

Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History

Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood,
Rewriting History:
African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's
Literature in the Twentieth Century

Edited by

Verena Theile and Marie Drews

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P U B L I S H I N G

Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History:
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INTRODUCTION

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND AFRO-CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS: WRITING, REMEMBERING, AND “BEING HUMAN IN THE WORLD”

VERENA THEILE AND MARIE DREWS

“Dear God, dear God. I burned the papers.”

—Toni Morrison, *Paradise*¹

Pungent smoke rising from an oil barrel in the garden marks the conclusion of the sixth section of Toni Morrison’s 1998 novel *Paradise* and alerts its readers to Patricia Best Cato’s destruction of the “history project . . . that began as a gift to the citizens of Ruby” (187). Years of research smolder quietly as the genealogies and historical documents that commemorate her community’s founding, the history of her home, and, consequently, her complex relationship with that home vanish in the fire. Understanding how it is that Patricia stands in her yard, not so far from her mother’s grave, feeding the “[u]pside down family trees” that had grown out of her conversations with members of the Ruby community to the flames, requires understanding the intimate connections between her recollection of home, her recognition of the role Ruby’s women play in shaping and defining that home, and her comprehension of how her relationships with her own mother and daughter impact her interpretation of the town’s story.

Patricia grew up as a witness to Ruby’s self-creating historical narrative, a narrative that constantly re-invents its stories to accommodate deviation and preserve the integrity of the “town’s official history . . . elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday School classes, and ceremonial speeches” (189). Her physical record-keeping derives its stories from letters and bibles and from grandmothers who “liked to reminisce” and

1. Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Plume, 1998), 217 (hereafter cited in text).

formulates a new narrative that extends and revises what was previously agreed-upon as public record (189). It is her archive, her collection of “cardboard files, sheets of paper—both stapled and loose,” that slowly begins to reveal to her that Ruby’s public story differs from its variegated stories and vitally hinges on an idealization of an altered past and an active, intrusive, and exclusive shaping of the future (217). As such, Patricia’s new narrative is “unfit for any eyes except her own” (187), or, as Nancy J. Peterson terms it, it meaningfully manifests the “unspoken story, the unspeakable history of Ruby.”² Predicated on a protective policy of exclusion and a fierce maintenance of pure eight-rock blood lines, Ruby’s history comes at the cost of physical and psychological violence and depends upon the safeguarding of a legacy of entitlement even as it fuels an ever-increasing illusion of community and belonging. Many individual stories have been erased in order to maintain this “official history,” and most of these stories, Patricia realizes, were those of women.

Indeed, as Patricia muses over her archive, watching it burn to cinder in her old barrel in the backyard, she recognizes clearly and, perhaps, for the first time the persistent presence of Ruby’s women as active participants in the town’s past. Despite the fact that their own stories often remain untold, it is the women who direct Ruby’s historical events. Located at the fulcrum of the men’s anxieties over the town’s blood compromises, they orchestrate quietly; they are the prime movers in preserving what is most valuable to the men. Not surprisingly, Ruby, the novel’s fictional setting and Patricia’s home, is a town named after a woman. Ruby died sacrificing herself for her children, the future eight-rock inhabitants of the town that took her name, and for the men who would become guardians of the community’s purity, its heritage, and its memory. Ruby thus forcefully emerges as the progenitrix in the town’s records, and she is celebrated as the epitome of motherhood in its oral narrative. Ruby’s story, the town’s story, is thus a redefinition of history. Women are its conveyors, men its governors. Patricia’s archive tells a story of this township which includes the multiple stories of a community of women rooted in the town’s precarious past and troublesome present, stories that have been shrouded in silence and erased from public records. It is in her archive’s work of uncovering erasures that Patricia recognizes the danger of her findings, and she knows that sacrificing them to the flames is the only way to restore the silence on which the community’s well-being depends.

2. Nancy J. Peterson, *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crisis of Historical Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 87.

Importantly, Patricia’s own familial, and distinctly female, narrative is intricately entwined within the narrative roots of Ruby’s founding. Let us visualize how, prior to dumping her papers into the oil barrel, Patricia sits over them, assessing the relationships forged between the community patriarchs and their wives and rehearsing the founding families’ journey to Oklahoma. When she locates her own genealogical line in the book, her reflection shifts into a direct address of her mother, Delia, one of the women in the community who, in the past, faced the vicious consequences of the town’s protectionism. Now, as nothing more than the memory of a lighter-skinned woman whose marriage to an eight-rock man irrevocably contributed to a lightening of the bloodline, Delia has become part of Peterson’s “unspeakable history of Ruby.” Erased from formal records, Delia and her deviance exist only within Patricia’s private diaries, in her memory. The daughter remembers the mother. But motherhood reaches in both directions in Morrison’s *Paradise*, and so, as Patricia moves two generations down the family tree, she automatically recalls her own daughter’s departure from Ruby; readers see how Patricia’s admiration for her mother’s perseverance is lost to the anger she feels toward her daughter, Billie Delia. Patricia’s personal narrative, as it weaves itself through the branches of the family tree, exemplifies the contentious nature of a woman’s begetting: Patricia, the caring school teacher and devoted daughter, reveals that she almost killed Billie Delia in a fit of rage that was motivated by that mixture of undying love and inconsolable fear that often resides in the innermost rooms of a mother’s heart (203).

