"To Persons Defiled and Faithless": The Dichotomy of Pleasure and Shame in Paul Mendez's *Rainbow Milk*

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Abstract
This article explores the complex interplay of pleasure and shame in Paul Mendez's novel *Rainbow Milk* (2020), focusing on the protagonist Jesse McCarthy's journey of self-discovery as a gay Black man navigating the intersections of race, sexuality, and religion. Jesse's experiences of sexual pleasure are constantly juxtaposed with feelings of shame, rooted in religious indoctrination and racial ideologies. Through an intersectional lens, the article examines how Jesse's marginalisation as a gay man is intertwined with his experiences of racism. Mendez intricately weaves the narrative around descriptions of cleanliness and dirtiness, exposing the impact of dysfunctional dynamics within Jesse's family and religious teachings on his self-perception. The article employs Sally R. Munt's concept of shame as a mechanism for understanding how shame as an affect impacts the formation of identity and relationships. It explores how shame is regulated, shaping individuals' self-worth and social belonging. Insights from postcolonial scholarship inform the analysis of racialised shame, highlighting the destructive impact of internalised racism. From this perspective, the article delves into the complex interplay of race, sexuality, and religion, illustrating how shame operates as a tool of control and oppression. Through an analysis of Mendez's novel, it illuminates the nuanced politics of shame and its impact on marginalised identities.

Keywords: politics of shame, religion, queerness, identity, affect, *Rainbow Milk*, Paul Mendez

Introduction

> "*[T]o persons defiled and faithless nothing is clean, but both their minds and consequences are defiled*"
> (*Bible*, Titus 1.15-16, qtd. in Mendez 91, emphasis original)

A reading of this bible verse prefaces nineteen-year-old Jesse McCarthy's disfellowshipping from his congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses due to his queerness, a practice of formally excluding and shunning members who do not comply with the religious standards. With it, the protagonist of Paul Mendez's debut novel *Rainbow Milk*, which was published in 2020, begins his journey of emancipation—involuntarily, at first—from the religious and familial constraints of his youth. The novel opens with a seemingly standalone prologue, written partly in patois, which tells the story of Norman Alonso, a Jamaican family man who immigrates to England with his wife and two children in pursuit of a brighter future in the late 1950s as part of the Windrush generation. As the family faces everyday racism within the UK's unexpectedly hostile environment, Norman's vision begins to deteriorate and his wife Glorie is left to shoulder the financial burden as they struggle to make a life in the Midlands.

Without further exploration of Norman's life, the narrative transitions quickly to its primary storyline set predominantly in the early 2000s. Mendez's coming-of-age story, a postcolonial and queer take on the genre of the bildungsroman, follows Jesse's process of reconciling with his identity as a gay Black man who has grown up in England's Black Country, an area in the West Midlands known for its historical association with coal mining, iron production, and industrialisation. Following the events around his coming-out and disfellowshipping, Jesse is shunned by his family and leaves his childhood home to face the challenges of building an independent life in London. Immediately drawn into the city's queer scene, he indulges himself in his new-found sexual freedom. As he finds the means to sustain himself financially through sex work, Jesse's self-perception begins to vacillate in a continuous interplay of pleasure and shame. His sexual encounters with others are constantly framed by narratives of cleanliness and dirtiness and punctuated by poignant memories from his past, exposing the dysfunctional dynamic within his interracial family and the impact of religious indoctrination on his self-perception. The absence of his father, whose identity as a queer Black artist remains unknown until the end of the novel, compounds Jesse's efforts to feel seen and empowered in an environment that is predominantly white and marked by constant racist encounters. Seeking love and care in the arms of older white men, Jesse is mostly met with the

fetishization, discrimination, and violation of his body. The constant stigmatization that he faces as a gay Black man is exacerbated by the struggle to reconcile his desires with religious and societal concepts of purity, morality, and shame. This article investigates how *Rainbow Milk* delves into this dichotomy of pleasure and shame, which is informed by a nexus of religious concepts of sin, guilt, and punishment, particularly in the regulation of sexuality, and the dynamics of violence, shame, and resistance inherent in colonialism. Its aim is to shed light on how shame affectively operates in an interplay of race, religion, and queerness, and how *Rainbow Milk* negotiates these politics of shame.

