

Maternal Genealogies and the Legacy of Slavery in Caribbean Women's Historical Fiction

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This presentation surveys contemporary women's historical novels which revisit and rewrite the history and institution of slavery in the Caribbean. While scholarship (Barker; Halloran; Kyiiripuo Kyoore) highlighting and tracing the trajectory of the Caribbean historical novel is becoming more visible, a focus on both gender and women's novels is underrepresented. As primarily it is women writers who are taking on the burden of offering alternative accounts of the past, these novels deserve more visibility and recognition in the genre. I argue that women's novels rewrite hegemonic nationalist history/masculinist master narratives by centralizing a maternal genealogy, and today I am going to focus on the family tree, included as paratext in each novel. Envisioning a distinct maternal genealogy, disclosed through African-Caribbean voices and figures in the Caribbean historical novel, has the potential to challenge historical erasures, silences, violence, and political exclusion both in the past and in the present. The novels surveyed in this presentation trace the lives of several women within a matriarchal family; beginning with portraits of nineteenth-century plantation life they trace the legacy of slavery well into the twentieth century. Each novel offers an inventive revision of slavery by putting women's lives at the forefront: Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Téliumée Miracle* written in 1972 in French [translated into English as *The Bridge of Beyond*] is set in the French West Indian island of Guadeloupe while Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* written in 1999 in English is set in the English West Indian island of Trinidad. To reiterate, women's historical

novels, like these, speak from the margins and spaces of silence within history and the genre and, thus, offer a powerful counter narrative to official history and canonical literature.

Maternal genealogies, a distinct characteristic of contemporary Caribbean women's historical fiction, suggest gender and a link to one's maternal past, not the national context – the defining feature of traditional historical fiction – is more important in shaping the female protagonist's identity and in empowering her challenges to patriarchal authority. Both novels corroborate Luce Irigaray's definition of a maternal genealogy:

There is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mother's side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters. Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (44)

A leading authority on the woman's historical novel, Diana Wallace likewise contends that the genre is a most suitable medium for women writers because "women have been violently excluded both from 'history' (the events of the past) and from 'History' (written accounts of the past)" ("Letters" 25). Traditionally, women's history has been considered an oxymoron, with women's lives and voices being characterized as romantic, private, unhistorical or ahistorical,

misrepresentative, inaccurate, fantastical, anti-nationalist, even escapist (Wallace, *Woman's* 15).¹ Focusing on female protagonists, comprised of daughters, mothers and grandmothers, subjects patriarchal values to a gender analysis and creates a sense of gendered consciousness, outside of and within these texts. Acknowledging and studying this contemporary corpus, which rewrites and reimagines the history and legacy of slavery via a maternal genealogy, is, therefore, imperative for resisting and remedying current masculinist norms and scholarship.

A native of Guadeloupe, Schwarz-Bart wrote her novel during a time in which a distinct Caribbean writing was emerging, but the genre of historical fiction remained unpopular. Critics, too did not seem to know what to make of this rich and complex work of art, because it “cannot be contained in a strict linear narrative” as Jamaica Kinkaid notes in her introduction to the English translation of *The Bridge of Beyond* (12). Her experimental take on the traditional historical novel, defined by “political events and the deeds of ‘great men’” (Von Dirke 417), combines French and Creole, and concentrates on her island’s customs, history, landscape, and spirituality from the perspective of females.² Schwarz-Bart’s literary contribution and feminist intervention, by showcasing a domestic novel as heroic, however, paved the way for now, other, canonical Caribbean women historical novelists such as Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kinkaid,

¹ By propagating a national past, a collective mythology, and a unified identity, master narratives predominately ignore the lives and contributions of women; thus while female political figures may be known (e.g., Alvarez’s novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* which imagines the lives of the Mirabal sisters who were murdered by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo on November 25, 1960), working-class women, who would have experienced some form of public life, are rarely deemed worthy of historical remembrance. In many cases, women’s lives are recorded and referenced solely in relation to the achievements of male family members.