Patricia smiles a crooked smile as she sits at her kitchen table and reflects on the fire she has set and the history it has extinguished. Following her sober realization that “[h]ome is no little thing” (213), that history is potent, and that the community’s narrative holds an oppressive power over its inhabitants, she suddenly understands that “everything that worries them [comes] from women” (217). This, she knows, is a secret the men are willing to protect—come what will. Her research may have inadvertently uncovered this deep-seeded secret and her files may have temporarily provided written evidence of a town’s past controlled by men, but her burning of the papers forever ensures her power as a woman and her authority over Ruby’s story and brings to light the women’s collaboration in the men’s efforts of protection and selective preservation. The smoke rising from the lost records thus signifies a female potential that is tempered, a torch that is snuffed out by the same oppressive and competing forces of love and fear that might compel a mother to exact violence against her child.

But while Patricia's act might suggest her complicity in maintaining the "official" narrative, her burning of the documents can also be read as a measure of self-preservation, one that calls on an alternate understanding of a lived historical remembrance. Women are the key to the town's communal life and its continued existence; they are Ruby's quiet gatekeepers as Patricia is the town's secret record-keeper. Andrea O'Reilly's astute assessment that the "women [of Ruby] must remember the daughters and mothers they once were to become the women they wish to become" proves useful to a reading of Patricia's act and reflects the richness of her experience.³ For Patricia, this means that the papers need to be burned, but it also means that her own story and her knowledge of the town's communal history remain hers forever; they live on quietly, in her heart and in her memory. This much Patricia knows. "[U]nspeakable" and "unfit for any eyes except her own," the stories will continue to exist outside of official records, forever safe inside all of Ruby's foremothers, mothers, and daughters, silent and invisible but vibrant and real all the same. Even as the archive burns, Patricia's realization of its truth resurrects each of those who have been written out of the public narrative from the flames and once more allows them and their stories to rise from the ashes. Reassembling these stories in her mind and her heart, Patricia knows that Ruby's history might be forever secret, forever hidden, but she also knows that it is safe, sealed away from Ruby's men and inside of her women.

In much the same way in which Patricia's narrative illustrates the interconnectedness of home, motherhood, and history in the realization of black women's creative energies, the essays in this collection lay bare junctions of domesticity, nurturing, and heritage. As a collection, *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History: African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Literature in the Twentieth Century* traces this interconnectedness and explores various ways in which black women writers demonstrate through their female characters the tumultuous processes of deciphering home and homeland, of articulating the complexities of mothering relationships, and of locating their own personal history within local, national, and international narratives. Through storytelling, black women writers challenge traditional conceptions of those processes that have been established by white writers and dominant critical movements. "Being human in the world," Toni Morrison explains in an interview with Claudia Tate (*Black Women*

3. Andrea O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Mother: A Politics of the Heart* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 153.

Writers at Work, 1983), preoccupies fictional black characters in the same way in which it preoccupies white characters, male and female.⁴ The work of black women writers marks this universal preoccupation—this "being human in the world"—by turning its conventionality into an urgency that betrays it as a commonplace precisely through its forced exceptionalism.

In the hands of black women writers, humanity emerges as something at which their black female characters muse and marvel and after which they quest untiringly. Its achievement liberates them from a dominant narrative that binds them and from a confinement conditioned by their own silence. In her germinal essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1985), Barbara Smith acknowledges the daunting and "overwhelming" task of breaking "such a massive silence."⁵ Smith's own work, of course, has contributed much to the breaking of the silence and to giving a voice to black women's narratives. When she writes of "[b]lack women's existence, experience and culture, and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these," Smith also draws attention to the culture which creates that oppression, "the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness" that carefully controls black female expression.⁶ Safeguarding traditional, discursive boundaries, this "real world" keeps black women's voices "beneath consideration, invisible, unknown."⁷ For black women, finding the safe spaces of home, the beautiful moments of motherhood, and the life giving potential of history is neither a simple nor a straightforward process; it is harsh and complex. African American and Afro-Caribbean writers convey this complexity and complicate normative assumptions in "real world" literature and public culture by visualizing history not as a recounting of facts, but as a fluid process, informed and shaped by individuals with an agenda, with both objectives and prejudices.

Patricia's is not an exceptional narrative, then, but one that articulates a spectrum of experiences; to be valued fully and in the entirety of their scope, these experiences necessitate attention and scholarly engagement. *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History* represents one such effort as it joins existing conversations about African American and Afro-Caribbean women's literature. In their work with black women's texts, scholars have encouraged readers to consider how

4. Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison," Interview with Claudia Tate, in *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1983), 121.

5. Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class, and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Methuen, 1985), 3-18.