Shame as an Affect

In *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (2007), Sally R. Munt explores the affective dynamics of shame and its intersections with identity, culture, and politics. She examines how this emotion operates "as a mechanism for thinking about identity, desire, embodiment, relationships and social inclusion/exclusion and […] as a catalyst that has the potential for catharsis" (O'Rourke x) in a process of moving beyond shame. Her understanding of shame as a "sticky emotion" (Munt 2) that "may not necessarily be registered as a 'feeling' [… and] often goes unrecognised and unacknowledged" (5), one that exceeds the momentary state of feeling embarrassment and humiliation, draws on Sara Ahmed's concept of affect. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed suggests that emotions, which she sees as social and cultural practices rather than psychological states, "do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (208) between bodies. Through contact with others, bodies are shaped as objects of emotion and become "saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (11), constituting some as legitimate and others as illegitimate. In the context of shame, this occurs in a process of transforming "feelings of vulnerability and fear into disgust and hate, […] simply abjecting them onto those marked out as Other" (O'Rourke x). Munt regards shame as a necessary and not inherently negative or harmful emotion, drawing on Silvan S. Tomkins's work, which offers a foundational framework for understanding the emotional and psychological dimensions of shame. Tomkins underscores the profound impact of shame on an individual's sense of self-worth and social belonging. He argues that shame operates only after feelings of interest and enjoyment have been activated, inhibiting, but not fully reducing them (353). Positive affect, the feeling of pleasure, is at the very root of shame: "Shame illuminates our intense attachment to the world, our desire to be connected with others" (Probyn 14). In a similar vein, Elspeth Probyn asserts that shame is not solely a negative emotion

but also serves as a conduit for understanding our relationships and social bonds. She states that "[i]n shame, the feeling and minding and thinking and social body comes alive. […] The feeling of shame teaches us about our relation to others" (34-35). Thus, it is also in experiencing the unpleasantness of shame that social behaviour is learned.

In 2009, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that "in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity" (50) and highlights how shame contributes to the formation of individual and collective identities. In this sense, shame is neither good nor bad, but it reinforces the demarcations of collectives, and the ways in which individuals identify with and understand themselves as part of them. Munt, however, acknowledges that shame can also "incite a wilful disintegration of collectivity, […] cause fragmentation, splitting and dissolution in all levels of the social body, the community, and within the psyche itself" (26). Her emphasis of the destructive potential of shame echoes Tomkins's association of shame with indignity, transgression, and alienation. The feeling of shame may be experienced as "an inner torment, a sickness of the soul" (351). Munt also points out the physicality of shame and argues that the body can be its source. She stresses that it is important to recognize that bodily sites of shame are "brought into being *because* of the cultural, because of what dominant ideas of health and physical wellbeing dictate" (2, emphasis original). The emotion "exceeds the bodily vessel of its containment—groups that are shamed contain individuals who internalise the stigma of shame into the tapestry of their lives, each reproduce discrete, shamed subjectivities, all with their own pathologies" (3). But shame goes beyond the individual sphere. The emotion is ever-present in "[h]istories of violent domination and occupation [which] are found frequently lurking behind these dynamics of shame" (3). Shame can—and has been—used to exert power over marginalised communities. In histories of oppression, the body has frequently become the site of shame and presented as non-conforming, illegitimate, less valuable. This becomes particularly relevant when examining shame in the context of colonialism.

The exploration of shame in relation to race is a central theme in postcolonial discourse, and scholars such as Frantz Fanon and bell hooks have provided valuable insights into the ways in which racialised identities have been and are still constructed and policed within society. In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon delves into the psychological and existential consequences of colonialism and racism on people of colour. He examines the ways in which colonial oppression leads to a fractured sense of self, internalised racism, and a desire for acceptance within white-dominated societies. Fanon observes how Black

individuals, surrounded by white supremacy, often internalise feelings of inferiority and nonexistence, grappling with the agonising desire to transcend their racial identity and be recognised as equals in the eyes of white society (3). This yearning for acceptance manifests itself in a relentless pursuit of whiteness: "Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*. I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*" (Fanon 45, emphasis original). This quest for white validation becomes synonymous with self-worth, and it is set up to fail, inevitably leading to—and consciously made to evoke—feelings of "[s]hame. Shame and self-contempt" (88). The feeling of contempt is what Tomkins describes as a tool of oppression: "The hierarchical relationship is maintained either when the oppressed one assumes the attitude of contempt for himself or hangs his head in shame" (362). In *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001), a study of the meaning and cultivation of love in Black communities, bell hooks describes this mechanism as "racialized shaming" (74, 81). She elucidates the profound impact of shame within colonial contexts, emphasising that "[s]haming has been a central component of racial assault [… and] central to all other dehumanizing practices" (82). hooks stresses the importance of dismantling systems of domination that perpetuate feelings of inferiority and worthlessness among marginalised communities and highlights how racialised shaming serves as a tool: "Within a culture of domination, shaming others is one way to assert coercive power and dominance" (82). This has profound psychological repercussions for those who are shamed, particularly on their self-esteem and self-love (73). The lack of attention paid to Black self-love impedes mental health and exacerbates this cycle of shame, as individuals internalise the pervasive message that their worth is contingent upon conformity to white norms and standards (92).