² Schwarz-Bart’s novel is pioneering because it marks one of the earliest forays into the genre, and she does not adhere to the traditional parameters of historical fiction. The hallmarks of the traditional Anglo-European novel are Walter Scott’s works, which are echoed in early Caribbean works too, like *Drums of Destiny* (1947) by Peter Bourne and Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), which chronicle the Haitian Revolution and Henri Christophe, a former slave who became Haiti’s first king. Traditional historical novels, as Herb Wylie suggests, attempt to assert an authentic and serious identity and history, independent of colonialism and other national influences (6).

Edwidge Danticat, Rosario Ferré, Julia Alvarez and so on.³ Dionne Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* is certainly indebted to earlier Caribbean texts like Schwarz-Bart's and her work enters into a dialogue with these predecessors but it also advances the conversation in terms of the role of the maternal in history and slavery and in how all three shape one's sense of being Caribbean, particularly as she extends her work to those living in the diaspora.

That both novels open with a family tree, which concentrates on the African-Caribbean slave woman, supports my claims. More than a handy resource to keep track of characters, the family tree serves multiple functions such as 1) highlighting "the erasure of matrilineage" (Wallace, *Woman's* 98) in official history and thereby calling into question the historical records' system of and criteria for valuation; 2) suggesting a notion of *esprit Caribbean* that dissolves national and linguistic borders; and 3) disclosing both authors' critical black feminist frameworks for their novels. Rewriting Caribbean history can be only sustained through recognizing the intersection of race and gender exemplified in re-centering the African-Caribbean mother figure. Thus, Schwarz-Bart's and Brand's works are feminist counter-texts to discourses which vilify the African-Caribbean mother figure, portraying her in derogatory stereotypes like the traitor, the mad-woman, the trouble-maker, the ingrate, or the "breeder" (Davis 7). In reclaiming the mother, these novels, however, free the African-Caribbean mother from the confines of literature and history, and offer innovative portrayals of her, as visible, courageous, and powerful. This is evident, even at first glance, when the reader learns that Minerva, a former slave possibly born in Guadeloupe, begins the line of Lougandor women in

³ The exception is Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) which rewrites Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, as Caroline Rody has argued, from a postcolonial perspective but scholars were initially reluctant to claim Rhys as Caribbean.

Schwarz-Bart's work and Marie Ursule, originally from Guadeloupe, founds her line of several generations in Trinidad.

The African-Caribbean mother poses a great risk to traditional, patriarchal-imperial fiction and history because, at the bottom of the social spectrum, she exposes the constructed nature of hierarchies and their susceptibility to change. Consider the fact that in recent history Schwarz-Bart's name has been removed from works she co-authored with her former husband. Writing the African mother is thus essential to reclaiming Caribbean fiction and history. That the mother's life legitimizes the authors' ancestry both in history and in literature is clear. She is a mother to her daughters within the texts but a mother to the authors outside of the texts. The novels, in restoring the mother's life, also clear a space for scholarship on African-Caribbean women. For how can you write about and research what has been written out of history? How can you claim your space in the literary canon if your name as author is deleted and your ancestors have been uprooted, kidnapped, enslaved, murdered, and dispossessed? There is a sense that history begets literature, especially in the genre of historical fiction.

As maternal history is often designated non-history, to use Édouard Glissant's term, it explains that which Rody identifies as a "Caribbean romance with maternal history" (Rody 109). This commitment to maternal history is demonstrated by both authors' choice of fiction and clarifies their inclusion of a family tree beginning with a slave woman who gives birth to one child only. Marie Ursule gives birth to her daughter, Bola, in 1821 in Brand's text while Minerva has a daughter named Toussine, later known as Queen Without A Name, sometime around 1848, the year in which Minerva "was freed by the abolition of slavery" (1). Marie Ursule and Minerva defy the norm, which placed a high value on the "slave woman's reproductive capacity," thereby exploiting her ability to replenish the plantation's work force (Davis 6-7). As Angela Y. Davis

notes, however, the “ideological exaltation of motherhood –as popular as it was during the nineteenth century –did not extend to slaves. ...Slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments “guaranteeing the growth of the slave labour force” (Davis 7). Brand and Schwarz-Bart, however, in their revisionist novels refuse the plantation owner a labour force, give back the role of mothering that has been denied, and challenge the mother-daughter separation commonly found in slave narratives (historical and fictional) e.g., Levy’s *The Long Song*. The genealogy is one way of re(s)taking this forbidden relationship and lost heritage.

