
Reclaiming My Womb

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Abstract

In *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Hunted*, Tomi Adeyemi and L.A. Banks reclaim the isolated Black womb and reattach it to the human to which it belongs, thus humanizing Black women. This humanization of Black women combats the dominant narrative that seeks to reduce Black female identities to what their bodies can produce for the Western patriarchy world founded on capitalist exploitation. Their wombs are a counternarrative to the tired trope of the almighty phallus that disfigures phallic power into a deadly weapon, only suitable for destruction. Banks' and Adeyemi's placement of symbolic wombs highlights the power of wombs as a space where spirit and body meet to upend oppressive world orders rooted in spiritual darkness. Here, even the phallus achieves greater power. The womb exposes the phallus's ability to invest life and further incubates that life to create revolution. Together the phallus and womb work to display the necessary fetation of rebellion, resistance, and liberation. Banks and Adeyemi join the scores of Black feminist writers who insist on the unity of Black masculinities and Black feminism to ensure the futurity of Black liberation.

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*'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of *your womb'*

Luke 1:42

**emphasis added*

In her exploration of the erotic, Audre Lorde defines the womb's power as, 'an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered' (Lorde 2000, 89). Lorde reveals the power of the womb as essentially creative. This creative force directly counters the power of the phallus which, according to Western culture, is essentially destructive. The regenerative female womb opposes the penetrative male phallus. In a cultural context, this dichotomy plays out as acts of rebellion against despotism. Metaphorically, wombs house and form power that directly opposes tyranny. I employ this understanding of the womb as demonstrative of revolutionary power to my analysis of *Children of Blood and Bone*, the first novel in Tomi Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* series and *The Hunted*, from L. A. Banks' *Vampire Huntress Legend*. Their novels feature various wombs that catalyze Black female social upheaval. I choose to examine their works because, residing in both horror and African American literary genres, they both serve as commentary on Western attitudes of fear towards Black women in control of their own bodies. Specifically, these texts exemplify the radical potential that Black wombs represent in the face of continually oppressive expressions of phallic Western dominance.

Aside from their classification as works of Black horror, the plotlines of *The Hunted* and *Children of Blood and Bone* serve as social commentary. *The Hunted* is part of the *Vampire Huntress Legend* series that follows the journey of Damali Richards as she assumes the position of Neteru. In Banks' series, the Neteru is a human designed by The Light Realms—the mysterious force of all goodness—with superhuman ability. The Neteru emerges once every millennium as a weapon of war against The Dark Realms—the source of all evil. Banks associates The Dark Realms with traditionally destructive and masculine manifestations of power. In *The Hunted* this takes the form of allusions to colonialism. While The Light seeks to use Damali as an agent of justice, The Dark seeks

to use her body to create daywalkers. Because the Neteru possesses special physical properties that make them impervious to vampire infection, they produce a special type of vampire that can withstand ultraviolet light when they mate with a vampire. The Dark's obsession with Damali's womb directly mirrors historical colonial obsessions with the Black womb. Just as colonizing identities attempted to reduce the Black womb to a site for labor reproduction, The Dark attempts to control Damali's womb.

The Hunted is book three of twelve in Banks' *Vampire Huntress Legend*. Just as Damali begins her journey to combat the Dark Realm, her love interest, Carlos Rivera, sets out on his own quest to avenge the death of his family and friends. By this time, Carlos is a notoriously successful drug lord and a prime candidate for the leaders of the Dark Realm—vampires. Eventually Carlos is turned into a vampire by one of the vampire council members, the highest rank in the Dark Realm besides the Antichrist and Satan himself. At the beginning of *The Hunted*, the audience and characters believe that Carlos is dead. Damali is mourning until he shows up at her hidden fortress having followed her scent.

Children of Blood and Bone is a completely different genre of horror. Whereas *The Hunted* adheres to typical parameters of vampire literature, *Children of Blood and Bone* creates a world with roots in the indigenous mysticism and spirituality of West African cultures. The protagonist, Zélie, is a young divîner woman. The Orishan government actively oppresses the divîners because of their magical capabilities. Zélie survived a genocide of divîners that took place before the story begins. Her mother was murdered in the massacre. It is significant that Zélie's mother was killed: her murder is another example of how phallic oppression works to destroy wombs that it cannot control.