The juxtaposition of Fanon's and hooks's insights illuminates how shame operates as a mechanism of control, compelling individuals to conform to societal norms and perpetuating self-doubt and self-denial in those who are excluded. The act of "shaming people is a powerful and potentially destructive and violent way to patrol the borders of normality" (Probyn xvi). Shame shapes the lived experiences of marginalised communities—more so, it "brings the fear of abandonment by society, of being left to starve outside the boundaries of humankind" (3). This is a crucial aspect in the history of colonialism throughout which people of colour have been continuously denied the status of the human being and systematically dehumanised within the context of slavery (Fanon 179). In *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Saidiya Hartman examines the historical misrecognition and ambiguity of the humanity of enslaved people, demonstrating that they "were used like animals" (4). She emphasizes that

"the selective recognition of humanity that undergirded the relations of chattel slavery had not considered them men deserving of rights or freedom" (5). Following Hartman's work, Sabine Broeck describes how this continues to affect postcolonial studies today: enslaved people are commonly "registered in the annals ostentatiously as property and cargo and as such, are not audible to white historiography as human actors, if only in the cracks of state and collective memory" (354). As postcolonial scholarship continues to deal with the legacy of colonialism and strive towards decolonisation, an understanding of shame as an affect becomes paramount in addressing the psychological wounds inflicted by centuries of oppression and reclaiming narratives of dignity, self-love, and pride. This becomes even more complex when racialised shaming is intertwined with the evocation of shame on the basis of religious doctrines and gender norms, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

Oscillations of Pleasure and Shame

In *Rainbow Milk*, Paul Mendez's protagonist Jesse McCarthy is faced with an entanglement of dogmas around sexuality, race, and religion. Having grown up within the confines of a strictly governed religious community of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Black Country, Jesse grapples with the deep-seated shame engrained in him as a gay Black man. He finds himself constantly at odds with his own desires and the moral expectations imposed on him through his religious upbringing. His trajectory throughout the novel is marked by a relentless search for acceptance and validation amidst the pervasive shame and guilt associated with his sexuality. Jesse's identity is built on the belief that his desires render him inherently dirty or sinful in the eyes of his community and, by extension, in the eyes of a higher power. This internalised sense of moral impurity becomes a central motif in Jesse's narrative.

The novel's first encounter with Jesse already situates the events within the paradigm of impurity, illustrated by descriptions of disgust and dirtiness. On the bus on his way to a client, Jesse thinks about his sex work and wonders whether the people in his vicinity "[m]ight be able to smell it on him" (Mendez 48), convinced that his homosexuality or his occupation are physically manifest and easily perceptible. When he arrives at the flat and is greeted by his "sweating and out of breath client [… in] a studded leather collar and dirty white socks" (48), an environment of intense heat and body odour, dirty water from the tap, drawn curtains, cocaine rows and a plastic sheet on the bed, Jesse begins to feel nauseous. Repulsed, he quickly leaves the flat (49-50). The scene is the beginning of Jesse's fragmented narrative which unfolds by traversing between timelines and memories, offering glimpses into various moments

in his life. The narrative structure reflects Jesse's disjointed sense of self as he grapples with the weight of his shame, which has caused a sense of "fragmentation, splitting and dissolution" (26) as described by Munt. It highlights the non-linear nature of memory and consciousness, not only capturing the fluidity of Jesse's thought processes, but also underscoring the dissonance between past, present, and imagined futures. Through form, Mendez portrays Jesse's inner turmoil and the disorienting effects of shame on his sense of temporal and spatial orientation.