Gil Zehava Hochberg, writing on Schwarz-Bart’s historical novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* and Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* claims that: “With the absence of the symbolic patriarchal figure ... ‘the monstrosity’ of a strong maternal figure (‘with the capacity to name’) offers a radical identity position for ... women and an alternative narrative of female empowerment, based on the specific (destruction of) the ... family during slavery” (2). Indeed, men play minor roles in both novels. For instance in *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, Schwarz-Bart refers to Toussine’s father as “The Negro from Dominica” who runs away after he learns Minerva is pregnant. Male behaviour towards women in both novels is also deeply problematic; men leave their women, beat them, steal from them, rape them, cheat on them, disgrace them, and abuse their power.

The cruelty and hardships the Lougandor women endure accentuates their courage and dependency on each other for support and survival. This is the case when the protagonist Télumée, at the beginning of Part Two, is sent to live with her grandmother, Toussine, the second most important character in the novel. Télumée’s mother, Victory sends her daughter away because she has met a womanizing man named Haut-Colbi. There is an insinuation that, had Télumée stayed with her mother, Haut-Colbi would have sexually molested her: Schwarz-

Bart writes: “That god was a great connoisseur of feminine flesh, or at least that was his reputation. The first thing my mother did was send me away, remove my little ten-year-old flesh to save herself the trouble, a few years later, of trampling on the womb that betrayed her. So she decided to pack me off to my grandmother at Fond-Zombi, a long way away from her Carib” (56). Télumée’s move away from a lecherous man who in the future would impregnate her signals a distinct narrative break in the novel from Part 1 “My People” to Part 2 “The Story of My Life,” but it also serves to mark Télumée’s transition from girlhood into womanhood, and a leaving of the colonial plantocracy for the wilderness. She is also retracing the steps of her grandmother who as a young widow first came to Fond Zombi: these transitions are symbolized by the Bridge of Beyond, which they must literally cross to get to Toussine’s home in Fond-Zombi.

The name Fond-Zombi further indicates a liminal place, in which, much like the genre of historical fiction, the living mix with the dead, or where the dead are alive. The presence of Télumée’s grandmother even after her death supports this thinking. Near the end of the novel, an elderly Télumée, living on her own in a little village near Fond-Zombi says: “Then I think not about death but about the living who are gone, and I hear the sound of their voices, and it is as if I saw the various shades of their lives ...and I try to find the thread of my life too. ... I think of the injustice in the world, and of all of us still suffering and dying silently of slavery after it is finished and forgotten. ...By my moonlight lamp I look through the shadows of the past at the market, the market where my people stand, and I lift the lamp higher to look for the face of my ancestor” (260). Schwarz-Bart ends her novel with Télumée reflecting peacefully on her life and death asserting, “East winds have buffeted and soaked me; but I am still a woman standing on my own two legs, and I know a Negro is not a statue of salt to be dissolved in the rain... Sun

risen, sun set, the days slip past and the sand blown by the wind will engulf my boat. But I shall die here, where I am, standing in my little garden. What happiness!” (264). These comments, which end the novel, resonate with the original French title which indicates Télumée’s resiliency against adversity (Mortimer 95). Likewise, mirroring the family tree at the beginning of the text: she stands, firm as a tree, with her arms branching out and her feet taking root. This is the same image we are confronted with at the beginning of the novel.

Schwarz-Bart writes:

“A man’s country may be cramped or vast according to the size of his heart. I’ve never found my country too small, though that isn’t too say my heart is great. And if I could choose it’s here in Guadeloupe that I’d be born again, suffer and die. Yet not long back my ancestors were slaves on this volcanic, hurricane-swept, mosquito-ridden, nasty-minded island. But I didn’t come into the world to weigh the world’s woe. I prefer to dream, on and on, standing in my garden, just like any other old woman of my age, till death comes and takes me as I dream, me and all my joy”

(1). The novels’ genealogies suggest both the cyclic time of nature and the cyclic nature of time, which resonates with the maternal and rebirth as Télumée’s opening lines suggest. Unlike linear, teleological history, these maternal narratives return to their origins as a source of strength and life-giving.