The basis of *Children of Blood and Bone* is the birth of the gods and humanity. The story centers around the Sky Mother's womb. The plotline follows two young women as they travel from womb to womb in hopes of reattaching humanity to the umbilical cord of Sky Mother. This reattachment castrates the patriarchal attempt to sterilize Sky Mother and her descendants. Tomi Adeyemi reclaims the womb and uses it as a source of power

where her characters produce life in the face of death. She refuses to allow the womb to be an instrument for the preservation of male legacy or the reproduction of labor. Her reclamation of the womb positions her female characters in a place of power that opposes the phallic oppression they face.

The two texts on which I focus have a few parallels in their story lines. They are both works of Black horror. Both narratives boast Black female protagonists. The protagonists have lost connection with their biological mothers and form relations with surrogate mothers who guide them through their journey to defeat evil. Each author binds their world in themes of the supernatural to expose oppression in Western society. However, they differ in their specific genre and offer two disparate explorations of uterine motifs in Black horror fiction. Their differences suggest that there may be a pattern of womb motifs in African American literature.

The placement of symbolic wombs and their treatment as settings for revival and defiance is not exclusive to Black horror literature. Wombs have long been a motif in African American literature. Historically humans who benefit from sexually based power structures, namely men, have treated the womb as a valuable container for the production of heirs and the perpetuation of legacy. For this reason, the womb has often been the subject of conflict. This conflict is apparent in the alarming numbers of nonconsensual hysterectomies and sterilizations in American history. It is implied in the lack of access to female birth control among impoverished populations and evinced in the U. S. Supreme Court's recent rescission of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. The conflict was codified into law in 1662 with *partus sequitur ventrem*, which stipulated those children born in the colonies of North America retained the status of their maternal parentage, thus rendering the Black womb a site for enslaved labor reproduction.

Abolition of legalized slavery by 1865 in the United States did little to secure women of colour's right to safe healthcare in their reproductive lives. Numerous examples exist of the ways in which intersections of race and gender had a profound impact on the reproductive health of women and that of their potential or actual children. One example

involved the clinical trial of Envoid, that Dr. Gregory Pinchus and Margaret Sanger administered from 1955. Envoid was a birth control pill, which they distributed to women in 'the poorest areas of San Juan' (Blakemore 2018). The trial used as recruitment sites many birth control clinics funded and run by Proctor and Gamble heir and American eugenicist Clarence Gamble. As Erin Blakemore has argued, 'Gamble believed that Puerto Ricans and others living in poverty should be wiped out to make room for more 'fit' members of the population, and birth control was part of that vision' (Blakemore 2018). Empathizing with the women who were subject to the pernicious intent of such practices, Blakemore points out that the 'women who took the drug knew that it prevented pregnancy, but had no idea it was experimental or even that they were participating in a clinical trial' (Blakemore 2018). Certainly, they had no idea that the drug was part of a larger scheme to wipe out their population. Once again, the womb was manipulated to satisfy the destructive desire of the Western patriarchy.

The quest for a superior race of humans swept the continental United States with startling ferocity and sought to control the womb to execute its objective. Lisa Wade explains that it manifested in the South as 'unnecessary hysterectomies, that were such a widespread practice that [they] had a euphemism: a "Mississippi appendectomy"' (Wade 2019). According to Wade, some American women, 'were threatened with termination of welfare benefits or denial of medical care if they didn't 'consent' to the procedure.' In these instances, women were forced to choose between immediate sustenance and survival or reproductive control.

Moreover, as recently as 2020, a whistleblower issued a public complaint, 'regarding the rate at which hysterectomies are performed on immigrant women under ICE custody at Irwin County Detention Center' (Project South et al 2020, 2). In this investigation, a nurse found that almost 20 immigrant women received hysterectomies without consent in that facility. Most recently, the fight for ownership of the womb takes the form of legislation concerning abortion. Both Mississippi and Texas have codified laws that restrict women's access to abortions. The Mississippi abortion law was heard by the Supreme Court, meaning the highest court in the land has power to control each

individual womb. The womb is so important that the federal government seeks to control decisions surrounding it.

