Nunez’s Sara from Trinidad is unable to disassociate herself from Black students in the United States. Like the character born of Barbadian parents, Selina Boyce, in Paule Marshall’s first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Sara resents the disassociation that Black immigrants are encouraged to make from other Black communities in the United States. Of this novel, Barbara Christian writes that “from her point of view [Selina’s], the Barbadian American community’s desire to disassociate themselves from other Blacks, as well as whites is “clannish,” “narrow minded,” “selfish,” and provincial” (Christian 100). And Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, like Sara in *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, chooses not to dissociate herself and declines a scholarship like Selina did in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Nunez fulfills a principle articulated by her mentor’s contemporary Lorraine Hansberry who said that the Negro writer must deal more forcefully with “the most pressing issues of our time—war and peace, colonialism, capitalism versus socialism” (Hansberry, 137). Nunez’s mentor John Oliver Killens worked for Hansberry while she was book review editor for the *Freedom* newspaper.

Killens wrote a review of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* that Hansberry edited for the *Freedom* newspaper. Killens wrote an excoriating review of *Invisible Man*, calling it "a vicious distortion of Negro life" (Killens qtd in Jackson 359; Fraser 269-270). What Paula tells Anna about Anna's need to think about how her actions will help both the Black immigrant community and the U.S.-born Black community are part of what Hansberry has called these pressing issues. These are characters that think not about personal material gain, but about the well-being of their community. This awareness of community fulfills what her writing mentor John Oliver Killens himself urged writers in to do in his 1964 article "The Black Writer vis-à-vis His Country." In this article, Killens urged writers to produce a literature of heroes, legends, and myths," and not "distorted images harmful to African American children" (Killens 41; Gilyard 199). Nunez's characters deliberate on how their decisions would best benefit the U.S. born Black community; she presents images of heroines that are ultimately positive for African American children that deal forcefully with "the most pressing issues of our time, specifically, capitalism versus socialism."

In summary overarching themes of the work of Elizabeth Nunez include: her redefinition of development according to an African worldview; her exposure and critique of "the Anglo-Saxon ideal" like no other' and her addressing "the most pressing issues of our time."

Mainstream Criticism of Nunez

Mainstream criticism of Nunez's work is unable to appreciate the "new respect" and development that Nunez's protagonists demonstrate for the collective "African past" and ultimately reflect the real differences between African and European worldviews articulated by Kambon. The inability of these critics to value Nunez's kind of development reflect what Addison Gayle Jr. has termed the "polluted mainstream of Americanism" (Gayle 304).

Nunez's novels are part of what Gayle calls the Black Aesthetic that is intended to help Black people out of the "polluted mainstream of Americanism." This polluted mainstream disparages African religions and disparages Nunez's kind of narration that encourages development of her protagonist and reader according to an African worldview. Mainstream criticism's disparaging of Nunez's narration reflects the false contradiction promoted by Western society between religious faith and science that her fellow Trinidadian Kwame Ture wrote about (Ture 94). Ture wrote about how he could not join Marxist organizations because of their white Marxists' inability to consider or discuss consistent spiritual beliefs of African people. The mainstream criticism of Nunez highlights the inability of the white critic to allow the Black artist their practice of spiritual beliefs while at the same time asserting any agency of political education individually or of any group. There are about ten mainstream reviews of Nunez's work and none of them, like colonial Caribbean society, demonstrate a respect for the practice of African-derived Caribbean religions such as Obeah or Vaudun.

This section will focus on five of these reviews because these five highlight best the difference between African and European worldviews. These reviews highlight the difference by either disparaging Nunez's narration or dismissing the role of African-derived Caribbean religions that the articles of this special issue will in part correct.