6. Smith, 3.

7. Ibid., 3.

each intricate character, each elaborate relationship, intersects with broader narratives of black women's individual and communal experiences.⁸ In particular, Barbara Christian, Carol Boyce Davies, Cheryl Wall, Hortense Spillers, and Hazel Carby have carved out a space in which conversations about black femininity can take place.⁹ But inquiry into both the lived realities and creative representations of black women's experience extends beyond scholarly discourse and includes the public and political estimations of such writer-theorists as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, all of whom are literary pioneers whose fictional work has paved the way for black women writers and whose non-fictional work continues to spearhead black feminist scholarship. Their contribution to the way in which scholars read and experience literature, its composition and its consumption, cannot be stressed enough.¹⁰ In this collection, we attempt to consider both venues of literary, cultural, and scholarly expression: that of the critic-theorist and that of the writer-theorist. Special attention has been given to the intersections of history and home, that is, to the way in which black women's writing captures in its

8. Important texts to be mentioned here include Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *Black Literature & Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1984) and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For recent and continuing scholarship on the role of black women writers in black feminist criticism, see, for example, Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

9. See, especially, Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Cheryl Wall, ed., *Changing Our Own Worlds: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989); and Barbara Christian, *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*, edited by Gloria Bowles, M. Guilia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Additional works by these authors appear in the bibliography.

10. See, for example, Claudia Tate, ed. *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1983); Mari Evans, ed., *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1984); Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (London: Women's Press, 1983); Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar, *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1996); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1992); and Toni Morrison and Carolyn C. Denard, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008).

creation of black female characters the diversity of black women's experiences.

In its historio-theoretical approach, this collection thus most closely advances the goals of Janice Lee Liddel and Yakina Belinda Kemp's *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature* (1999), a text that examines the diversity of writers included in the Africana canon. Following Liddel and Kemp's inclusion of a variety of Africana voices in order to "acknowledge and to affirm the common heritage of all women writers of the African Diaspora," the essays gathered in this collection engage with the works of black women writers from the Caribbean (Jamaica Kincaid and Gisèle Pineau), Guyana (Grace Nichols), and Cuba (María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno), alongside the works of African American women writers (Pauline Hopkins, Toni Morrison, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Audre Lorde, Lalita Tademy, Lorene Cary, Octavia Butler, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sherley Anne Williams). Together, our contributors probe the realms of gender studies, postcolonialism, and post-structural theory and suggest important ways in which to explore connections between home, motherhood, and history across the multifarious narratives of black female writers.¹¹ One equally interdependent on the other, these connections reflect what Simone A. James Alexander acknowledges in the work of Afro-Caribbean women writers as "triangular relationships among the mother, the motherland(s) . . . and the mother country."¹² In its cultural thrust, Alexander's analysis, in fact, reaches beyond the Caribbean Sea and importantly touches upon issues common to black women's experience here, there, and elsewhere.

Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History thus brings together extant, cultural conversations while it initiates new ones and critically engages with texts that bridge black female experiences from across the twentieth century. As demonstrated in the scholarship of Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Roberta Rubenstein, Nancy J. Peterson, and Andrea O'Reilly, conversations about black women's experiences contribute to the discursive process of healing and trace black women's suffering from the dehumanizing experiences of slavery to the continuing violence of racism, sexism, and heterosexism that inhibit black women's quest for a home/place within which they can be safe and whole, where they can "be woman." Black women's narratives, in other words, cannot be confined to

11. Janice Lee Liddell and Yakina Belinda Kemp, eds., *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1999), 7.

12. Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 3.

geographical spaces; they always have to include considerations of home as a domestic, social, and political realm—as the place where women learn to be women. Contributors to this collection, therefore, assess revaluations of history even as they examine representations of imagined futures. By viewing home, motherhood, and history as intrinsically linked in their constructions, they illustrate how coming to know a woman's home—whether that home is articulated as a community of individuals, as a distinct and private place, or as a more abstract imagining of homeland—is contingent upon conversations about a woman's mother, about her as a mother, and about mother figures in general, that is, about all of the women who have shaped a woman's life, her living, and her livelihood.

Seeking to highlight the importance home plays in the processes of black female identity formation, this collection opens with a section entitled “Reclaiming Home”; learning how to become and be a mother and understanding how to preserve stories that narrate a people's heritage and project women's future in history begin in the home. Consequently, the essays within this first section examine black women writers' conversations about home in terms of its communal, familial, geographical, and socio-political associations. Contributing authors show how the formation of home within black women's literary tradition navigates family ruptures and develops even in the absence of motherly figures. Together they recognize home as it is inscribed in the heart, in the mind, and on the body of the woman; they construct home within the context of political engagements; and they view home as part of a larger cultural narrative which embraces neighborhood formation alongside efforts of nation-building.

In her essay “‘A Bleak, Black Wind’: Motherlessness and Emotional Exile in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*,” Maria Mårdberg conceives of the socio-historical context for the identity formation of female protagonists in Kincaid's work as instrumental in the recognition of a safe home/space. This recognition takes place in plain sight of the conspicuous absence of community mothers and points to the legacy of colonization to explain such nurturing voids. For Mårdberg, arguing that the concept of the “othermother” breaks down the link between mothers and the domestic sphere is to highlight female kinship bonds as inescapably tied to historical and political structures.