Brand’s novel, like Schwarz-Bart’s, resists severing the past from the present and daughters from grandmothers. The dead inhabit reality. Just as Schwarz-Bart’s work comes full circle, so too does Brand’s emphasized by her title and the image of the moon, a symbol of maternity, in her title. The spirit of Marie Ursule who having died in 1824 visits her daughter’s namesake and the youngest descendent, Bola in the 1990s. The young Bola, living in Trinidad on her own, is considered clinically insane because like Télumée, she communicates with her dead

grandmother. Young Bola's dwelling in the refuge of the past, complete with maternal ghosts, suggests living with ghosts is preferable to an existent patriarchal colonial society which deliberately forgets them, justifying such forgetting of non history as logical. Unable to function in this post-colonial, patriarchal society, Bola delves deeper and deeper into the past; she is imprisoned by the past, which arguably mimics the authors' quests to exorcize their own troubled past via fiction.

Young Bola envisions her grandmother at several key times in the novel. Most importantly, however, is that her great-great grandmother Marie Ursule also arrives. "A lady, came limping to our house as if one foot was sore. ... She had a heavy ring around her ankle and a rope around her throat. I loosened the rope, I fanned her as I had fanned our mother when the sun was too hot" (285). That Marie Ursule is depicted with the ring around her ankle (her punishment for an attempted rebellion in 1819) speaks to the enduring physicality of slavery. In the first chapter of the novel, which begins a few years after Marie Ursule has had her ring removed, she recounts the memory of her pain: "But the memory of that ring of iron hung on, even after it was removed. A ghost of pain around her ankle" (4). In a sense, Marie Ursule is a ghost of pain and "slavery can be looked upon as a system which has permanently altered the black body to the point that not even Marie Ursule's phantom can be free of the fetters of her earthly bondage" (Dhar 40). Furthermore, Nandini Dhar speculates that "the ring embodied slavery itself" (41), and as an artifact of history serves to remind both author and reader that one cannot forget the brutality of slavery. Like the maternal ghosts, former slaves who haunt their descendants, slavery continues to haunt the genre and its readers. It is the work of female descendants, like Schwarz-Bart and Brand, and by implication the reader, to free their maternal

heritage from this yoke; symbolized when the young Bola loosens the noose at Marie Ursule's neck.

Reifying the link between fiction and history and the necessity for invention when it comes to women's historical novels, generally, but even more so for slave narratives, both authors draw on historical figures. The tale of Schwarz-Bart's eponymous protagonist, "is a fictional autobiography, inspired by an old Guadeloupean woman (Stephanie Priccin) who had fascinated and intrigued the author during her childhood" (Wallace 428). Meanwhile, Brand claims in her acknowledgements that after reading V.S. Naipaul's *The Loss of El Dorado: A History*, she "found the story of Thisbe who in 1802 was hanged, mutilated and burnt, her head spiked on a pole, for the mass deaths by poisoning on an estate. At her hanging she was reported to have said, 'This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered.' She became my character Marie Ursule." Marie Ursule is a resilient figure who sacrifices herself and poisons all of the other slaves in 1824 in order to end their suffering and potentially improve future black lives, like the young Bola's, on the island.

Prior to the mass suicide, Marie Ursule allows for one conceit: she saves her young daughter, Bola. Brand excludes the girl's biological father from the family tree. He remains unnamed and unknown. Not even an empty dash marks his presence. A possible reason for this willful exclusion could be that the father's child is Marie Ursule's owner and master, M. de Lambert and that this violent history is too painful or difficult to remember. Most likely, however, is that the father is another slave named Kamena because he is included in the genealogy, though he is not directly linked as Bola's father. Brand's placement of Marie Ursule at the beginning of her long line of descendants is therefore a way of refusing to forget her and by doing so apotheosizes her. Rivalling the traditional, singular, paternal Christian monotheistic

deity, Marie Ursule, a black female, a mother, a slave, is given impressive power –her existence certainly continues to influence and shape the present and future of Trinidadians and the Caribbean diaspora but even more so, her descendants continue to influence and shape the past of Caribbean people. This permits one to read Marie Ursule’s pregnancy and Bola’s birth as a kind of parthenogenesis, a literal and metaphorical virgin creation that centralizes and mythologizes the African slave maternal figure within Caribbean history and fiction.