This initial account of Jesse's meeting with the client is only one of various sexual encounters in his narrative whose depiction is framed along the lines of cleanliness and dirtiness, and it is the only one in which Jesse decides to leave. Jesse's first sexual experience takes place at a train station, shortly after leaving his childhood home. In the public bathrooms, he catches sight of a man masturbating in the reflection of a puddle of urine on the floor, leading to an episode of oral sex (98-99). The central focus of the scene is Jesse's preoccupation with his partner's "pungent" (98) smell. Generally, the novel does not shy away from describing the grimy and unappealing aspects of the spaces in which Jesse's sexual encounters take place and the bodies of his sexual partners, including the way in which Jesse reflects on them in hindsight. The narrative is interspersed with descriptions of dirty and off-putting sights and smells which only seem to fuel Jesse's pleasure—"Jesse closed his eyes and imagined any one of those men from the landfill site, the ironworks or the warehouses in their dirty jeans and muddy boots, fucking his mouth like this man was" (90)—and moments in which Jesse feels dirty, but cannot do anything about it: "He still hadn't washed Rufus off himself, and wasn't sure that he ever could. He could still smell him in his nose hairs" (139). Jesse's pleasure is constantly excited by visions of dirt and the smell of bodily fluids. In the moment, he is able to enjoy what he sees as the shameful aspects of his sexuality, mirroring Munt's argument that "shame itself can be experienced as pleasurable [… and] provide a frisson of excitement" (4). Afterwards, however, his shame manifests in feelings of sickness and nausea, leaving him lethargic and depressed.

The idea of dirtiness and its association with impurity which constantly surfaces in Jesse's mind is rooted in the religious indoctrination that stems from his upbringing within his congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. Throughout history, the dichotomy of purity and impurity has frequently been wielded within religious contexts as a means of shaming individuals who deviate from a given framework of norms, particularly in relation to gender identity and sexuality. In such contexts, physical cleanliness is widely used as a symbolic representation of inner purity and

righteousness. Purification rituals are common practices in various religious traditions, symbolising the cleansing of the soul from sin and impurity. As Chayanit Trakulpipat et al. argue, the need to cleanse "the dirty body after past misdeeds has been engraved in the canon of all major religious ceremonies for many centuries […] which suggests a deeply rooted connection between moral purity and physical cleanliness" (780). Jesse has internalised the association of homosexuality with immoral behaviour and sin. He revels in his sinfulness and derives pleasure from it in the very moment he allows himself the sexual freedom, but the feelings of shame, guilt, and self-contempt that he has been taught catch up to him eventually. This conflict culminates when Jesse isolates himself completely for a period of six weeks after being subjected to a traumatic experience of sexual assault. The novel describes how Jesse feels, having withdrawn to his room in an apartment shared with his flatmate Owen:

> He wondered if Owen, next door, ever smelt anything, whether it be a spliff or cigarette being smoked, an ashtray full of old butts, or the smell of Jesse's body when he couldn't be bothered to wash, which was most days, these days, unless he had something or someone in particular to get up for, which hadn't been for six weeks, since *that man*, and in any case, some clients had liked him to be dirty and smelly, but since *that man*, his money had run down and he didn't know when he might be able to work again. (Mendez 174, emphasis original)

The incident that the narrative alludes to occurs during an appointment with a client who intentionally injures Jesse during the sexual act to infect him with HIV. At this point, the discourse around moral impurity and shame within the novel is brought to another level, incorporating fears around contagion and death. Jesse is unable to cope with his shame and existential fears. As he tries to grapple with the repercussions of the assault, he remembers his own baptism and draws a direct link from this religious purifying ritual to his current situation after being exposed to a deadly disease, feeling, "now, like the man in that painting at Thurston's house, naked, bleeding and falling through the sky" (173-174). This biblical imagery of nakedness, bleeding, and falling invokes the memory of his disfellowshipping from Jehovah's Witnesses, when Jesse is asked to read a passage from the bible out loud:

> Jesse, startled, obeyed. "But to persons defiled and faithless nothing is clean, but both their minds and consequences are defiled. They publicly declare they know God, but they disown him by their works, because they are detestable and disobedient and not approved for good work of any sort." (91, emphasis original)

In this biblical quote, the concept of cleanliness is used to establish a moral dichotomy between those who are deemed pure and faithful versus those who are considered impure and lacking in faith. The passage suggests

that individuals who are morally corrupt and lack faith are incapable of perceiving anything as clean or pure.