Extending the processes of finding, formulating, and affirming a home in the midst a community of other women, Régine Michelle Jean-Charles's article, “*Terre et chair: Rape, Land, and the Body in Gisèle Pineau's Macadam Dreams*,” considers the ramifications and complexities of reclamation when the violated black female body is superimposed onto

the home. Arguing that Guadeloupean writer Gisèle Pineau’s use of the cyclone parallel focuses readers’ “attention on the female body in a way that disrupts the traditional image of the postcolonial Caribbean landscape as a feminized space,” Jean-Charles claims that “Pineau reads the body back into the notion of a raped land (*la terre violée*) and inserts female subjectivity by unveiling acts of violence against women and by offering survivor testimonies from victims of violence.”¹³ In this approach toward reading home, the term “land,” as well as its conceptualization, is effectively feminized, thereby allowing the details of female suffering endured during the metaphorical cyclone of a bodily rape to emerge powerfully. Female victims can recover from history and reclaim their “home” only if they allow such merging and acknowledge suffering in all its violence and quintessential unnaturalness.

The communal recognition of home/land alongside the recovery of women’s psychological and bodily home/space and as part of a continual female effort of physical and emotional reclamation is explored further in Jeffrey W. Miller’s essay, “‘All Hail, My Royal Ancestors’: Civic Virtue and Black Nationalism in Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood*.” Miller examines the trope of Africa as home and its implications for black political identity, and he reads Reuel Briggs’s reclamation of Meroe as home/place “as a metaphorical call for . . . national recognition,” for an American acceptance of African Americans as part of American culture, even as they hold the key to a cultural heritage all their own and distinct from Western society.¹⁴ Important for the work of this first section, Miller’s article illustrates a process of continental reclamation as one crucial approach to home-making for African Americans living out the legacy of slavery in the United States.

Narrowing the contextual framework to a consideration of home as it is manifested at the local level—namely, to finding community in one’s immediate neighborhood—Metta Sáma’s essay, “Searching for Comfort: Transformative Imaginations in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” argues that Morrison’s *Sula* sketches Bottom as a black neighborhood in which “diasporic, transformative imaginations” rein free and develop unencumbered by white interference.¹⁵ Through her examination of the characters that populate *Sula*’s fictional community, Sáma explores the complicated experience of retaining individuality amidst communal home living. Specifically, her inquiry into how the characters of Shadrack and Nel, as well as the Peace women, navigate their own individual identities

13. See Jean-Charles, 29.

14. See Miller, 53.

15. See Sáma, 70.

in the process of seeking communal comfort highlights Morrison's narrative structuring. Sáma argues that it is in the method of her telling that Morrison is best able to represent the transformations of her characters and their communities, showing us how being and becoming are intricately tied to the telling and visualizing of one's story.

The essays of the second section, "Remembering Motherhood," invite an engagement with African American and Afro-Caribbean women writers' responses to and reconsiderations of traditionally constructed meanings of motherhood. When we begin the collection with Mårdberg's exploration of home as being surrounded by a community's "othermothers," we cultivate not only an awareness of the various constructions and realities associated with the role of motherhood but we also locate that role—no matter its iteration—as central to the writing and narrating of women's experiences. Shifting our lens in this section from the discourses of home to those of motherhood allows for an exploration of the various connotations and expectations associated with mothers' responsibilities to their children, not only as the supposed bearers of an ethnic identity and a narrative history, but also as the providers of communal care and support. In *Mother Without Child* (1997), Elaine Tuttle Hansen draws on the feminist description of motherhood as a threefold process that commences with "repudiation, recuperation" and that culminates in "an emerging critique of recuperation that coexists with ongoing efforts to deploy recuperative strategies."¹⁶ Applied to black female experiences, the processes of repudiation and recuperation are cast against the background of reclamation. Active in questioning the possibilities of a re-formation of "mother," black women writers labor to promote an inclusive understanding of the complexities of mothering, motherhood, and motherliness in their readers. Woman's subjective experience of the world, be it as progenitrix, mother, or daughter, and often as a combination of all three, lies at the heart of their fictional explorations.

In her essay, "Jessie Fauset's *Comedy: American Style: A Mother's Will to Power*," Erika Baldt argues that the abolition of slavery initiated African American women's quest to reclaim motherhood. The burden and expectation of social uplift by practicing maternity and by nurturing one's own children as a metaphorical extension of an entire race, however, often overshadowed a woman's ability to develop and to maintain her self-identity. Baldt explores the tension inherent in managing this expectation through analyzing Olivia Cary, Fauset's female protagonist. For Baldt,

16. Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5.

Olivia's simultaneous rejection of her blackness and her role as a mother "highlights the ambivalence of motherhood and the dangers inherent in . . . race and gender stereotypes."¹⁷ Being a mother provides Olivia with a way to surpass her ability to "become only that which one is," but it does not equip her with the ability to live with her double denial of self-identity.¹⁸ The incongruence between her created self and her real self destroys all possibilities of existence.

If Baldt's essay asks readers to visualize the dangers of denying one's black female self and to recognize the power and control available to women in the mothering of their children, then Paula Sanmartín's essay, "'We Dreamed of an Archive of the Word': Family Feuds and the Continuous Revision of History in *Simply, Reyita* (*Testimonial Narrative of a Nonagenarian Black Cuban Woman*)," broadens this query through its analysis of the Castillo Bueno women, whose voices affirm their identity as black women (as foremothers, mothers, and daughters) and whose narrative explicitly acknowledges generational ties. Through their intimate discourse, familial and racial validations are initiated and mother and daughter are transformed into active and articulate historical agents of home, culture, and family. *Simply, Reyita*, transcribed by Black Cuban historian Daisy Rubiera Castillo following interviews with her mother, tells the life story of María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno from her African grandmother's arrival in Cuba as a slave until the triumph of the revolution in 1959. By situating the genre of the testimonial at the crossroads of discourses (history/literature, oral/written, single/co-authored), Sanmartín's article demonstrates how this writing inscribes the image of Reyita as a rebel mother within the larger framework of Cuban history even as it focuses on an examination of the dialectic of authorship and mother-daughter relationships.

