

## “A Different Economy”: Postcolonial Clearings in David Chariandy’s *Brother*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the myriad of ways in which racial identity and geographical location are deterministic factors in David Chariandy’s *Brother* (2017). Borrowing from theories of critical race scholars, including Rinaldo Walcott, Idil Abdillahi, and Frantz Fanon, this article argues that Chariandy’s book is an exemplar of how an economy based on intrinsic value privileges human bonds over money. In response to dominant Canadian discourses that position Black men as criminals, Chariandy’s novel celebrates Black masculinities and reveals how law enforcement haunts the communities, homes, and small businesses of Black people. The characters in *Brother* find refuge in what I call postcolonial clearings, which take the form of barbershops, hidden valleys, and music. This article begins with the premise that Canada is a colonized territory that treats Black people as second-class citizens. The article underscores police brutality which in *Brother*—a text set in the Toronto of the mid-1990s—is directed at racialized people, especially Black men. Chariandy not only breathes life into Black men rendered nameless and faceless by powers-that-be, but he also questions the central ideals and pillars of the Canadian nation-state.

**Keywords:** David Chariandy, *Brother*, economy, Black, Black masculinity, crime

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### I. Introduction: The Tyranny of Race, Space, and Class in *Brother*

David Chariandy’s award-winning novel *Brother* (2017) is a gut-wrenching exploration of the myriad ways in which racial identity and geographical location are not only deterministic factors but can also constitute

what Chariandy terms “a different economy” (*Brother* 99). I read this “different economy” as one that associates exchange with friendship and brotherhood, as opposed to dominant economic paradigms that privilege the exchange of commodities. The novel thus demonstrates the importance of intrinsic rather than instrumental value. Philosopher J. Baird Callicott describes instrumental value as the means by which we achieve our goals or ends, whereas intrinsic value is the value a person or thing has in itself (280). The novel is set in Scarborough, Ontario in the 1990s, in a dilapidated cluster of townhouses, low-rises, and apartment towers dubbed the Park. It documents the Black characters’ precarious social positions on the economic margins and the way they create a resistant relationality, i.e., a “different economy.” Although the characters sometimes struggle unsuccessfully for agency, sanity, and belonging, they do not always fail, largely because they find respite from racial discrimination not in traditional places of worship but in the sanctuary of barbershops and hidden valleys—what I call postcolonial clearings. The novel reclaims intrinsic value for these mostly Black men, who are rendered simultaneously invisible (devalued and socially marginalized) and hyper-visible (a target of state surveillance and police harassment) by dominant Canadian culture.

In her discussion of marginalized epistemologies, Leela Gandhi borrows the philosophical concept of *lichtung* from Martin Heidegger’s examination of human consciousness. The German word has a double meaning: in Gandhi’s interpretation, it “designates a bringing to light which is also a clearing of space” (53–54). In cleared epistemological spaces, which are always fiercely fought for, Gandhi argues that relatively new fields of knowledge like “postcolonialism[,] . . . women’s studies, cultural studies, and gay/lesbian studies” not only contest the “privileges and authority of canonical knowledge systems” but “recover those marginalized knowledges which have been occluded and silenced by the entrenched humanist curriculum” (42). Kwame Anthony Appiah, on the other hand, postulates that “the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodernism, is the *post-* of a space-clearing gesture” (348; emphasis in original), but it may not be more than a gesture. He argues

that “many areas of contemporary African cultural life—what has come to be theorized as popular culture, in particular—are not in this way concerned with transcending—with going beyond—coloniality” (348). According to Appiah, the failure to transcend the colonial even while clearing epistemological spaces is in large part because African writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe, as Appiah suggests, are wedded to “international cultural forms” (348) and depend on Euro-American publishers and readers. For Appiah, there is no escaping this contamination (354). Gandhi’s discussion of clearings suggests hopefulness about the development of decolonial knowledges, whereas Appiah is not as optimistic. While I agree with Appiah about the contaminating effects of globalization, he seemingly ignores the numerous pockets of resistance in the Global South, in particular practices built on localized and Indigenous knowledge systems. Importantly, while Gandhi and Appiah’s clearings operate in the realm of ideas, the postcolonial clearings I analyze in Chariandy’s novel are spaces of refuge, self-care, and resistance. These spaces allow Black men, who have been relegated to second-class citizenship, to temporarily escape scrutiny, microaggressions, and policing in an anti-Black Canada and, indeed, in the Black diaspora as a whole. Because the political economy of racism objectifies and devalues the capabilities of Black people in general, it conceals their intrinsic value as human beings. The clearings of barbershops, historically regarded as sanctuaries in Black discourses in the West, help restore the humanity of Black men. These small businesses accomplish that restoration by enabling Black men to exercise and cultivate their creativity; such is the function of Desirea’s, the barbershop in *Brother*. While these businesses may be physically small, as I discuss in the final section of the paper, human creativity in these spaces is unbounded.

In deviating from the postcolonial clearings of Gandhi and Appiah, which privilege epistemologies more than actual physical spaces, the clearings presented in *Brother* offer the novel’s characters opportunities for healing, restoration, and self-care. Alluding to Audre Lorde’s assertion that self-care is “not self-indulgence” but “an act of political warfare” (131), Sara Ahmed elaborates:

In directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. This is why when we have to insist, I matter, we matter, we are transforming what matters. ("Selfcare")

Ahmed's reassembling is especially crucial for Chariandy's characters because, as Joseph Mensah maintains, racial integration is a myth: "Increasingly Blacks and Whites are living in two separate societies (at least in spatial terms) in Canadian cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax" (168). Furthermore, nepotism in the workplace leads "Blacks into the dead-end, low paying jobs" (168) where they are "last to be hired" and "less likely to be promoted" (169). Certainly, evidence of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau donning blackface in the 1990s and brownface in 2001 (Beattie and Paling) indicates not only the racially charged times we are navigating but also the pervasiveness and normalization of anti-Black culture. Sadly, another world leader, former United States president Donald Trump, participated in this normalization of racism directed against Black and Brown people. In 2018, speaking to House members on immigration, Trump complained about the influx of racialized people coming to America from "shithole countries" (Cillizza). It is this kind of discrimination that necessitates Lorde's and Ahmed's communal clearings, in which Black fragilities can not only be privileged but transformed into strengths.