In the preface to *Queer Attachments* (2007), Noreen Giffney argues that "it is shame that is one of the guiding principles of Christianity. Munt writes in the shadow of shame because it is within that shadow that the human takes shape" (x). Jesse's expulsion from his congregation is a deliberate and performed act of shaming, and it leaves Jesse within that shadow of shame. As he strives to emancipate himself and reject the equation of his homosexuality with moral impurity, the belief in his own worthlessness echoes within him – and it is immediately situated in his body. This embodiment of shame becomes clear when he describes himself as "sick, in mind, body, and spirit" because of "his dick, which had developed a mind of its own. […] He flexed an arm but was repulsed by the smell of his armpit" (Mendez 176-177). Jesse not only perceives his own body as "sick," but also feels dissociated from it. His shame becomes an active agent, palpable in his own physicality and body odour. This "denigration of the body in religious discourses" (Dhawan 194) has been integral in the subordination of queer people and is rooted in what James Baldwin describes as the "[t]error of the flesh. After all, we're supposed to mortify the flesh. […] [P]eople believe the wages of sin is death" (64). When Jesse is confronted with the possibility of HIV, he is immediately convinced that he has "ruined himself" (Mendez 176) and fallen from grace, that his queerness is punishable by death.

Jesse's guilt manifests itself similarly to how Susan Sontag describes the connection between shame and guilt in her work on sociocultural discourses around AIDS: "With AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt. […] It is not a mysterious affliction that seems to strike at random. Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed […] as a member of a certain 'risk group,' a community of pariahs" (153). Sontag here discusses how AIDS and other illnesses are imbued with metaphorical and social meanings beyond their medical realities. With his potential HIV infection, Jesse faces not only societal but also religious stigma. In his worldview, shaped by the constraints of his religion's doctrinal beliefs, Jesse's potential disease is a consequence of his "sinful" behaviour, his own fault—a calamity brought on himself, "especially since AIDS [in this logic of sinfulness] is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity" (Sontag 153). Sontag highlights that the construction of AIDS has historically depended on notions that separate groups of people—"the sick from the well, people with ARC from people with AIDS, them and us" (155). Such separation arguably further reinforces Jesse's internalised stigma. It takes a long time for him to distance himself from the doctrines

of his religious upbringing and accept his own identity—not just as a gay man, but also as a person of colour.

Illegitimate Bodies and Intersectionality

The notion that he is "fundamentally wrong" is instilled in Jesse from early on in his life. His race and sexuality, two central aspects of his identity, subject him to constant scrutiny from all sides. It is within this intersectionality that Jesse experiences vilification, stigmatisation, and in which he ultimately becomes subjected to sexual assault. In Jesse's process of emancipation and self-discovery, his experiences connected to race and sexuality cannot be neatly separated. James Baldwin, who is also mentioned in the novel as one of Jesse's favourite authors, stresses that the "sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined" (64), although a gay Black person has often presented a "sexual conundrum to society" (67). Kathryn Bond Stockton adds that there is "no purely black form of debasement—nor a queer one. Only blended forms of shame" (23). Experiences of discrimination and marginalisation due to race are always also informed by norms around gender and sexuality and vice versa. In her study on debasement in the intersection of blackness and queerness, Bond Stockton adds that "we cannot grasp certain complicated cultural, historical entanglements between 'black' and 'queer' without, at the same time, interrogating shame—its beautiful, generative, sorrowful debasements" (8). In the experience and embodiment of shame, it is Jesse's existence that is declared illegitimate.

Jesse experiences the feeling of alienation early on. After being introduced to the girl who is chosen as his future wife within the congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, he remembers going home and "[scratching] at his body as if he wanted to break out of his own skin" (Mendez 59-60). It is his skin that he wants to escape from as he feels that "something [is] wrong" because of his queerness, and he hopes "to God his real truth would not find its way out" (60). The shame he derives from his homosexuality is situated within his body and is inextricably linked to his experiences of shame as a Black person. In the intersectional space between the two aspects of his identity, he learns to perceive his whole existence as sinful.