In response to the iterations of motherhood apparent in public expectations and national narratives, Stephanie Li's essay, "Becoming her Mother's Mother: Recreating Home and the Self in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*," likewise explores the relationship between a mother and her daughter and examines how this relationship impacts the production of black female literature. By trying to understand herself through her mother, Linda, Lorde refashions her mother's legacy and, in the process, validates both her poetic voice and her sexuality. Li maintains that "Linda is different because she is Lorde's mother"; motherhood thus

17. See Baldt, 92.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1901; repr., New York: Random House, 1967), 182.

changed Linda, and Lorde herself emerges as “both the originator and cause of Linda’s difference,” and, by extension, “originator and cause” of her own existence, of her own being, mother to her own mother.¹⁹ By rewriting a line of descent that is informed by the presence of women in general and the primacy of the mother figure in particular, Lorde succeeds in becoming her own originator, Li maintains. In this way, Lorde not only creates a cultural heritage that recognizes her lesbian identity, but she effectively transforms linear models of familial inheritance.

As the final essay in this section, Seretha Williams’s “‘Waiting for the Spider to Come Home’: Mothers and Mothering in Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River*,” takes a similar approach to imagining motherhood. Tademy’s ancestral matriarchs probe the boundaries of mothering as they attempt to rescue their families, and especially their daughters, from the intricate web of race, class, and gender that envelops Louisiana’s Creole culture. Williams asserts that Tademy, through the narrative of her female protagonists, not only reconstructs family history, but also constructs alternative motherhoods and strategies of mothering. Tademy’s *Cane River*, “humanizes the roles of foremothers by revealing their flaws and fallibilities,” Williams argues.²⁰ The novel portrays mothers both as guardians who are willing to jeopardize their self-identity and self-worth for the good of their children and as women whose jealousy and ambition occasionally get in the way of their nurturing.

Within the final section of this collection, entitled “Rewriting History,” essays foreground criticism of black writers’ engagements with history and examine their involvement in the processes of transformative historiography. In “‘Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something’: African-American Women’s Historical Novels” (1990), Barbara Christian recalls a BBC special on Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, during which Walker explains “that her family spoke ‘in whispers’ about certain parts of their history, whispers which she said fascinated her.”²¹ The hushed voices and the curiosity they invoke are what fuel Patricia Best Cato’s documentary efforts. By writing down Ruby’s oral narrative of the past,

19. See Li, 148.

20. See Williams, 179.

21. Barbara Christian, “‘Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something’: African-American Women’s Historical Novels,” in *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*, eds. Gloria Bowles, M. Guilia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 86; first published in Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, eds. *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 326-41.

Toni Morrison’s black female historian first only satisfies her own curiosity, but, by and by, her records reveal a variety of stories, all of which are distinct from both the town’s carefully guarded recorded as well as from its official oral history. Rather inadvertently, the volume increases, turning whispers into clearly perceivable voices that tell stories that should remain unspoken, unheard, unseen. Patricia’s recognition of the voices she has given speech and the questions she has raised leads her to abandon her project, but not before she has internalized her power as a woman and as an historiographer.

As in all of the previous sections of this collection, motherhood is the factor that pulls the collection’s essays together. It is through black women’s understanding of themselves as mothers that home is found, history is written, and mothering made possible. Christian elucidates how black women writers like Morrison and Walker, “in the process of consciously imagining their novels . . . were propelled by the stories their mothers told them about their lives.”²² The essays in this last section draw upon memory as a function of the family and as a means to recollect, reconstruct, and, ultimately, redefine a past which has survived in whispers alone. Cherise A. Pollard’s article, “The Hidden Cost of Freedom: The Strategic Use of Memory and Voice in Lorene Cary’s *The Price of a Child*,” for example, explores how the historical projects of black women novelists give voice to the traumatic, unspoken experience of slave women. Breaking through “the silence of history,” Lorene Cary’s female protagonist, Mercer Gray, exerts agency over the past as she “strategically invokes her memories of slavery to advance the abolitionist cause.”²³ Pollard’s article is unique in that it charts former slave Ginnie Pryor’s transformation into the abolitionist Mercer Gray and captures how “writing black women . . . into history is a particularly political act” that makes possible “personal and communal transformation” crucial to the processes of black feminist historiography.²⁴

A comparable excursion into the vagrancies of black historical memory, memory manipulation, and historiography can be found in Magali Cornier Michael’s essay “Telling History *Other-Wise*: Grace Nichols’ *I Is a Long Memored Woman*.” Nichols’ collection of poems, *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, represents a black woman writer’s conscious process of first recalling, then articulating, and, ultimately, “narrativizing,” as Michael calls it, “an often silenced history.”²⁵ By evoking memories of

22. Christian, 86.

23. See Pollard, 186.

24. Ibid., 206.

25. See Michael, 207.

how the black female body suffered under the duress of slavery, especially during the Atlantic slave trade, Michael draws attention to the difficulties involved in constructing a story from the remnants of a past controlled by slave traders and marked by an absolute absence of agency on the part of this story's subjects. The story recounted by Nichols' volume of poetry, Michael explains, thus insists on the inextricable connection between bodies and memories in the sense that bodies who experienced events will forever continue to experience the past's repercussions. Michael's reading of Nichols' purposeful presentation of multiple histories thus illuminates the poet's alternative and multifaceted narrative and highlights how *I Is a Long Memored Woman* gives voice and face to a past that would otherwise remain disembodied.