Rinaldo Walcott and Idil Abdillahi use the term BlackLife to refer to an existence in which skin colour is not a deterministic factor. To get to this point of egalitarianism, they necessarily confront the Canadian institutional powers-that-be that seem to neglect part of its citizenry, forcing "Blackness in contemporary Canada" to "continually . . . announce itself as belonging" (52). Thus, they speculate about the face of

Canada if Black people held more sway in the sociopolitical fabric, if their belonging to the nation was unquestioned. Exhausted and bored with discussions surrounding racial justice that are always circling and therefore remain unresolved (49), Walcott and Abdillahi argue that Canada suffers a "blockage" (51) and denies the "spectacular deaths of Black people globally" (87). They call for a "Black Test" that would determine the seriousness and indeed commitment of governmental and other institutions in "ameliorating Black dispossession and making BlackLife possible" (95). Compellingly for this essay, they assert that capitalism's "ongoing production of BlackLife as outside of life and only noticed if commodified" (88) is actually "a cruel arithmetics" that positions Black people as "both a cost and a deficit simultaneously" (88). In other words, "a cruel calculation . . . that has its corollary in both debasement of BlackLife and the commodification of it at the same time" (88). BlackLife, then, queries "what might happen if blackness was and is assumed as instrumental to the formation of the nation and concurrently understood as a gift to both the past and the present, animating a different coming future" (51–52).

The query above is well answered by the characters in *Brother*, who resist internal colonization by forging their own spaces. Originating in Latin America, the term internal colonization is generally applied to the US as an explanation for African-Americans' "territorial concentration, spatial segregation, external administration, the disparity between their legal citizenship and *de facto* second-class standing, their brutalization by the police, and the toxic effects of racism in their lives" (Gutiérrez 282). Mensah, in bringing the issues of colonialism to bear in the Canadian context, argues that

while nothing is really gained by comparing the inhumanities endured by various visible minority groups at the hands of the European settlers in Canada, it is pertinent to note that the Black experience in Canada is unique. . . . The key factors include the high visibility of Blacks; the legacy of slavery and its attendant dehumanization; the innumerable negative connotations of the word "black" in social discourse; and the primacy

of skin-colour racism in Canada. The fact is, much of the negative racial mythology and stereotypes developed under colonialism and slavery did not disappear with the abolishment of slavery. . . . Thus, the straitened circumstances of Blacks in contemporary Canada are not fortuitous; they correspond to the colonial ideologies of the past. (38–39)

I argue that the terms “internal colonialism” and “colonialism” apply to the Canadian context and to Black men, who, in *Brother*, are described by the narrator’s unnamed neighbour as “oiled creatures of mongoose cunning,’ raiding dumpsters and garbage rooms or climbing up trees and fire-exit stairs to spy on adults” (Chariandy, *Brother* 13). However, within the barbershop where the novel’s characters find their dignity, we see less of a reliance on these types of cunning. But even in these spaces of refuge and self-care, the men come under attack by the police who are an ever-dominant and forceful presence, haunting the homes and businesses where Black men congregate.

*Brother’s* autobiogetic narrator is Michael, whose brother Francis died ten years earlier at the hands of the police. The novel’s chapters alternate between the present and the past; however, the sixth chapter is set entirely in the past, during an incident at a mall food court in which Ruth, the boys’ mother, is subjected to a group of white boys’ racist and misogynistic vitriol (153). The narrative style has a choppy rhythm that mimics the lives of the novel’s central characters—the disruptions, the characters’ abrupt exits, and the ways in which casual institutional violence sabotages their sense of normalcy and designates where Black bodies do and do not belong. In the narrative set in the present, although now less socially awkward, Michael is still skeptical about the people and places his brother cared about. However, a decade after Francis’s death, Michael has learned enough to know that “[m]emory’s got nothing to do with the old and grey and faraway gone. Memory’s the muscle sting of now. A kid reaching brave in the skull hum of power.” He recalls his brother asserting: “[if] you can’t memory right . . . you lose.” Ruth, who suffers from dementia, struggles to “memory right” until Francis’s best friend, Jelly, enters her life. Jelly is a griot, an almost spiritual figure

who was an important fixture at Desirea's before Francis's death. He embodies Chariandy's call for so-called minority writers and artists to be "custodian[s] of cultural memory" ("Spirits" 812). Although Jelly and his "brothers" at Desirea's appreciate how an economy grounded in mutual respect can lead to the kinds of healing desired by those living with and against racism, the narrative is about Michael, who is only slowly coming to this realization a decade after the death of his brother.

While *Brother*—with its focus on the deaths of two Black men—confronts a Canadian state that has failed Black people, it does not present Francis as a failure, as he dies bravely confronting police. Michael recalls Francis "reaching to still the weapon" (Chariandy, *Brother* 171) that he fears the police will use against Jelly. The police predictably defend the shooting as "lawful" (171) after asking Michael leading questions about Francis's "reputation[,] . . . unpredictable moods[,] . . . [and his supposed] history of violence" (169). This scene illustrates David Austin's argument that "Canadian state security practice, oscillating between legality and illegality[,] . . . monitor[s] and control[s] Black public politics" (183). The other death central to the plot of *Brother* is that of Anton, described in a newspaper photograph caption as "known to police" (Chariandy, *Brother* 73). Anton is possibly killed by what Michael describes as "a bunch of guys we didn't recognize hanging out in the roundabout of our complex" (27). Anton's death evidences the hopelessness that seems to permeate all areas of Michael's life. Anton, who is the answer in Walcott and Abdillahi's "cruel arithmetics" (88), is a "boy whom few would mourn," who "lived in the Park, in a sagging low-rise complex on a muddy lot. . . . Most times he seemed to live bare and in the open" in a crowded two-bedroom unit with parents and siblings, "all elbowing for room in a place barely as big as anyone else's living room" (Chariandy, *Brother* 73). Francis and Michael, who witness the shootings that lead to Anton's death, are rounded up by the police but then released after their innocence is established. The casualness of this racial profiling, coupled with Michael's revelation that they had been stopped by police before (29), is a sad commentary on the fear Black men and women experience far too often on North American streets. The postcolonial clearings I suggest are places of refuge from the

dangers of living “bare and in the open” and are, in many ways, a matter of life and death.