In response to the patriarchy's assumption of control of the womb, especially those belonging to women of color, Black female horror writers employ metaphorical wombs as sites of rebirth and dynamism for their female characters. They thus reclaim the womb as a source of power for those to whose bodies they belong. In Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and L.A. Banks' *The Hunted*, metaphorical wombs produce and preserve Black female resistance against violent misogyny and racism.

African American horror retains the anchoring themes of its parent genre, African American literature. Just as African American literature demonstrates themes of resistance to racial oppression, so does African American horror. Scholars such as Jessica Birch cite Banks' *Vampire Huntress* series for its active resistance against racialized oppression (Birch 2015, 82). Specifically, *The Hunted* subverts the predominant historical narratives of the Americas that situate White, Christian, masculine identities as brave explorers of a new world. According to Birch, a scholar of Ethnic Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Banks' 'portrayal of evil is firmly rooted in a historical reclaiming of the contemporary significance of slavery and oppression' (Birch 2015, 82). Banks' choice to recount 'The Age of Exploration' through the eyes of the oppressed opposes the accepted narrative of noble White male Christianity. Birch asserts that Banks, 'highlights the connections between historic imperialism, colonialism, and slavery, and the present-day impact of globalization on developing nations' (Birch 2015, 82). Edward W. Said's depiction of colonizing cultures as destructive and masculine in nature underscores Birch's focus on the postcolonial implications of Banks' writing (Said, 2004). In the form of colonialism, the symbolic white phallus penetrates and impregnates the metaphorically female and 'othered' (read: racialized) land to produce white cultural hegemony for several generations.

Kinitra Brooks notes that Black horror 'texts privilege the reclamation of the black woman's body' (Brooks 2011, 1). Brooks' choice to call it a reclamation acknowledges a

historical reality where Black women had no claim to possession of their own bodies. Brooks argues that 'Banks rewrite[s] and revamp[s] history by focusing on black women's bodies as sites of reality-changing power' (Brooks 2011, 2). Brooks' assertion stops short of localizing resistance to the Black woman's womb. Black female bodies have historically been possessed and valued because they housed wombs to produce a submissive labour force. This valuation of the Black womb inadvertently indicates an admission to perceived power. This recognition of power inevitably leads to an attempt to control this power. As Black feminist scholar, Audre Lorde, has argued, when faced with power that has potential to rival the oppressive governing power, 'every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change' (Lorde 2000, 87). Both the phallus and the womb exist as symbols of power. The life-giving Black womb exists as a counter to the invasive White phallus. In Black female horror, female characters transform their wombs, both physical and metaphorical, from sites of labour production for the White capitalist patriarchy to sites for the production of resistance and rebellion.

In the most basic terms, a womb is a container. It is enclosed. It is dark, warm, and wet. It supports life. It provides sustenance. It protects. It incubates things as they develop, then forces those same things out when the development is complete. *Children of Blood and Bone* opens at the setting of a tropological womb — a fitting opening shot to a story about young girls' coming of age. The main characters' youth marks the narrative as one of incubation.

The ahéré where Mama Agba teaches Zélie and other girls how to fight acts as an incubator for young women who were prematurely ripped from the organic gestation of a trauma free childhood. Nearly all the students in Mama Agba's ahéré are diviners who witnessed the government-sanctioned murder of their parents. The traumatic rupture pushes them out of their traditional place of development. Mama Agba opens her ahéré as an artificial womb where the girls receive the 'nutrients' they need to rebel against the regime that attempted to exterminate them. Just as a premature baby inhabits an incubator, the young diviners inhabit the ahéré.

Mama Agba's ahéré serves as a site of resistance. It is there that Mama Agba chooses to support diviners and train them for combat. The Orishan government and the ruler of Orisha, King Saran, views Mama Agba's compassion for Zélie and the others she welcomes into the ahéré as defiance and economically punishes her. The tax collectors taunt her, stating, 'Maggot rates went up. Since [she's] got so many, so have [hers]' (Adeyemi 2018, 9). Mama Agba's school of combat poses as a sewing shop, a sure sign of its subversive nature. She would not have to hide it if the Orishan government did not view it as a threat. King Saran's regime kills the diviners' mothers hoping the feti would die without the womb's nurturing and protection. Saran's regime understands that any amount of nourishment would eventually produce rebellion against the oppressive systems. Mama Agba's decision to offer the diviners life is a blatant opposition to the necropolitics of the Orishan government.