This is visualised in his hauntings by apocalyptic visions, starting with his first reflections on Armageddon as a child. When teenage Jesse fulfils his duty by going from door to door and proselytising individuals for the congregation, he is invited into the home of a gay couple watching the 9/11 news reports. After this first encounter with the reality of a queer couple living together, having witnessed "something far more destructive to the

world than their love, [he leaves] with a foretaste of Armageddon" (63), immediately linking homosexuality to the end of the world and his ensuing death. He is constantly harrowed by visions of Armageddon and convinced that he will die along with all the sinners and evildoers (203), particularly after being subjected to a statement from one of the Witnesses that "Jehovah allowed the AIDS virus because he couldn't wait for Armageddon to punish the disgusting, evil gays" (224). This vilification of queerness becomes an integral part of Jesse, directed against himself. In the moment of his disfellowshipping and involuntary outing, the narrative describes Jesse's catastrophic visions of "[t]he walls of Jericho […] coming down" and him being "buried in the rubble" (90). In his first in-depth conversation with Owen, who becomes his partner later in the novel, the realisation that "[w]hatever happened now, it was too late. He was going to die. *You're gonna die at Armageddon*" (203, emphasis original), brings about a mental breakdown. In Jesse's mind, his identity as a queer person is inextricably linked to disaster and ensuing death.

Jesse's marginalization as a gay man cannot be analysed separately from his experience as a Black person. Throughout his life, he is deeply engrained with feelings of alienation and estrangement. Jesse grows up wondering about his biological father's absence, whom he knows nothing about. Emotionally neglected by his mother from an early age onwards, Jesse finds himself in an ambivalent relationship with his white stepfather, Graham. While Graham occasionally shows affection, Jesse's longing for his approval and care is hindered by his mother's interventions. Despite his exemplary behaviour within the congregation, he is continuously rejected by his family and denied a space to share his experience with other Black people. Suffering from this lack of representation and identification figures, he never truly feels a sense of belonging. In fact, his family actively prevents him from negotiating the significance of race in his life: "His mother had never allowed him to listen to rap, so he'd been blocked all his life from hearing black men talk about the world on their own terms" (67). Furthermore, he is constantly subjected to racist remarks and encounters. His colleagues at his part-time job question his identity by demanding him "to become harder, more aggressive, their idea of *black*. […] One of his colleagues joked that Jesse was like a black boy trying to be a white boy trying to be a black boy" (93, emphasis original). Their gendered perception of what constitutes blackness highlights the complex expectations imposed on Jesse due to his race, gender, and sexuality. In their view, he fails to meet the standards of masculinity or blackness, leaving him feeling inadequate in both regards. The narrative is interspersed with various racist encounters in Jesse's daily life:

> When the kids at school called him that, rubber lips, coon, blackie and paki, he came home, stared at himself in the mirror until he was full of anger and hate, put the hot tap on until it ran scalding and set to scratching off the black; the face-cloth wouldn't work, nor would his nails, so he stole a Brillo pad from under the kitchen sink and rubbed and rubbed until the foam went pink, but that made his skin sore, red raw. It healed back to black. (135)

It becomes evident that Jesse's encounters with racism inflict deep wounds on his body and psyche. The constant exposition to derogatory slurs not only triggers feelings of shame but also instils a profound self-hatred within him. The use of racially charged insults serves to shame and dehumanise Jesse. The intensity of his reaction, resorting to self-inflicted harm in an attempt to erase his Blackness, underscores the impact of racism on his sense of identity and self-worth. The novel describes this explicitly: Jesse's recollection of a barber shop visit at the age of fifteen depicts his coming home and immediately "scalp[ing] his head bloodily in the shower with one of his father's razors. He hated himself that much, already—not himself, but his blackness" (186). Jesse's repeated acts of self-harm are desperate attempts to escape what he has been taught is a marker of worthlessness.

> He recognized that he had thought of himself as a blond white boy all his life. He'd never thought of himself as a black boy, or compared himself to other black people. He'd known so few black people, and those his mother knew she often derided for being *too black*, doing things in *too black* a way, […] being disorganised because they were *too black*, being rough and uneducated because they were *too black*. He wouldn't have been treated so harshly if he wasn't *too black*. He wouldn't be cooped up in a prison cell, an exile within the family home. (94, emphasis original)

Whiteness is what Jesse strives for, becoming white and thus worthy of respect and love in the eyes of others. He himself comments on the fact that he has barely seen representations of black men in loving relationships anywhere, trying "to remember if he'd seen a black man kiss someone on a TV show or in a film" (152). The denial of love and care due to his Blackness, compounded by the absence of visible affection within Black communities or among individuals, leads Jesse to perceive Black bodies as inherently unlovable.