*Brother* is set during a volatile period that “marked the full emergence of Black cultural politics in Canada in a manner that had not previously existed. In film, music, literature, visual arts and theatre, Black Canada asserted itself, indelible evidence of its presence in the nation” (Walcott and Abdillahi 12). Elsewhere, Walcott describes Toronto in the 1990s as a space mired in both hope and despair. There was the bold music of Maestro Fresh-Wes with his “CD . . . titled *Naaah This Kid Can't be From Canada!!!*[.] . . . [a] response to the discourses of nation that continually positions [*sic*] his black body outside of Canada” (*Black Like Who?* 127–28). On the other hand, the Toronto of 1996 was inundated with pictures of “Adrian Mathias Kinkead’s face [which] graced every newspaper and television news program in the country. . . . Stretching the definition of serial killer to fit Kinkead, accused of killing three people, had to be done in light of the boy-next-door atrocities of [Canadian serial killer] Paul Bernardo, a White ‘native son’” (101–02). The phrase “known to police,” associated with mostly Black men like Kinkead and Chariandy’s Anton, forms part of a now familiar narrative. According to Delores V. Mullings, Anthony Morgan, and Heather Kere Quelleng, the phrase is

given supreme prominence especially in cases where police shoot and kill African Canadians. This is despite the fact that the term “known to police” is undefined and thus includes the broadest range of minor to serious interactions an individual can have with the police. State structural violence against black bodies are common place in Canada and confirms that black bodies “known to police” are . . . disposable. (34)

While *Brother* depicts how Black male bodies have been made disposable, it also insists on the value of these bodies and the importance of mourning them. This is a kind of economy that breathes new life into men who, as flawed as they are, possess the depth and dimension erased by police in North American popular discourse. In his review of *Brother*, Paul Barrett elaborates on these problematic erasures:



In the year before his death, Austin Clarke gave a commencement speech at York University where he reminded his young audience that "summer time," for Black people in Canada, "used to be called . . . killing time." Clarke's phrase evokes the summer police killings of men like Lester Donaldson, Wade Lawson, Albert Johnson, and others whose names have largely been stricken from the Canadian historical record. (Barrett)

Barrett insists that these names must be remembered and recalled in the same way that Chariandy, in the fictional realm, memorializes the names of Black men like Anton and Francis, whose identities and histories are under threat of distortion or even complete erasure.

Michael and his brother grow up in a devalued suburb that "had once been called 'Scarberia,' a wasteland on the outskirts of a sprawling city" (Chariandy, *Brother* 13). Ironically, the townhouse complex where they live with their mother is called the Waldorf, but unlike the luxury Waldorf Astoria hotel, it is located "at the edge of a bridge and made of crumbling salmon brick" (5). Even so, it is a warm house full of the kind of tough love that arguably strengthens rather than weakens the characters. Chariandy is keenly aware that he could have easily been one of the visibly raced casualties that he documents in the book. He describes *Brother* as "an exercise in what if. . . . [What if] the economic and social vulnerabilities I felt growing up in Toronto from the 1970s and into the 1990s escalated into outright poverty and despair? What if an encounter with a figure of authority took a sharply tragic turn?" ("Everyday").

The Manichean world of Frantz Fanon's colonial Algeria is evident in the racial divides observed by Mensah and Chariandy in postcolonial Toronto. Fanon describes "a colonized's sector[,] . . . a world with no space, [in which] people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized's sector . . . crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate" (*Wretched* 4–5). In contrast to the men at Desirea's who gain the partial protection of this clearing, Chariandy's Anton

lives in a desperate setting similar to that described by Fanon, never having “the right sort of clothes against the cold and rain” (Chariandy, *Brother* 73). Anton lives in a cutthroat world, where there is not much pooling of resources and Black men—whom Ruth characterizes as “*harden*” (38; emphasis in original)—turn against each other. These men, stereotyped as dangerous thugs, are “always presumed guilty” (Fanon, *Wretched* 16). But Chariandy humanizes them, showing them as flesh and blood people who, like anyone else, respond well to care and compassion.

The tyranny of race, space, and class necessitates clearings, like Desirea’s, which are sanctuaries of empowerment. The act of Chariandy publishing his letters to his daughter in his book *I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* is an empowering process that occurs in the open for all to see. However, *Brother* focuses on a strengthening that occurs more clandestinely, as the characters need to take their time before feeling ready to venture out of their cocoon. Leaving the clearing is a necessary risk, but when the clearing in *Brother* is invaded, it becomes dangerous and turns into a crime scene. In writing about racial tyranny in other contexts, George Yancy reveals that “[e]ven as we have reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century where so many argue that we have achieved a so-called color-blind society[,] . . . I am still deemed a problem, and, in some contexts, a ‘nigger’” (196). In his foreword to Anthony Stewart’s *You Must Be a Basketball player: Rethinking Integration in the University*, Cecil Foster writes: “What is baffling is that the privileged members of academe seem impervious to social change: they can remain oases of a discredited way of living even while the times churn up diversity and differences all around them” (11). Chariandy’s oasis or clearing is a way through a racist wilderness where Black people are outnumbered and, in the spaces they occupy, find themselves “an only.” The term “only,” which Stewart borrows from bell hooks, “makes clear how vulnerable the member of a minority group can feel when that person is the only member of a particular group present” (95). Stewart describes this feeling as a self-consciousness akin to “a fish that always knows it is wet” (95). Such is the tyranny of race, space, and class that *Brother* explores so brilliantly.

## II. Desirea's: Perspective and Value

The postcolonial clearings I discuss in this essay make possible a life of dignity for Chariandy's characters: that they not only survive but sometimes even thrive in their circumstances is remarkable. As Trudier Harris observes, typically in Black barbershops “[b]usiness is leisurely, not dollar oriented; however, as in any business, the barber must make enough money to keep his shop operative” (112). At Desirea's, the income is modest, and what matters more are the “lives and names [that] emerged” from the place (Chariandy, *Brother* 99). Owned by a man named Dru, the shop “wasn't your typical business. Prospective clients were almost never welcomed” (99), but “walk-ins” are accepted (77). Before Francis's death, the socially awkward Michael finally visits the barbershop where Francis has retreated after tensions at home with their mother have escalated. Michael observes a young boy paying for a haircut with “nothing but pocket change and lint for a service . . . less of a haircut than a punishing rite of passage” (99). The “punishment” is Dru's seemingly merciless “pushing,” “yanking,” and “digging” with the hair clipping machine (99). However, Michael later realizes the “punishment” was just for “show,” as afterwards the young boy is fed a beef patty and iced Coke and allowed to stay as long as he wants (99). But Desirea's is more than a clearing or a “walk-in” space. It is a home for those who need it. When Francis takes Michael to a back room, the latter notices his brother's hanging laundry and a bed among the “milk crates of records” (77).