Similarly preoccupied with redefinitions of history and the development of alternate historiographies, K. Denea Stewart-Shaheed's article, "Re-Membering Blackness in the Neo-Slave Writings of Octavia Butler and Zora Neale Hurston," emphasizes black women writers' use of time and space as tropes in their works. When placed within the context of non-linear time, the construction of fictive relationships between time periods helps to trace connections between black women characters and their experiences across multiple histories and continents. Stewart-Shaheed maintains that, through their use of the neo-slave narrative, Hurston and Butler seek to re-member America's slave past, that is, black women writers attempt to reclaim the past by re-constituting a more complex representation of slave memory and by populating that memory with people. To Stewart-Shaheed, who in her analysis follows the writings of theorist Kodwo Eshun, "[i]t is not enough to go back to the American colonial past or to envision utopian, alternate futures. Rather," to populate the past and re-member history, "what is required is the incorporation of future, past, and contemporary timelines within the same or complimentary, literary frameworks."²⁶ Ultimately, Stewart-Shaheed maintains, Hurston and Butler employ Afro-futurist techniques in an effort to get around, between, and over the limits imposed on black memory. Through their engagement with time travel, these authors create what Stewart-Shaheed describes as a "counter memory," that is, a memory which effectively re-envisions history inside bodies of the future to re-member the American slaves' past.²⁷

The final essay of this section and the collection as a whole, Marc Steinberg's "*Dessa Rose*: Putting the 'Story' Back into History," is equally

26. See Stewart-Shaheed, 236.

27. Ibid., 236.

concerned with constraints embedded in the historical process of reconstructing a slave past. Steinberg's chief argument rests on the assumption that "Williams radically revises the slave narrative by explicitly showing us the interior life of an ex-slave and by exploring the absolute necessity for a female slave to form female communities in order to transcend her subjugation."²⁸ In his reading, Dessa, the novel's eponymous female protagonist, represents an unspoken and unheard past, one which emerges as the narrator of a story that needs telling. History can thus only be historically complete and accurate when the focus is directed away from "his" so that "story" may surface and past may be spoken and heard, felt and experienced.

As a whole, the essays in *Reclaiming Home, Remembering Motherhood, Rewriting History* offer a critical valuation of fictional characters that face trials not unlike those Morrison's Patricia Best Cato encounters as she seeks to make sense of her personal and communal stories at the same time as she considers how she is implicated in their creation, their telling, and their destruction. By engaging with a broad geographical and temporal spectrum of black women's literature and through examining their characters' projects of reclamation, re-memory, and revision, the contributors to this collection confront questions about home, motherhood, and history similar to those that readers of *Paradise* are called upon to ask when they grapple with the complexity of Patricia's decision. As their essays sketch the scope of black female living, being, and suffering, they recognize black women's experiences as unique and individual even as they acknowledge crucial commonalities between black womanhood and aim to contribute to a fuller, richer picture of woman's process of "being human in the world."

28. See Steinberg, 250.

PART I:
RECLAIMING HOME

CHAPTER ONE

“A BLEAK, BLACK WIND”: MOTHERLESSNESS AND EMOTIONAL EXILE IN JAMAICA KINCAID’S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER*

MARIA MÅRDBERG

Unlike many psychoanalysts, however, feminists conceptualize the families in which we first experience relations with others as constituted by more than the dyads (or triads) of many psychoanalytic accounts. Families and individuals are located within wider contexts of social relations. Some of these relations, for example, race and gender, are structured by and through domination. Questions of power are essential aspects of the constitution and analysis of subjectivity. . . . The possibility and plausibility of many theoretical claims and social practices rest in part on the evasion, denial, or repression of how important human attachment is in the constitution of the subject and culture more generally The first experience of such attachments and their power occurs in early childhood, especially in mother-child relations. In male-dominant cultures the importance of such relations is simultaneously romanticized, devalued, denied, repressed, and placed firmly outside the public realm.

— Jane Flax, *Disputed Subjects*¹

Afro-Caribbean author Jamaica Kincaid’s 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* establishes the practice of motherhood as socially situated

1. Jane Flax, *Disputed Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 117-18.

and mother-child relations as fundamentally important not only to the individual, but also to the community at large.² Kincaid's novel dramatizes maternal loss and abandonment, and it posits the presence or absence of an othermother or community mother as crucial to female identity formation. *The Autobiography of My Mother* chronicles the story of Xuela Claudette Richardson, a motherless girl's path to isolation from family and community, and, particularly, her inability to mother. The violent legacy of Dominica's colonization in the 20th century is crucial to understand Xuela's nurturing shortcomings and her self-centeredness. In Kincaid's novel, an interdependence of psychoanalytical and postcolonial perspectives explain isolation and exile in the black female subject.