It is whiteness that is desirable, and Jesse's desperate wish to "remain […] *whiter than white*" (83, emphasis original) manifests itself in his desire for closeness and affection from white men. He is attracted to elderly white men, constantly looking for alternative versions of his distant stepfather. The act of sleeping with white men, however, is not only a way of seeking validation in their eyes, but also a way of perpetuating the illusion of his own whiteness and belonging. His behaviour mirrors what Baldwin explains as his impetus for seeking the love of a white partner: "By loving

me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. […] When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine" (45). What Jesse grasps in his search for love from white men is the feeling of being desirable, respected, listened to, and most of all, safe. He is even aware of his own needs for nurturing and unconditional love, like a mother's love, wanting "[t]o nestle in [a man's] chest and belly and wet them with his happy tears. To suck on his nipples as if they would draw milk. To be warm and cared for" (Mendez 125). Throughout most of the novel, however, the attention that he receives from white men serves as a means of exploiting his body to assert their own dominance and supremacy.

Moving Beyond Shame

Following Jesse's period of depression and self-isolation, the narrative devotes a significant portion of the novel to the events of a Christmas Day in the London house-share, where Jesse and his flat mate Owen spend the day indulging in champagne, discovering music, and talking about their experiences with queerness and religion. It is this scene, marked by Jesse's emotional breakdown, that sets his process of emancipation from the religious constraints of his past in motion. Trying to make sense of the way he has been treated by his family, the congregation, and the men whose affection he has sought, Jesse slowly opens up to Owen and finds the space to be heard and listened to. His prayer before dinner becomes a means to voice his opinion and release the anger he has been suppressing for so long:

> Thank You for […] letting us live with freedom of choice, when the rules You set mean the choice to live is punishable by death in some countries. […] [W]e should be with our families who should love us unconditionally, but don't, because of the rules You set, and because we don't wish to live our lives by the lies You would rather we told. […] I hope […] You're not there, so I don't have to hold You to account for all the evil that's happening, caused by people who think they're the good ones and have got You on their side. (196)

He subverts the traditional Christmas prayer into a blunt critique of religious homophobia and hypocrisy, ending with a triumphant toast to "Owen. And Joy Divison. And Sugababes. And Destiny's Child" (197). This subversion of a conventional sermon marks the beginning of Jesse's rejection of the shame that has been imposed on him in the past as he confronts religious doctrines and norms with ridicule. In the ensuing dialogue with Owen, he ponders topics like white supremacy, internalised racism, and the racism and homophobia inherent in music history, and the two share their personal experiences related to HIV and AIDS, including

the profound impact of sexual assault. It is Owen who takes the lead and drives the conversation, highlighting how Jesse has been conditioned to view white men as the epitome of godliness, beauty, and desirability: "you've been taught that God is a white man. […] That's why you love their smiles, their skin, their beauty, their voices, their words, their sex. You've been trained to hate yourself and love and desire them" (206). The irony of a white man with an academic background like Owen explaining this to Jesse underscores the hierarchical nature of their exchange. Owen teaches Jesse about racism and homophobia while Jesse is left feeling like he is being lectured by a paternal figure, "as if he was being read to at bedtime by Daddy" (219). Their interaction reflects the recurrent pattern of a white man assuming authority and expertise on matters concerning race, despite lacking the lived experiences or understanding of systemic and everyday racism that a person of colour may possess. Owen naturally assumes a position of superiority as he speaks to Jesse, and as before, Jesse seeks validation from a white man. This time, however, he receives the attention, empathy, and respect he has long been deprived of.

The part of the novel set in the early 2000s ends with Owen's involvement in a serious car accident that impedes any further contact between the two and denies them the chance to maintain their connection. Over a decade passes before Jesse and Owen cross paths again, marking a prolonged period of separation before their eventual reunion. In the subsequent timeline, the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the Brexit referendum era in 2016, exhibiting an upsurge in xenophobia and racism, and it becomes clear that Jesse has had time to process and understand the stigmatisation he has experienced on various levels. Jesse is able to reconcile with his identity by finding a fulfilling job as a waiter and delving into auto-fictional writing, as well as forming connections with fellow queer individuals and people of colour such as Ginika, his closest friend with Jamaican and Nigerian roots who becomes "like a sister to him, and in some ways, a mother" (261). It becomes clear that he has developed a critical perspective on discourses around race and gender, including topics such as the commodification of Black bodies, white supremacy, and the appropriation of religion and history to perpetuate colonial ideologies. While he continues to wrestle with the racist ideologies inherent in cultural institutions and social media and still questions his own position within them, he has found his own footing. His relationship with Owen, now on more equal grounds, ends the pattern of idealising and subordinating to older white men. The novel leaves some tension, however, which becomes more explicit when Jesse's friend Jean-Alain addresses prevailing racist dynamics within the gay community and criticises gay white men for perpetuating colonial power dynamics by

fetishizing and exploiting Black bodies, ultimately still positioning gay Black men as "something other, something inferior" (299) and striving for white supremacy. Jesse reacts ambiguously to Jean-Alain's arguments and agrees while simultaneously exempting Owen from these patterns of behaviour.