Historically, barbershops have functioned as sanctuaries in Black communities, “a home away from home” (Harris 113). The Barbershop Talks held in Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto in 2018 to combat micro-aggressions and the “false identities” imposed on Black Canadian men and the “significant stresses” they face (Clarke and Powell) speak volumes about the importance of these clearings in the Black diaspora. I argue that the natural-hair bias that Black women face in the workplace (see Brown) is also faced by Black men, who similarly suffer scrutiny for how they choose to wear their hair or the hair establishments they frequent. Fitsum Areguy's confession is a common hair story for Black people in the West:

I have not always considered my Blackness to be beautiful. For years my brothers and I, the only Black males at a small Lutheran school, were the subject of our peers' callous curiosity. I have visceral memories of schoolmates who, drawing from one-dimensional caricatures of Black people in popular media, would endlessly assert that we should walk, sound, and look a certain way. That included how we styled our hair. (Areguy)

Barbershops have also been a site of Black protest in Nova Scotia. For example, in the mid 1950s, Senator Calvin W. Ruck took aim at "local [Halifax] barbers who refused to cut Black people's hair, a practice he and his children protested by sitting in the shops and refusing to leave" (Block). While there has historically been discrimination within Black communities in the West regarding natural hair—the good hair/bad hair debate—hair is not an overriding concern at Desirea's. It is an undeniably masculine space where "flesh-and-blood women" with "fingernails honed like weapons" can only be sexual objects even with their "bossy hairdos" (Chariandy, *Brother* 100–01). However, these women, who are regulars at Desirea's, force the men to change the sexist ways in which they talk about women in general.

If the larger society seems to have pulled the rug out from under the feet of Black men, it is in barbershops that they matter to each other and to themselves. Here, they realize they are neither a cost nor burden but people who have been shortchanged, casualties of what Walcott and Abdillahi term "the permanency of Black exclusion and subjection" (15). Walcott and Abdillahi contend that the "Black 1990s is owed a debt, one that Canada needs to pay in full and one that BlackLife grapples to extract from the state and its extra-state apparatus" (15). But in the interim, until that debt is paid, postcolonial clearings serve as a life-giving force that might give people like Anton a different trajectory.

The word "desire," embedded in the barbershop's name, enables the novel's masculine relationships, such as the one between Francis and Jelly. Walcott's comments on desire are helpful for appreciating these communal clearings: "in the mid to late 1990s I frequented . . . a barber shop on St. Clair Avenue West . . . run by a group of hip urban young

black men who constituted a community of desire, possibility and tentative remaking of the Canadian landscape. . . . Part of the confidence was that these guys knew that the urban, such as it is, was markedly black" ("Towards a Methodology" 49). The confidence and freedom that Walcott highlights finds expression in Jelly, who serenades the men with songs of celebration and mourning. As I demonstrate below, what is particularly important about Jelly is how in the novel's present time he still carries with him the "different economy" and values that he learned from Desirea's when he reenters Michael's life, despite the barbershop having been long replaced by a fast-food chain restaurant called "Happy Chicken" (Chariandy, *Brother* 171).

Michael initially misunderstands the economy at Desirea's, mostly critiquing Francis's brotherhood. He fails to realize that, as nondescript as it is, Desirea's inspires the men who patronize the shop to follow their ambitions and to dream, despite the odds stacked against them. For instance, Desirea's affords Francis and Jelly an income, which facilitates the purchase of a car. Banged up as it is, the car represents another kind of clearing, since they can drive it "showily" (79) and use it to perform important errands. Like almost everything else in Michael and Francis's lives, driving is dangerous, undertaken without seatbelts. After stopping at a restaurant, Francis leaves "etches on the bumper of the neighbouring car" that they "hoped nobody would notice" (80). These etches are interconnected and symbolic of the traces that the brothers leave on the dominant society. Ultimately, Toronto cannot be free as long as nearby Black communities are in a state of disarray. Like most episodes in the novel, the outing at the restaurant is soured by a man at the cash register who undermines Francis and Michael's value by doubting whether they can pay (80). But this moment is not crushing as, after their meal, the car facilitates their search for a father who had abandoned them as toddlers. The search may seem unsuccessful as they don't even have the apartment number of the building, but it is an effort to restore the health of the family. Michael is impressed by "the unseen map" (84) guiding his brother. I read this map as knowledge of the city, a where-withal that was instilled in him at Desirea's. Nevertheless, no matter how much Michael learns to understand Desirea's importance, he is unable

to appreciate Jelly who is connected to the more vulnerable aspects of these spaces, particularly as Jelly is linked with Francis's death and Ruth's own near-death experience when she is struck by a car while they're walking together.

What goes on at Desirea's occurs literally behind closed doors, with "windows papered with posters" (76) because of surveillance from the police, the media, and members of the community who implicate Francis and Michael in Anton's murder. The barbershop is situated behind a mall, in a garbage-filled area toward the intersection of Markham Road and Lawrence Avenue. The area is poorly lit and the windows of the storefronts are boarded up or cracked (75). The couches and chairs at Desirea's are also "cracked" and "beat-up" (76), even though the place is functional, "booked solid till midnight" (76). Even as a patron fuels Michael's insecurities by pointing to his "car-wreck" hair (77), Desirea's still inspires much tenderness, especially between Francis and Jelly. Michael observes "their heads bent into each other" as they "slipped palms and joined fingers and hugged and stayed" (78). The intimacy in this scene is especially moving given the historic and ongoing violence against and between Black men, the old colonial tactic of divide and rule. Though Desirea's is necessarily shielded from the glare of police, with "no sign advertising services provided or wares sold [and] . . . a clutter of print [on the windows] that seemed designed to obstruct rather than to inform" (76), this oasis simultaneously becomes a trap since the police are unseen when they descend upon the shop.