The erasure of the father throws into sharp relief the violent exclusion the African mother has traditionally suffered. Marie Ursule’s name, like Minerva Lougandor’s, is not even her own. Like the island which is forced on the slave, so too is the master and his name – it is the strength of these characters, however, demonstrated in their queen-like appellations such as Minerva, Victory, and Regina, which transforms these enforced spaces and names, over-time into their own. This reclaiming of space supports Dolace McLean’s claim that “Lougan” in Senegalese translates as a plot of land (106); for the land and names which have been lost and forbidden are slowly, albeit under difficult conditions, appropriated by the women in the novel evident in Télumée standing in her garden. Similarly to not knowing anything of Minerva’s origins, any knowledge of Marie Ursule’s date of birth or her parents is either omitted or unknown. Whether Marie Ursule has been born in Africa or the Caribbean is unclear too– which highlights not only omissions in the historical record but also Schwarz-Bart’s and Brand’s refusal to separate the Caribbean mother figure from the African mother figure. Minerva and Marie Ursule, the Caribbean slaves in these texts, are simultaneously an African daughter-mother and a Caribbean daughter-mother, emphasizing contiguity.

Brand’s fictional writing on the historical maternal, like Schwarz-Bart’s, clearly delves into memory as a means to disrupt the vicious repetition of the slave’s existence. On the morning

in which she murders her fellow slaves and in turn is murdered by her master, Marie Ursule clairvoyantly sees her future generations. In one particular example, she perceives the abolishment of slavery and that “The lives of her great-great-grandchildren, their lives would spill all over floors and glass cases and the verandas and streets in the new world coming. Their hearts would burst” (20). She foresees her relatives living scattered, separated from their maternal ancestry and maternal homeland, Trinidad. Marie Ursule reveals a version of the untold African-Caribbean past, but her words also foreshadow the lives of her descendants –her survivors, all of whom are haunted, even if unwittingly, by slavery (Caruth 4).

Hochberg too sees the relation between history and personal memory along maternal lines:

By assigning mother [...] the role of a ‘medium’ through which an alternative narrative emerges as a direct confrontation with history, ‘woman’ (as mother) is aligned with memory as an alternative to history. This promising role of the mother is promoted through a gendered mobilization of the radical division between ‘history’ and ‘memory.’
(2)

Hochberg recognizes the powerful role mothers play in women’s historical novels like Schwarz-Bart’s and Brand’s which are centered on the lives of black slaves in the Caribbean but what are we to make of the fact that the youngest descendants, Bola and Télumée choose not to be mothers? The genealogy ends arguably because both authors refuse mythologizing or monumentalizing the maternal.

To conclude, Marie Ursule knows full well that her life as a slave does not end with her: the trauma of slavery will persist for generations to come. As in *Pluie et vent sur Télumée*

Miracle recalling the maternal African-Caribbean female slave is paramount towards healing. A willful forgetting of the maternal, and denying her a role in history, that is relegating her to the realm of non history, to haunting the margins, makes moving forward impossible. Yet, Marie Ursule's and Minerva's lives, like few female black slaves can, cannot simply be inserted into the grand master narrative of History; a paradigm shift of what and who constitutes history is necessary. Rody identifies the figure of the mother-of-forgetting in Caribbean women's historical novels as representing "dispossession, homelessness, and historylessness" (110), which echoes Brand's and Schwarz-Bart's suggestion that the forgetting of history is a political luxury, and until the African-Caribbean slave woman's past has been properly acknowledged, a deliberate forgetting, a letting go of the colonial past (Dhar 30) is neither possible nor desirable. The legal abolishment of slavery, the novels contend, is not enough to disrupt the detrimental impacts (psychical and physical) the past has had and continues to have on the lives of generations. A resurrection of the maternal, of non history, symbolized in the African Caribbean mother figure, her family tree, and her literary successors is necessary in order for the Caribbean to heal. The Caribbean woman's historical novel is thus a counter-novel and as such it constitutes a hauntingly powerful resistance literature.

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