In literary texts by African American women writers, mothering has often been represented as located in a larger arena than what is customarily posited as the private sphere. Particularly, the figures of the community mother, who nurtures and leads the community as a whole, and the othermother, who nurtures children regardless of whether or not they are biologically hers, manifest such widened maternal responsibility. Many studies identify the centrality of the othermother in African cultures. "Cross-culturally," Patricia Hill Collins states, "the high status given to othermothers and the cooperative nature of child-care arrangements among bloodmothers and othermothers in Caribbean and other Black diasporic societies gives credence to the importance that people of African descent place on mothering."³ The fact that the community mother is a persistent nurturing literary figure points to her enduring importance in the real and imaginative life of African American women.⁴ Often combining political activism with her nurturing skills, the figure of the empowering community mother invokes a wider definition of mothering as a community centered practice. In African American and Afro-Caribbean women's writing, the community mother is needed not only to resist the violence of racist and sexist abuse but also to build alternative kinship ties to those of racist and patriarchal ones. Both the othermother and the community mother, therefore, challenge traditional definitions of mothering as confined solely to the territory of the 'private' home, the domestic sphere.

Feminist intersectional critique of notions of race- and class-less gender has shown that motherhood is integral to the workings of the social

2. Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (London: Vintage, 1996), (hereafter cited in text as AB).

3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 181.

4. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 189-92.

and the public and that to posit a dichotomous split between the public and private spheres is erroneous. "Since work and family have rarely functioned as dichotomous spheres for women of color, examining racial ethnic women's experiences reveals how these two spheres actually are interwoven," Collins claims.⁵ For mothers in slavery the absence of a private home conditioned their experience of mothering and even, in dominant discourses, excluded them from the categories *women* and *mothers*.⁶ Slavery also created new forms of family; in response to dehumanization, African-inspired extended kin units were formed based on experience of oppression rather than blood. Moreover, as privatized motherhood was never an option, communal child care became a necessity.⁷

In my reading of Kincaid's novel, images of the othermother and of the community mother emerge as deeply interconnected in that Xuela needs a surrogate, an othermother, to take the place of her dead birth mother and to mobilize political opposition against oppression on Dominica. It is a critical commonplace to underline how African American mothering forms a powerful alternative to white Westernized mothering in the repressive, white, patriarchal, nuclear family. However, several African American women writers have also explored how mothers of African ancestry fail.⁸ In depicting failing potential othermothers, Kincaid's novel marks colonized female subjects as fundamentally unfit for such a task. No othermother or spiritual, ancestral presence can guide Xuela into a family/community/nation. Leadership which combines mobilization and mothering is missing in Xuela's life, and this lack has grave consequences for her as well as for the community as a whole. Unmothered, little Xuela must fend for herself, unable to establish an alternative sense of self, family, and community. In the end, Xuela's story affirms her fundamental isolation in a community that is also marked by isolation.

5. Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood" in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 46. For intersectional critiques, see *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983).

6. See Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

7. See Collins, *Black Feminist*, 48-50.

8. See Toni Morrison's first novel from 1970: *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). See, also, Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin, 1983) and Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: The Women's Press, 1983).

Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* belongs in a tradition of writing in which community ties and community mothering are crucial to the well-being of the individual and the community. For example, Laura Niesen de Abruna brings up "the centrality of either bonding or the absence of bonding in the texts of Caribbean women writers, especially in the literary focus on emotional inter-dependence of mothers and daughters, granddaughters and grandmothers, friends and sisters."⁹ My study foregrounds the conspicuous absence of community mothers and demonstrates that the legacy of colonization combined with patriarchal ideologies explains the absence of nurturing *gestalts*. The absence and failure of potential othermothers in Xuela's personal and private narrative act to further the traditional female kinship bonds as inescapably tied to historical and political structures. In the process, the possible separation of the domestic and the public sphere for American women of African ancestry is questioned. In this Caribbean novel, mothering is fully determined and even prevented or negated by its socio-political contexts—the patriarchal society on Dominica with its colonial legacy of slavery. My reading of the potential othermothers in Kincaid's novel demonstrates a complex interaction between socio-political forces and extended mothering; as I will show, it is this interaction that determines the outcome of the female protagonist's trajectory. In this analysis, the daughter's female object relations are in focus; colonial racist and patriarchal misogynist ideologies become mediated and realized in object-relations and, therefore, internalized in developmental processes. As such, social reality is not transmitted to physic reality in a simplistic manner.

Kincaid thus writes into an existing web of narratives in which Toni Morrison's important novel *Beloved* from 1987 exemplifies how maternal loss and community mothering are intricately linked within the context of a specific African American maternal history.¹⁰ Community mother Baby Suggs is a former slave who nurtures the members of the community, lavishing food and love onto them, and, as a spiritual leader, she urges them to lovingly recode their (mentally) enslaved bodies in her nurturing space:

9. Laura Niesen de Abruna, "Family Connections: Mother and Mother Country in the Fiction of Jean Rhys and Jamaica Kincaid," in *Modern Critical Views: Jamaica Kincaid*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998), 14.

10. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1992). Other examples of literary narratives in which community mothers figure include Alice Walker, *Meridian* (London: Women's Press, 1982), Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (London: Virago, 1983) and Sapphire, *Push* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996).