As I suggest above, Desirea's is a sacred ground, and when the police converge there for a drug search, they violate this space. The violation manifests physically in the Black men's bodies as exemplified by Francis's exhaustion, impatience, and rage. The invasion makes "the shop suddenly . . . small, the air chang[ing]" (Chariandy, *Brother* 116–17). Although most of the Black boys and men in the neighbourhood have been stopped by police before, the police certainly know young men like Anton, described by Michael as a "petty dealer with a small bit of real knowing" (27), on a superficial level. This "small bit of knowing" displays the impatience and, indeed, the racial profiling of the police who have no interest in considering the socioeconomic and historical

vulnerabilities of Black and Indigenous men (Browne) and so target "petty dealer[s]" in possession of small amounts of cannabis. While spaces like Desirea's are sanctuaries, they simultaneously become targets of oppressive acts.

### III. Celebration: Music, Rouge Valley, and Aisha

The push and pull between hope and despair in *Brother* is a tension that Walcott and Abdihalli theorize in the Canada of the 1990s, a time that "marked a significant and important period of Black Canadian artistic production and activism that many assumed would produce a changed political and cultural landscape" (12). But, as they assert, "such desires never came to fruition, and the Canadian landscape that might authentically come close to representing our multicultural demographics remains elusive still" (12–13). In *Brother* the clearing at Desirea's is full of potential despite the fragility and misfortune at the intersections of race, class, and gender. By the end of the novel, there is still a possibility for change and renewal when Jelly re-enters Michael's life and forces him to confront the past. In this way, Desirea's is an important bridge between the present and the past.

Chariandy argues that his novel not only depicts a "different economy" but also "celebrates life and creativity" (Patrick). Indeed, I agree with Emily Donaldson that *Brother* is not an elegy, as Marlon James suggests on the novel's front-cover blurb. Rather, Donaldson ventures that the novel "lacks the basic qualities of an elegy, being neither a lament nor poetic," and that, ultimately, we do not get a sense of the deceased Francis—he is a "cipher" in that "we don't really know *him*" (emphasis in original). I argue that *Brother* is more an ode to a deceased, beloved brother than an elegy. Furthermore, what we *do* know about Francis are the values and dreams that motivated him as a character. Both brothers find value in music; in the neighbourhood Rouge Valley, a beautiful haven with a creek running through it; and in Aisha, Michael's childhood friend, neighbour, and first love. Aisha returns to The Park after a ten-year absence when her father dies of cancer.

Time seems to stand still at Desirea's, a place where music plays an important role in cultural recovery, where all the stolen things are, for

a moment, “stole[n] back” (103). Here, men who are quickly discarded and “figured out” emerge. For Chariandy, Jelly is an example of Black artistry and “the diversity, beauty, joy, and everyday genius of black life” (“Everyday”), as his pan-African musical selections stretch beyond Scarborough to the Congo and the Sudan. He is a “Djeli” (*Brother* 111) or a griot at the turntable, playing “a mash-up of sounds and rhythms” and a “bass so deep and heavy you could feel it in your jaw” (76). In the postcolonial clearing of Desirea’s, Chariandy’s “brothers” speak an enabling “new language” (101) as they patiently listen to each other and to their parents’ music “with new ears” (102). There is an intimacy in this experience of unearthing an African history which is unfamiliar to these particular men in the diaspora. On the other hand, Joe Friesen suggests that race is becoming irrelevant, in these spaces, because the music of “hip-hop culture . . . dictates how they [other cultural groups that are not Black] want their hair styled.” I find Friesen’s observations overly optimistic given the lingering stain of racism on the world as a whole. He suggests that this space is open rather than necessarily closed:

The barbershop is, paradoxically, a place to congregate and to remain separate. It’s a spot where men hang out and shoot the breeze, but they often do it in narrowly defined groups. Hair cutting and race intersect in complex ways, which has meant that black barbershops in Toronto have catered almost exclusively to clients with an Afro-Caribbean background. But for a generation raised with hip hop as its mainstream culture, those barriers are collapsing.

Nonetheless, Friesen rightly maintains that music is an essential ingredient in Black barbershops and beauty shops in general. It is no accident, then, that before Francis’s untimely death, Otis Clay’s “A Lasting Love,” a song about encouraging self-love, is blasting from the speakers (Chariandy, *Brother* 100). In Desirea’s, patrons exhibit these acts of self-love: for example, after a shave, a man named Kev “spent at least five minutes admiring the work in a mirror” (100). There is no taunting based on complexion, here. Francis and Michael, who are both dark skinned, make little of the distinctions between their Black mother



and East Indian father. They know, from a grainy picture, that their absent father's "skin was much darker than Mother's," but as Michael puts it, "we had been told that he was not black like her, but something called 'Indian'—although this identity seemed lost in the poorness of the photograph" (9–10). What matters to Michael is that, growing up, his brother was always close to him, "just a skin away" (8). This is the "lasting love" referenced in the Otis Clay song that Michael treasures. It is also a love that he doesn't realize Desirea's nurtures in him: away from their loving but strict mother, they mark their own boundaries.

The clearing that Desirea's makes possible allows for a normalcy that is difficult to attain outside the borders of the store, but notions of failure and success are complicated. Take, for example, Michael's observations of Jelly's experimentation with the musical connections of "ska and blues[,] . . . Port of Spain and Philadelphia[,] . . . the 1950s and the late 1980s. Sometimes it failed, and the noise had no resonance. . . . Other times it worked, the old and elsewhere summoned back and enthroned in an amplified rhythm that sent everyone in the shop suddenly pouting and nodding and calling back" (103). In this space of experimentation, these men are not "ugly and contagious" (31), which is how their neighbourhoods appear to the police. At Desirea's, characters like Michael and Francis develop a confidence that is positively contagious, one which emboldens them for the harsh world they inhabit. Reflecting on *Brother*, Chariandy argues: "I think what is also really important in this novel is that in order for the young men to think beyond the narrative of themselves that they're fed, they then reach beyond Canada in music and culture, and through these cultural references they piece together a bigger sense of what it is to be black and human" ("Reckoning"). Jelly clearly appreciates the potency of the Black diaspora and its pan-Africanisms. Like Chariandy, he understands music as a powerful balm against pain and injustice.