The most significant factor in Jesse's process of moving beyond the shame that has been instilled in him on several levels is the discovery of his biological father's identity, which also reveals the link between Jesse's narrative and the novel's prologue to the reader. Finding out about his father, a queer Black artist who has died from AIDS—and who turns out to be Norman Alonso's son Robert—provides Jesse with an awareness of his own roots and positionality within the UK's history of immigration that he has been hitherto denied. The realisation that "father and son share a sense of rootlessness and non-belonging common in the Windrush generation and especially acute in their case, as members of dysfunctional families and as black queers" (Yebra 62), allows for a sense of identification and belonging that is integral for Jesse's sense of self-acceptance. What makes the revelation of his father's identity even more poignant is the fact that Jesse has seen and been fascinated by one of his artworks before: a painting of a naked Black man, pricked by a rose he is holding in his hand, with a Christ-like image of blood coursing down from his palm to his forearm. Witnessing his father's art and feeling "somehow, as if it belonged to him" (Mendez 284), allows Jesse to bear "witness to his father's pain" and reclaim it as his own "pain in genealogical and cultural terms as a queer black" (Yebra 64). He comes to terms with his own multifaceted existence and individuality by finally feeling a relation to the past through his father.

Conclusion

Jesse reintegrates into the community he comes from as he forges new meaningful relationships with Robert's sister Glorie and her family and develops a sense of pride in his father's activism during the AIDS crisis. At this point, the fragmented narrative is anchored in time. The novel ends with Jesse's proclamation that "[t]his isn't the past. This is now, and the future" (Mendez 316). Echoing Munt's suggestion that "we cease denying shame's presence [… and] reclaim, embrace and possibly transgress or move beyond shame in a reparative gesture towards self-healing" and her encouragement that "out of the wounded attachments of shame can emerge an energizing and life affirming, even redemptive, queer politics of hope" (O'Rourke x), Jesse is able to acknowledge his own shame along with his father's. This recognition lets him reclaim his own agency, marking the beginning of his liberation from shame.

Rainbow Milk enriches intersectional discourse between queer and postcolonial studies by illustrating how Jesse's experiences as a lower-class gay Black man are shaped by the dynamic interplay of his racial, sexual, religious, and socioeconomic identities. By focusing on the effects of religious indoctrination, particularly within the context of Jehovah's Witnesses as a religious group with rigid discriminatory beliefs and practices, Mendez demonstrates how religious doctrines may intersect with race and sexuality to enforce shame and marginalisation. He expands intersectional discourse beyond secular frameworks by highlighting the unique challenges faced by religiously influenced queer people of colour. Moreover, *Rainbow Milk*'s explicit portrayal of the sensorial aspects of sexuality provocatively confronts readers with the affective impact of shame. In this way, the novel critiques even implicit connections that we may draw between sexuality and shame.

Ultimately, Mendez's novel offers a nuanced understanding of how the affect of shame operates within a nexus of race, religion, class, and sexual orientation. This nexus, while often a source of negative affect, also offers unique spaces for resistance and empowerment. Jesse's success in overcoming feelings of fragmentation and non-belonging, his powerful proclamation of living fully anchored in his own time and space, showcases the potential for these intersecting identities to transcend the limitations of the past and find a sense of agency for a more hopeful future. The novel emphasises the significance of connecting with other Black and queer individuals and highlights the potential of a chosen family, which Jesse builds with his network of partnership, friendships, and selected familial bonds. His reconciliation with the idea of community and his own identity becomes a narrative of repair, not just for himself but for the broader intersections of race, sexuality, and religion. In this way, *Rainbow Milk* reflects not merely a struggle against oppressive structures but also a hopeful reimagining of identity. Mendez opens up reparative possibilities, offers a space for healing, and suggests a future where individuals can reclaim their identities from the forces of shame and marginalization. This way, the novel encourages scholars to explore the possibilities for intersectional healing and agency, advocating for solidarity across different forms of oppression and enriching postcolonial and queer studies with a more hopeful perspective.

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