As evinced in Mama Agba's insistence on using Yoruba in her ahéré, language is a viable tool for resistance. Walker's writing produces worlds that directly combat the worlds created by tacit White supremacist rhetoric. Beyond offering combat training, Mama Agba speaks Yoruba and teaches the history of the gods and maji. The Orishan monarch refuses to acknowledge the existence of the gods and Yoruba, 'the maji tongue,' is 'outlawed after the Raid' (Adeyemi 2018, 12). For maji, Yoruba is essential to manifest their magical abilities. The language plays a significant role in forming and developing their powers. If Mama Agba's ahéré is a womb, then Yoruba is vitamin A, the essential nutrient the young diviners lack because of their premature separation from the organic womb. Saran's decision to outlaw Yoruba is significant given the structuralist understanding of 'The world not [as] something that we discover, [but as] something that we construct, through language' (Parker 2020, 49). Saran's abolition of the maji language signifies a subsequent destruction of the world that language created. It is akin to modern discussions around the inclusion or exclusion of Black English in professional and academic settings. Adeyemi's writing exposes the genocidal undertones of language exclusion. It is impossible to include Black people without including Black culture. It is equally impossible to include Black culture while banning the language that creates that

culture. To eradicate Black language is to commit genocide on a foundational level. The Orishan government bans Yoruba because of its subversive nature. The same is true of Black English. White culture cannot replicate or manipulate Black language for its own use, so it labels it as unfit for use in spaces of economic and social uplift. Mama Agba insists on using the language in the ahéré. The ahéré is a womb, and Yoruba is the DNA that forms the identity of the young diviners she teaches. Through Yoruba in the ahéré, Mama Agba reproduces a culture of resistance to the despotic Orishan government.

Reflecting on this theme of Black resistance, scholars argue that the decision to rest is an act of resistance for Black people too. In 2016 Tricia Hersey founded *The Nap Ministry* as a movement to encourage rest and regeneration. On their Instagram page, *The Nap Ministry* affirms, 'we examine the liberating power of naps. We believe rest is a form of resistance and reparations' (Hersey 2021). For Hersey, rest is a reminder that, 'your body is a site of liberation. It doesn't belong to capitalism' (Hersey 2021). This is true for Damali as well. In the tropological womb of Inez's house, Damali refuses to see her body as a product or the means for constant production. She acknowledges her own humanity and allows herself to rest. The only people who inhabit Inez's house at the time of Damali's visit are women. The symbolism of feminine energy reifies the space as a womb. Furthermore, there is a toddler resting in the home, another indication of the house's womb-like quality.

The most critical aspect of Mama Agba's ahéré as a womb is its ability to incite a spirit of defiance in Zélie and her fellow rebel Amari. Mama Agba's ahéré teaches Zélie to appreciate her identity and culture. There she learns to defend her body and identity against the principles that seek to destroy both those aspects of her existence. It is in the ahéré that Mama Agba reveals her hidden gift and prophesies Zélie and Amari's responsibility to permanently reinstate Orisha's connection to the gods. Amari's rebellion is critical because her father is King Saran, the violent dictator of Orisha.

Amari accepts her position in the rebellion against her father in Mama Agba's ahéré, but her movement toward resistance starts in another symbolic womb. The opulent halls of

her father's palace act as an inhospitable womb inadvertently igniting her desire to overthrow the Orishan government. In Saran's throne room, Amari witnesses the execution of her friend Binta. The horrific scene excites a visceral reaction in Amari and drives her to steal the scroll that awakens Binta's magic. Saran aptly observes that Amari 'has committed treason' (Adeyemi 2018). The scroll serves as a conduit for power for diviners who her father has worked to disenfranchise. Amari's decision to take and preserve the artifact that her father wants to destroy is a direct act of defiance, fostered in the palace's walls. Her defiance surpasses the typical implications of a daughter defying her father given her father's active role in suppressing a people group and Amari's decision to preserve the culture he seeks to abolish. Amari's defiance cuts a rift in Saran's regime.