Ralph Ellison, too, displays a similar understanding of the power of Black diasporic barbershops and the music that is part of that clearing. In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, his narrator makes the following revelation: "There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with

my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue'—all at the same time. . . . I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible" (6; emphasis in original). Ellison's narrator yearns for the simultaneous playing of recordings, the "mash-up of sounds and rhythms" that Michael hears. The musical chaos is possibly a barrier against the institutional noise that devalues and drowns out Black men. Interestingly, *Brother* documents music as having both a public and private function, from the "almost deafening" (77) beat of music at Desirea's to the gentle Ruth donning her headphones to listen to music. However, by the novel's end, Ruth gestures for the volume on the record player to be raised (177). I read this request for increasing the volume as an assertion of worth and presence, a revaluing of the "Black noise" that is always being silenced. It can also create dissonance in that when everyone is loudly announcing their presence, a lack of coordination can result in conflicts between rival groups in the novel. Organizations like Black Lives Matter Toronto are effective because of their coordination, which makes the volume of their protest visceral and undeniable.

Much like the music that Jelly plays at Desirea's—a mixture of experimental failures and resonance—Michael and Francis's lives are similarly structured with both traps and throughways. Michael discovers this pattern long after Francis's death, when he listens to Jelly's Walkman toward the end of the novel: "I recognize the music from a barbershop a decade ago. Nina Simone, her opening to 'Feeling Good.' But changed, remixed, so that the band never arrives, the lonely voice forever looping back" (97). Michael might forget the name of the barbershop, but he does not forget the song. Regardless, the older Michael attempts to "feel good," to live a full life despite stagnation and the lack of institutional support.

Rouge Valley, like Desirea's, is both exhausting and exhilarating. Ruth takes her boys there when Francis suffers from "one of his nightmares," which is described by Michael as "overwhelming" in "terror" and "impossible as always to name" (148). Like Desirea's, the space is hidden, lying "[h]undreds of feet beneath" the concrete "monster" that is the Lawrence Avenue Bridge (5). Before Francis and Michael understand

the possibility of a "different economy," they understand that pleasure is not always driven by capital. At the Rouge they symbolically cover themselves with the leaves, branches, and debris of the land that refuses them entry (19). In the clearing, as they sip Molson Canadian beers, they forget the hovering "threat that is slow and somehow very old" (22), a threat so powerful it can, like magic, seem to make their darkened neighbourhood disappear. Michael is awed that a power can achieve this (27), but it becomes apparent that the same power that steals their faces also reduces the identities of the neighbourhood bullies to "darkness outlined by glare" (120). However, "[u]p close, [the so-called bullies] weren't so menacing" (121). When it comes to the police, Michael and Francis are not afforded this benefit of close perspective and nuance, which is why the leaves Michael and Francis cover themselves with at the Rouge provide some respite from the discrimination they suffer based on the colour of their skin. However, the leaves and the earth, which is the colour of the boys' skin, also importantly symbolize a brief feeling of belonging to the Canadian nation. Unlike the postcolonial clearing at Desirea's, with its various strategic concealments, Francis and Michael are still vulnerable enough at the Rouge that they need to create, with the covering leaves, a clearing within a clearing.

In this surprisingly green valley, this "wound in the earth" (18), Ruth initially fails to convince Francis that what looks like bits of paper, "if you weren't watching the right way," is not a meaningless "wasted alphabet" but actually moths (149). They are "not trash. They're living things. And they're flying," she says "in a voice turned dreamlike with exhaustion" (149). At work in this passage is Ruth's refusal to "surrender . . . imaginations" (Maynard 234) as she observes the garbage surrounding them. We see the eventual impact of these words as Francis attempts to soar above his circumstances, just as Ruth taught him to. Francis fearlessly asserts himself against the police who invade Desirea's. Although trash surrounds the barbershop, he knows he is neither "trash" nor "crazy"; he is not "dangerous" even though "as he smiled a scab broke open on his lip and streaked red upon his teeth" (Chariandy, *Brother* 159). He repeatedly demands accountability from the police; "It's happening today. . . . You're going to tell me what I've done" (159),

he says defiantly, becoming the man in Fanon's "final prayer"—that is, "a man who questions!" (*Black Skin* 181). But because speech is denied to the subaltern—to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak—Francis's words are both devalued and heard as threats. He pays the ultimate price for this assertion of value. The police, who neither see nor hear Black men, respond with violence.

*Brother* reveals how, with the benefit of the right kind of value economy and support systems (or even light), precious gems like Aisha can emerge from economically impoverished neighbourhoods. On the day of Anton's death, Ruth walks in a neighbourhood she no longer recognizes and looks like a masked actor "who'd stumbled accidentally onto a stage and who now, too late, had to figure out her role" (Chariandy, *Brother* 32); Aisha, however, knows her role. Whereas outside the barbershop other Black folk wear "blank expressions . . . [m]aybe from the intensity of the [police car] light, maybe because they wanted to give nothing away of themselves to others" (32), Aisha seems to have figured out the system of oppressive police enough to know how to play it. From a distance, Michael watches Aisha swing on a swing set in a park, "the poles anchoring the swings rocking dangerously upon the sodden earth" (44). Aisha knows how far she can go. Her agility on the swing is a metaphor for her ability to navigate or negotiate a racist state. In general, she fares better than Michael, who is relegated to basic-level courses, and Francis who is expelled in his last year of high school for telling his teacher to "fuck off" (24). Aisha enrolls in enrichment programs that are instrumental to her success as a writer and help her graduate from university as a computer science major. But the point the novel succinctly makes is that everyone needs support and enrichment. At Desirea's men band together to provide this support and create a life for themselves.

Just like Jelly teaches the men at Desirea's about the politics and value of music, Aisha teaches Michael how to find his value by confronting the status quo. However, she illustrates the sturdiness of the institutional machinery working against them when she throws a broken piece of asphalt at a police car and watches the glass "spider-webbing . . . into a pattern of pale blue without breaking" (60). By the end of the novel,

Aisha has helped Michael come to terms with his own fragility. At a bus stop, a day after Michael and Francis are interrogated by the police about the shooting that takes Anton's life, angry neighbours lash out at the criminal elements in the neighbourhood. Ruth, who believes the vitriol is being directed at her boys, looks "ready to break" (50). Michael compares his mother's face to "a glass ball being dropped in a slow-motion movie. That fraction of a second just after the glass hits the ground and it's still a ball, but the cracks are everywhere, and you know it's not going to be a ball much longer" (50). This description is important in light of the characters' brokenness: they are like these glass balls that are still whole despite their cracks.