‘Here,’ Baby Suggs said, ‘in *this here place*, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. . . . *You* got to love it, *you*!’¹¹

Baby Suggs draws attention to the creation of an alternative space, “this here place,” to what bell hooks would call “the home place . . . [a] site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist.”¹² Significantly, in *Beloved* “the home place” is a beautiful place in the woods, removed from white society. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs, “an unchurched preacher,” can lead her community in a resistant reading of their bodies and minds.¹³ With her speech, she heals their bodies, bodies that have been dismembered by the reality of slavery and its discursive disfigurement. In a typical manner, she mothers her community, combining emotional care and spirituality with political consciousness-raising.

Without a doubt, “[c]ollective practices can result in individual injuries: Through the denigration of one’s collective identity in the public sphere, individuals in a group may lose self-confidence and internalize hateful images of themselves,” as Seyla Benhabib claims.¹⁴ Against such denigration Collins holds up motherwork as a model of resistance to highlight the interdependence between individual identity and “the collective self-determination of one’s group.”¹⁵ The purpose of mothering is to encourage the development of self-respect in children at risk of internalizing devaluing imagery, partly by invoking alternative discourses and frames of reference already present. Benhabib explains that

11. Morrison, *Beloved*, 88 (my emphasis added in first sentence).

12. bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 42.

13. Morrison, *Beloved*, 87.

14. Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 51.

15. Collins, “Shifting the Center,” 47-48. Collins uses the term motherwork “to soften the existing dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood that posit rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as individual autonomy and identity growing from the collective self-determination of one’s group.”

[t]here is never a single culture, one coherent system of beliefs, significations, symbolizations, and practices, that would extend ‘across the full range of human activities.’ . . . [A]t any point in time there are competing collective narratives and significations that range across institutions and form the dialogue of cultures.¹⁶

Resistant mothering typically operates also outside the home. Evidently, Baby Suggs needs to take her community to the Clearing to ‘clear’ their minds of racist ideology. Envisioned as a secluded and sheltered place surrounded by woods, “this here place” is nevertheless “wide-open.”¹⁷ Its openness suggests that in this “home place” competing significations and symbolizations can more easily be set to work to counter racism and that they are voiced by the community mother. Connections with such a character may dramatically increase the main characters’ chances of finding self and community in the end. The expansion of the practice of mothering is thus implicit in the representations of potential othermothers in Xuela’s narrative.

The Other Potential Mothers

My Mother died at the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind. I could not have known at the beginning of my life that this would be so; I only came to know this in the middle of my life, just at the time when I was no longer young and realized that I had less of some of the things I used to have in abundance and more of some of the things I had scarcely had at all. And this realization of loss and gain made me look backward and forward: at my beginning was this woman whose face I had never seen, but at my end was nothing, no one between me and the black room of the world. I came to feel that for my whole life I had been standing on a precipice, that my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself. (AB, 3-4)

For Xuela the loss of her mother at the moment she enters the world becomes an overwhelming aspect of her identity. The passage above, which opens her narrative, establishes how her story of herself is rooted in her loss of her mother. Xuela’s narrative is a lament over a lost mother-daughter relationship and an expression of grief over a lost world, a world that this primary loss of maternal unity denies her. Her world becomes a

16. Benhabib, *Claims of Culture*, 60.

17. Morrison, *Beloved*, 88, 87.

“false paradise” because the maternal narratives are false, as we shall see, in the sense that they are imbued with colonial and patriarchal discourses that diminish and devalue the young female subject (AB, 32). Xuela conducts her life as if standing on a precipice, from which she risks falling into an abyss. The void her mother should have occupied is to her “a bleak, black wind,” and she has to face “the black room of the world” unsheltered. Black in Xuela’s narrative becomes encoded as a sign of loss, mourning, and endless longing.

Mothering in Xuela’s world is all-determining as the most important experience for a child and crucial in any life:

Observing any human being from infancy, seeing someone come into existence, like a new flower in bud, each petal first tightly furled around another, and then the natural loosening and unfurling, the opening into a bloom, the life of that bloom, must be something wonderful to behold . . . [T]he pleasure for the observer, the beholder, is an invisible current between the two, observer and observed, beheld and beholder, and I believe that no life is complete, no life is really whole, without this invisible current, which is in many ways a definition of love. No one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself in defiance and out of despair, because there was nothing else. Such a love will do, but it will only do, it is not the best kind. (AB, 56-57)

In Xuela’s dreams, her mother is an angel descending from heaven but Xuela can only see her heels; the comfort of her face, of being locked into and validated by her gaze is forever denied her: “No one observed and beheld me” (AB, 56). Despite her desperate need for her mother, Xuela can find no adequate substitute in her community because it cannot provide one. In her study of object-relations in mothering, Nancy Chodorow makes an important point that is directly applicable to Xuela: “The character of the infant’s early relation to its mother profoundly affects its sense of self, its later object-relationships, and its feelings about its mother and about women in general.” Xuela experiences rejection and abandonment in her early relations with women and, following Chodorow, so defines herself negatively; the quality of her self-love and self-hate originate primarily in these relationships and affect all her later relationships.¹⁸

The repeated denial of mothering is investigated in the text as Xuela explores her relationships with four potential othermothers: Ma Eunice,

18. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 77, 78-79.