The palace is also the setting of the devastating sparring session where Inan, Amari's older brother, scars Amari physically and emotionally. The incident also exposes her to the unsettling ambition and cruelty of her father, for it was her father who forced them to spar and pushed Inan to exhibit indiscriminate cruelty towards Amari. This nagging feeling along with her mother's constant verbal nagging prevent Amari from feeling at home in the oppressive privilege she has inherited.

After Amari and Zélie meet with Mama Agba, their journey propels them from one womb to another. Chândomblé serves as a site of rebirth and reconnection in their revolutionary quest. Olamilekan baptizes Zélie and re-establishes Orisha's connection to Sky Mother. Zélie's submersion in the water symbolizes a moment of gestation. The inclusion of her blood further marks the cave and more specifically the tub as a womb. Nourishment from the water enters her bloodstream in a similar way that nutrients enter a fetus's bloodstream in their mother's womb. After Olamilekan finishes the ceremony, Zélie is exhausted because she has experienced a re-birth. She is a newborn requiring substantial rest to regenerate energy and allow her magic to develop. Chândomblé is essential to Zélie's revolutionary development because it strengthens her magic. Her magic aids her in her quest to free her people from tyranny. It is magic that the Orishan government fears the most. Zélie's time in Chândomblé intensifies her creative ability. The womb

produces regenerative energy in Zélie that directly threatens the destructive agenda of King Saran.

In keeping with the imagery of water breaking, Zélie and Amari's journey drives them to Ibeji. Zélie again draws upon the power of her blood in the watery arena to animate the tortured souls who are 'weighed down by sin or trauma [and] can't rise to aláfia ... bound to their pain ... reliving the worst moments of their human memories again and again' (Adeyemi 2018, 203). The arena gives rebirth after death to several maji who posthumously join Zélie, Tzain, and Amari to challenge the authority that attempts to dispose of them. Their rebirth doubly solidifies their actions as defiant. They refuse even to die at the hands of their oppressors. Furthermore, it is in the arena that Amari finds the confidence to use her combat training and earns the title 'Lioness', a rebirth in its own right. The arena arouses attitudes of insurgency in Amari. It is also the place where Amari, Tzain, and Zélie obtain the last artifact necessary to reinstate magic, posing an increased threat to Saran's power structure. The watery arena contains this rebellion and concentrates it into an intense potency.

Zélie, Amari, Tzain, and Inan all stumble upon a divîner village that germinates magic and insurrection in its young inhabitants. Their insistence on complete ontological expression in a society that constantly seeks to segment and annihilate their very being is a blatant act of insubordination. Simply choosing to not eclipse their identity defies Orisha's desire to obliterate maji culture. Divîners arrive at the site and gain power and a sense of pride in customs they had forgotten. They resurrect ideologies and reconnect with the gods. Orishan law clearly prohibits the divîners' unbridled existence and views their free expression as a threat to the balance of power in Orisha. The Orishan army's massacre of the village vividly expresses this sentiment.

The army's invasion catapults Zélie into yet another womb. The Orishan army captures her during the raid and detains her in a dungeon. In the prison, Saran tortures Zélie until she is numb, 'running her torture on a constant loop' (Adeyemi 2018, 438). Up until this point, the wombs discussed have been nurturing and have intentionally aided in fostering

attitudes of resistance — all except the palace and the arena of course. At first glance the traumatic nature of the prison scene precludes it from being classified as a womb. However, it is the traumatic nature of the prison experience that validates its status as a womb. According to Sarah Griffiths in her account of 'The Effect of Childbirth No-one Talks About', 'millions of women worldwide develop PTSD ... from struggling to give birth' (Griffiths 2019). Griffiths explains that 'if an experience is traumatic ... memories become stuck in this primitive part [the amygdala] of the brain rather than being safely filed away' (Griffiths 2019). In fact, Griffiths' description of the trauma associated with childbirth is analogous to Zélie's understanding of aláfia where souls find themselves suspended eternally in the most traumatic moments of their lives. In response to the violence experienced in the prison, more maji employ their newly obtained magic and attack the Orishan royal guard. The prison also quickens Amari's desire to kill her father and free Orisha of his tyrannical regime. Metaphorical wombs are not immune to trauma, however they manipulate the trauma experienced to produce resistance.