Like Ruth and the women who frequent Desirea's, Aisha provides crucial support to the novel's central characters. She is immersed in the lives of Francis and Michael and present at the dress rehearsal for Jelly's musical audition at the Ex and at the audition itself. Despite the cracks in Michael's relationship with his brother, Aisha urges him to visit Desirea's: "He's your brother. What sort of invitation do you need?" (75). But her life's trajectory is unique. She is an example of the kind of person that Francis describes as having "made it to the top," and who is therefore "good." However, she recognizes that no matter how economically successful one is, it is important to bear witness to and value community. Aisha, who works in various overseas locations as a "freelance programmer" (63), accepts Michael's invitation to come home to Scarborough. When he responds to his irate mother about the purpose of Aisha's visit, he explains that she is there "for the *neighbourhood*. To see and remember" (41; emphasis in original). She returns to Toronto for a reason, creating a communal gathering that has not occurred in a decade, a reckoning of sorts. Later in the novel Ruth's home becomes a kind of haven, a clearing where Jelly is free to experiment with meals and music as they all begin the overdue process of mourning of Francis.

I argue that Aisha is an important antidote to the melancholia that hovers over characters who sometimes doubt that there can be a "different economy" that works for them. She understands and can negotiate the dominant economy. In many ways, she is a female version of Francis: fearless, determined, and down to earth. As racially mixed

“mongrels” (59) who somehow don’t constitute a “proper presence” (21), both Francis and Michael have a special connection to Aisha, who is also biracial. We also learn of the relationship that had developed between her father and Francis. Aisha returns determined to create the celebratory landscape that Walcott and Abdillahi long for, a landscape the characters can embrace, much like music and Rouge Valley.

#### **IV. Melancholia: The Brevity of Black Lives**

Michael’s loneliness and pessimism are understandable given the now boring equation of Black men with waste (Walcott and Abdillahi 44)—so-called criminals who live in terror, their days and nights haunted by stereotypes they cannot escape. This pessimism is a loop from which the characters in *Brother* struggle to emancipate themselves. As Walcott and Abdillahi contend, the “profound state of sadness concerning BlackLife . . . is, however, not a sadness that immobilizes, but one that makes us see and witness this world so much more clearly” (87). The work that must be done to combat racism can be both crippling and enlightening; as Austin posits, “[u]nfortunately, we have to drag ourselves deeper into the gutter of race and racism in order to emancipate ourselves from it” (182). Sometimes, as happens with Francis and Anton, the gutter that is life in Scarborough is too deep to escape, and so life, as a result, is cut short by the pervasive violence. I argue that *Brother*’s short length (at just 180 pages) is illustrative of the brevity of Black lives. In a poignant moment in the novel Michael sees his face and that of his brother reflected in the glass of a newspaper box (Chariandy, *Brother* 16), headlines flashing the usual gruesome stories involving Black men. This moment doesn’t quite resonate with him; the day Anton is shot he is afraid to go to bed, wary of “black murderers” (155). Ruth is taken aback by his language, asserting that the culprits are criminals, not “black murderers.” Donna Bailey Nurse describes this moment in the novel as “excruciating”: it is when the brothers learn that “they are the black men society has taught them to fear.” For Nurse, another “excruciating moment . . . [is] when we [readers] realize Francis cannot even escape racism in his own home” because his mother fears that all he will ever amount to is the Black criminal stereotype. When

the police handcuff Michael and Francis as suspects in Anton's death, one of the officers slaps Francis for no apparent reason. Ruth regards her two sons suspiciously when they return home. There is also their father, the "somehow familiar" (Chariandy, *Brother* 165) face who only makes an appearance at Francis's funeral, when it is already too late. In other words, everyone is suspicious of Michael and Francis—the police, the neighbours, and even their own parents. This lack of support breeds pessimism in the brothers.

Despite experiencing the pain of being devalued by a father who abandons them, Francis and Michael are loving sons to their hardworking mother, who teaches them how to find hope in despair. Francis understands better than Michael that he cannot fit into what his mother calls "the economy" (119), her explanation for their scanty resources around Christmastime. An intelligent young man as well as an avid reader, Francis gives up searching for his mother's "opportunity" (10) and instead decides to find his own. As suave as he is, he has much to learn about navigating dealings with the police: for example, his gesture of trying to still or hold back the police officer's gun has a "history, but [it is] unreadable by those around him holding power" (171). This ignorance or obstinacy ultimately leads to his death. Francis also seems unaware that there is no formula for success. When Francis admonishes Michael for wearing poverty on his sleeve, advising him to "turn up the edge of a collar . . . to let the world know you're not nobody" (81), he has not yet realized that, to law-enforcement officials, he is a nobody. There is no "break . . . coming" (81) and certainly "no way forward" (157) unless ways forward continue to be forced, which is what the postcolonial clearings represent.

In *Brother*, the police set traps and block any path forward; they come "cold-eyed with purpose" (116), with their racist and classist stereotypes in hand. Their first search of the barbershop turns up nothing. They come a second time with reinforcements, after Francis and Michael are beaten up by bouncers following Jelly's DJ audition at a local music competition at the Ex. At this moment, it dawns on them that he never stood a chance, that Jelly was always going to be overlooked and shortchanged. At the Ex, they are ruthlessly mocked by four

bouncers, three white and one Black, who are clearly there to obstruct them. Although Michael is badly injured after the brawl, it is Francis who looks “ruined” (132), a description that recalls the moment when Anton is left “half-naked” and bleeding after an attack by men “in a field not far from the Park where there was just enough darkness for the work to be done” (74). Only hours after the audition, police converge on the barbershop, not needing to wait for darkness to wreak havoc on men who have done nothing but simply exist.

Black men require postcolonial clearings to protect themselves against this formidably robust institutional racism, at least until “a different world” can be imagined and practiced, “one in which having to claim Black lives matter is greeted with puzzlement” (Walcott and Abdillahi 86). For Francis, street smarts are more essential than what he can find in books: he learns to read “signs,” “gestures,” and “faces” (Chariandy, *Brother* 17). But tragically the “logic” of the police remains a mystery to him, leading to his death, which stands for the innumerable deaths commemorated by the Black Lives Matter movement.