The first serious mainstream critique was Tepper Anderson's 1998 *New York Times Book Review* of *Beyond the Limbo Silence* where he wrote that Nunez's novel "sinks under the weight of an interior language of ancestral mysticism" (Anderson 7). Tepper disparages Nunez's narration that uses a language of ancestral "mysticism" without defining what is meant by "mysticism." This seems a vague reference to the parts of the novel where Sara is practicing the Obeah religion to first control her reproductive health, then to communicate to her unborn child and ask this child to help locate the bodies of three civil rights workers. Anderson is unable to understand nor articulate the very important and helpful role that African religions such as Vaudun plays in the novel. Jana Giles in her 2000 *New York Times Book Review* of *Bruised Hibiscus* wrote that in this novel Rosa's friend Zuela sends her to Mary Christophe, "a Black healer who shares her deep wisdom with Rosa and sheds light on the truth about her parentage. But Rosa's sense of guilt and need for absolution propel her into mortal danger, despite all the warnings" (Giles 7). Giles is not clear in this review on what she means by "mortal danger." Was it her choice to see and be seen by an Obeahwoman? Or was it her willingness to be among the poorer classes of Trinidad? What Giles describes as "mortal danger" is what one critic in this Special Issue, Georgene Bess Montgomery, calls "comfort," from the Obeahwoman Mary Christophe in this novel who, as Montgomery writes, "promised to take her [Rosa] and rear her as her own." Giles writes: "In its finest moments, the novel leaves us with difficult lessons about the postcolonial new world order we still struggle to negotiate. Religion isn't the answer" (Giles 7). Giles disparages religion here. However, for Montgomery, religion is the answer. Like Anderson, Giles is unable to define the important role of religion in the lives of many Caribbean people. For them, religion is the answer, the same way it was for the Haitians whose belief in Vaudun helped them triumph in the expulsion of the French, Spanish, and British military. The same way it was for the Cubans whose belief in Santería helped them triumph in the Cuban revolution. Barbara Mujica is one of the few mainstream critics who allows Nunez's protagonists in *Grace* their spiritual beliefs: "in order to keep Sally, he must first learn to let go. He must let her find herself, and he must let her write. He must realize that he cannot control everything, that if he succeeds, it will be through God's grace" (Mujica 59). Sara Towers' 2002 *New York Times Book Review* of *Discretion* writes that Nunez's narration spoils the story whereas Denolyn Carroll's review of this same novel in a 2002 issue of *Black Issues Book Review* writes that her talent "is enriched by attention to detail—in plot, character, background, setting and structure" (Towers 9; Carroll 30). The former review reflects the European worldview that disparages Nunez's very unique narration the exposes hegemony whereas the latter review reflects the African worldview that privileges development according to this worldview.

The *Publishers Weekly* review of *Prospero's Daughter* by an unnamed author summarizes the European worldview's understanding of Nunez, claiming that she "overexplains her material, forecasting plot developments and leaning, at times, toward didacticism" (*Publishers Weekly* 39). Elizabeth Schmidt's 2006 *New York Times Book Review* of *Prospero's Daughter*, that Nunez called "glowing," assumes a European worldview by asserting that "ignoring the traces of European influence isn't a realistic way to move forward" (Schmidt 22). Schmidt assumes that her worldview would allow her moral authority to write about "a realistic way to move forward" for a Caribbean people without acknowledging African derived religions or Nunez's exposure of hegemony in her narration.

Articles in this Special Issue

Unlike the mainstream reviews that examine Nunez from mainly a European worldview, the articles in this special issue on the fiction of Elizabeth Nunez look at her work closer to an African worldview. Janelle Rodrigues's article "Obeah as Conduit in Elizabeth Nunez's *When Rocks Dance*" shows how the African-derived religion of Obeah unites the spiritual and material planes for this novel's characters and allows a manner by which they can attain self-reconciliation. Miranda Jones's article "'This story, however, is not about him': Elizabeth Nunez's *Even in Paradise* and the Rejection of Lear" looks at Nunez's latest novel *Even in Paradise* in the context of William Shakespeare's play *King Lear* and how Nunez's Lear-like protagonist Peter Ducksworth fulfills or marks a departure from the generic role of the tragic hero. Jones in this article describes how Nunez is redefining the tragic hero in a postcolonial Caribbean context. In her article, "Healing the Bruised and Mothering the Motherless: The *Ájé* in Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus*," Georgene Bess Montgomery explores the role and impact of the *Ájé*, also known as The Mothers—Oshun, Yemanya, and Oya—from the African religion of Yoruba on the two protagonists Rosa and Zuela.

In his article, "Hybridity as a Counter-Hegemonic Discourse in Elizabeth Nunez's *Even in Paradise*," M. Kamel Igoudjil explores what he calls Nunez's "hybridity" as a counterhegemonic discourse that works to reclaim a space for the subaltern voice. In her article "Charting Territories of Love in the Works of Elizabeth Nunez," Leah Creque-Harris answers the question of "where is the love?" by examining the ways that the pairs of couples in Nunez's fiction inadvertently separate romantic love from spiritual practice. In my article, "Confronting Prospero," I look at how Nunez is exposing liberalism and white settler colonialism in the academic and book publishing industries. All of these articles collectively look in some part at Nunez's work from the African worldview that she privileges and writes developed characters for.

Note

¹ Killens and Brown worked together on the *Freedom* newspaper between 1950 and 1955. *Freedom* sought to retrieve the passport of Paul Robeson from the U.S. State Department who seized it after Robeson said it was “unthinkable that the Negro people of America or elsewhere could be drawn into a war with the Soviet Union” (Robeson 209).

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