The last pages of *The Hunted* find their setting in a cave. This cave contains a battle between two groups of women. The immediate and residual realities of colonization and slavery impact the experiences of both these groups of women. The first group is a band of Amazon warriors turned were-demon. They lived during the time of European colonization. The second group includes Damali's team from modern American societies. They meet in a wet, hidden space to explore the ways their bodies have endured trauma. Banks invites her characters to a symbolic womb in an attempt to allow them to reclaim their own for themselves. In this space, the women Damali fights seek 'freedom from all boundaries' (Banks 2005, 508). Both sides grapple with the reality that, 'all souls are hostage to oppression, topside, as long as [their] people aren't free' (Banks 2005, 512). In the cave, Damali and the woman that opposes her reckon with their varied traumatic experiences. In keeping with the traumatic reality of birth, Banks provides a space where the reality of the women's trauma will not be suppressed in favor of a more palatable narrative. As they reckon with their trauma, they also ascend to a rebirth of repentance to The Light. In this womb, the confrontation of troubled histories produces a rebirth into a glorious new life.

Children of Blood and Bone culminates within the womb of Sky Mother herself. The rebels descend into a buried temple. The Holy Temple serves as a container for the resurgence of magic for all of Orisha. It fulfills all the prerequisites for womb classification. It is dark. It is replete with blood. The entire island is sinking into water. Trauma, in the form of violent wars, saturates the temple grounds. In this container the maji community and its allies strike a deadly blow, irrevocably ending Saran's repressive reign. Amari kills her father. Zélie resurrects magic and experiences the fullness of her life-producing deed in a visit with her mother. At last, the womb ceases to exist detached from the Black female body. Throughout *Children of Blood and Bone*, metaphorical wombs stand alone with no connection to a female body, with the exception of Mama Agba's ahéré. This detachment signifies the somatic dehumanization of the Black female body in relation to the womb. Historically, American society centralized the Black female womb because it was the only part of the Black female body American society valued — due to its ability to reproduce labor. In the moment where Zélie and her mother reunite, Adeyemi makes the human who houses the womb the focal point. Adeyemi humanizes the Black female and highlights the regenerative power of love her womb symbolizes.

Leslie Esdaile Banks, or L.A. Banks, personifies racial, economic, and gender-based oppression into the forms of demons and vampires. Recent trends in popular culture favor vampire and demon epics, but Banks' treatment of the mythic creatures transcends capricious fads. Banks applies the possessive nature of demons to a story that centers around consequences of colonialism in post-colonial spaces. Although the Age of Imperialism is over long before the time period in which her series occurs, the demons, or residual effects, of colonialism still claim dominion in the postcolonial spaces. This immediately conjures notions of hegemony and the inherently insidious nature of colonial conquest.

Carlos Rivera, Damali's love interest, awakens in a Mexican desert as dawn draws near. Carlos is an ex-drug dealer, recently turned vampire who survives a gruesome attack at the hands of demons in the previous book. At this point in *The Hunted*, Carlos' body is

unrecognizably mangled. He needs human blood to be able to regenerate. He crawls to a cave, where a group called 'The Covenant,' composed of holy men from various religious backgrounds, meets him and feeds him blood. At first glance, the cave seems too masculine to serve as a womb. However, Banks' inclusion of male energy in this womb works to express a sense of the communal effort necessary to achieve lasting liberation. When asked if her work was 'female focused,' Banks admitted, 'I'm not sure that the writing is female focused, albeit Damali is a really strong leading character. I guess I say that because she's balanced by a core of strong male Guardians and her partner, Carlos' (Birch 2015, 24). Banks resists the western feminist tendency to require a self-sufficient, female first agenda that ignores the value and necessity of healthy masculinity.

White feminism inherits the individualistic instinct that is characteristic of White supremacy and Western capitalist patriarchy. After all, White feminism is a product of that culture and thus retains its paradigms. The feminism Banks and Adeyemi exemplify in their writings mirror Chikwenye Ogunyemi's womanist theory. Although developed around the same time as Walker's womanism, Ogunyemi conceptualized her theory in isolation. The primary function of Ogunyemi's womanism is to present a communal function that Western feminism lacks. For Ogunyemi and Banks female liberation is not a replication of White male egotism where a female protagonist who single handedly saves the day is the quintessential emblem of liberation. No, Black horror envisions a communal manumission that requires collaborative participation from both feminine and masculine identities.