While Aisha has “succeeded” in life, most of the families in the novel work in “shit jobs” where they are undervalued. Ruth’s rotting tooth is a symbol of pain suffered by the Black working class, who have historically been considered only good for housekeeping work. Although Aisha’s father is rumoured to have been a teacher in Trinidad, his choices were limited in Canada, and he spends most of his life as a security guard. Michael works at a convenience store, where he is subjected to racist insults and random drug searches by the assistant manager, Manny, who simplistically aligns upward mobility with “*attitude*” and “*mindset*” (42; emphasis in original), despite corruption and those being paid less because they are “hire[d] under the table” (43). Meanwhile, characters like Jelly quickly learn how to hustle on their own terms, heedlessly “cutting” (5) their own paths.

The word “cutting” is significant not only because of the artistic hair-lines that Dru creates at Desirea’s but also because of the precarity of the economy the Black characters live and work within. I read this cutting as part finesse and part creativity or innovation in very tricky environments. Already aware of a history that doesn’t speak to them (their



own heroes never grace the names of schools), as students Francis and Michael form their own confederations, alliances, and anthems (14). Much like her house, perilously close to the curb and susceptible to whatever slushy "[b]ullets" (7) the streets throw at it, Ruth also lives on the edge. The word "bullet" to refer to slush is fitting given Walcott's assertion in *Queer Returns* that "[d]eath is a marker of Black diasporic life—not a conclusion but its very origin or foundation. . . . The crossing of the Atlantic inaugurates our intimate relation to death in a fashion that I believe is different from many human others" (196). But he contends that there is a refusal of "a life that is a living-death . . . [of people on the brink of becoming] the walking-dead" (196). The fact that Ruth already feels a lack of belonging in a Canada that seems to neither want nor appreciate people who look like her only exacerbates matters. When she takes her sons back to her childhood home in Trinidad and Tobago, with its "wasted farmlands and abandoned cane fields" (144), not only is she unable to tell her extended family the truth about the realities of the land she has escaped to, but they are welcomed by a lunging dog "baring his teeth" at them (141). This moment is a difficult wake-up call for Ruth, who, by the end of the novel, and with the help of Jelly and Aisha, gets closer to understanding the gifts that Walcott and Abdillahi argue Black people bring to Canada.

## **V. Conclusion: Community Value and Resistance**

The lessons learned at the postcolonial clearing of Desirea's are particularly potent when they are passed on to others. These lessons concern death and renewal, as well as what can potentially happen when characters strategically give away what they want, their faces no longer blank but full of the intensity of their own light. Ultimately, as Matt Edgeworth reminds us in his discussion of Martin Heidegger, "the clearing as such has no agency or volition of its own. Human beings, on the other hand, have agency and intention as well as mere perception." When Jelly visits Ruth's apartment, invited not by Michael but Aisha, he is a powerful force and catalyst for positive change in the novel. Though Michael enjoys Jelly's cooking, he is irritated by a get-together that has turned into a noisy party during his absence. Not only is the

carpet stained, but, with Ruth's permission, her old, green suitcase is open for all to see. Jelly knows he is an unwanted presence, but he leaves to return later with a stain remover that only makes the stain spread more (Chariandy, *Brother* 112). The stain represents cultural traditions, such as the ones reinforced at Desirea's, that Jelly tries to reignite in the novel's present time. The family pictures in Ruth's suitcase play a similar role: they force Michael to remember the traditions he shared with both his deceased brother and his mother. There is an otherworldly quality to Jelly, who arrives "like a ghost" (88) and forces Michael to look at the pictures in Ruth's suitcase, making him finally reckon with the past and the space that Desirea's occupied.

Just as Francis is slow to connect the institutional dots working against him, Michael, who faithfully takes care of his ailing mother, fails to understand the valuable coordination and structure that was operative at Desirea's during his brother's life. The Michael of the present day knows that unemployment is just a tardy or missed shift away (41), yet he is frustrated with men like Jelly who simply "gets by" (90). It takes some time for him and Ruth to turn to community cornerstones like the religious and meddlesome neighbour Mrs. Henry and to recognize the value of what Stuart Hall calls "a living archive" which considers the "prior conditions of existence" resulting in the often informal archive of the "artistic production of the black and Asian diaspora" (89). Through introspection, Michael begins to relish the network around him and acknowledges acts of kindness, like receiving food from neighbours (Chariandy, *Brother* 37). Michael's maturation is what we expect of characters, but the Canadian nation-state does not exhibit the same type of growth, as Foster argues. Regardless, Foster hopes that Canada will "grow up and . . . accept criticism of the Canadian body politic," since criticisms leveled against it are "*not* acts of bad citizenship" but are offered "in the best of good faith" (Foster 18; emphasis in original) and for the benefit of the country.

There is a moment of relief from daily tensions and dangers when Michael admires the mix of Black, brown, white, and Asian people gathered at a party that Aisha has organized at Ruth's house. He finds the gathering "beautiful" (Chariandy, *Brother* 95), but he refuses to accept

the moment at face value and forces the large group to disperse even though Ruth enjoys the company. He won't be so easily seduced by the romance of integration, even as Aisha stresses that the “strangers” (96) are her friends.

The end of *Brother* shows glimpses of genuinely new beginnings, communal adventures to be had with a mother who is slowly on the mend and who may perhaps dance again like she used to. Even though Michael feels like the stereotypical Black “problem” because his presence at the hospital makes “some visitors uncomfortable” (175), there is literally hope for a way forward to the Rouge with the cleared pathway enabling access to the creek (177). Ultimately, there are no formulas, and Michael and Ruth must improvise to find the path forward. Michael declares, “We have eaten together, and there is music low on the record player, and we are here and for the moment together” (177). The repetition of the word “together” underscores the path that must be negotiated as a unit, and not individually. This is the agency of communities which continue despite the losses, like those of Francis and Anton, casualties of a much larger struggle, Black men whose “muscles . . . [were] always tensed” (Fanon, *Wretched* 16) because of the odds working against them. Thankfully there are others who “are [still] here” breaking bread together and “transforming what matters” as they etch out a life of dignity amidst a racial battle that the men at Desirea's knew too well.

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