Moreover, natural wombs require masculine presence, in the form of sperm, to conceive life. The conception of liberation and rebellion requires both masculine and feminine energy as well, as evinced by Banks' inclusion of a metaphorical womb full of men. It is clear that the cave serves as a womb because it houses blood. It nurtures Carlos and regenerates his body. It is the place where Carlos learns of his opportunity to pay penance and gain new life — a rebirth. The cave offers regeneration, preservation, and nutrients from blood like any other womb. More importantly, the cave acts as a site of resistance

against oppressive masculinity. In the cave, Carlos finds a safe place to regenerate from injuries caused by demons, a recurrent symbol of White supremacy and colonialism.

Banks moves the audience again to a new womb, the compound. Damali lays in

her private sanctuary, her bedroom, that had been practically turned into a lush replica of the Garden of Eden with plants everywhere, Moroccan tiles on the shower wall, and a gorgeous slate-framed jacuzzi. In fact, each room in the guardian compound, except the weapons room, was a veritable museum, filled with comfortable appointments and beauty all around (Banks 2005, 83).

Banks uses the word 'sanctuary' here again. She last used it to describe Inez's house, which was akin to a womb. She describes the room as a 'Garden of Eden', invoking immediate imagery of verdant fertility. Through this imagery, Banks equates the compound to the womb of all creation. Specifically, Banks juxtaposes the concealed, unsullied fertility of Eden to the compound that houses the guardians sworn to defend to The Light. The compound is hospitable and nurturing. Furthermore, the compound serves to protect and hide Damali from enemies. The walls of the compound are equivalent to the walls of a womb. In addition, the womb houses guardians, further validating its importance in the push against oppressive forces. The diverse backgrounds of the compound's inhabitants cements the compound's status as a womb of liberation. Banks refutes arguments of a singular liberation centered around the efforts of one people group by including varied cultures in the imagination and cultivation of liberation.

The next womb, The Covenant's lair, serves to reunite Damali and Carlos. Damali and Carlos consummate their union in the lair. Here, Banks offers a picture of the womb before it houses a fetus. The womb in this state still holds significance for the quest for liberation and justice. The scene exemplifies Lorde's perception of the erotic as a creative force. Banks presents Damali and Carlos' sexual expression as 'a conscious decision — a longed-for bed which [they] enter gratefully and from which [they] rise up empowered' (Lorde 2000, 88). Banks is familiar with writing quasi-erotic literature. She boasts an extensive opus that includes romance novels and thus capturing emotions such as lust

and desire in written language is well within her purview. Her choice to include a scene that arouses keen sexual energy is itself an act of resistance. Banks interjects the erotic to subvert existing notions of the womb as a passive, and a asexual carrier of masculine legacy. She arranges a depiction of the erotic, where both parties involved, 'acutely and fully... feel in [their] doing' (Lorde 2000, 88). Thus, the womb becomes a space that experiences the fullness of collaborative, erotic pleasure and then weaponizes that collaboration to produce a unified, energized front against oppression. Their collaboration is potent because the empowerment is mutually given and received for strength in a struggle they share. In the lair, they create the union necessary to conceive rebellion. Carlos and Damali lock into a covenant and join in a determination to demolish the forces that seek to destroy their worlds.

In *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Hunted*, Tomi Adeyemi and L.A. Banks reclaim the isolated Black womb and reattach it to the human to which it belongs, thus humanizing Black women. This humanization of Black women combats the dominant narrative that seeks to reduce Black female identities to what their bodies can produce for the Western patriarchy world founded on capitalist exploitation. Their wombs are a counternarrative to the tired trope of the almighty phallus that disfigures phallic power into a deadly weapon, only suitable for destruction. Banks' and Adeyemi's placement of symbolic wombs highlights the power of wombs as a space where spirit and body meet to upend oppressive world orders rooted in spiritual darkness. Here, even the phallus achieves greater power. The womb exposes the phallus's ability to invest life and further incubates that life to create revolution. Together the phallus and womb work to display the necessary fetation of rebellion, resistance, and liberation. Banks and Adeyemi join the scores of Black feminist writers who insist on the unity of Black masculinities and Black feminism to ensure the futurity of Black liberation.



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