

CARIBBEAN WOMEN AND THE CRITIQUE OF EMPIRE: BEYOND
PATERNALISTIC DISCOURSES ON COLONIALISM

By

Jennifer Bagneris

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Professor Dana Nelson

A question often asked by those sensitive to gender, race, and postmodernist discourse is: where are the women in the theorizing of post-coloniality? Although there are growing numbers of titular identifications of post-colonial feminist discussions, it seems so far that the discourse of post-coloniality is not, at this point in history, overly populated by “post-colonial women.”

- Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*

I. Introduction

“Where are the women?” This is a question I’ve found myself asking on several occasions, a question which has been met with resounding echoes from scholars across numerous academic disciplines for whom this absence is all too noticeable, persistent, and systematically maintained. As Carole Boyce Davies illustrated in 1994 with her influential work *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, there is a wealth of possibilities for new analyses within the study of literature and history when more substantial consideration is given to cultural, linguistic, and gender differences. Additionally, Davies work does not simply insist on an incorporation of gender within discussions of post-coloniality, but also demonstrates the necessity for further scrutiny of the terminology used to critically approach categories of difference. As such, Davies approaches a term like “post-colonial” with caution, asserting its inaccuracy as a “premature formulation” which fails to account for places in the world where colonial relationships remain in existence or where a colonizer is still actively present (i.e. Curacao and the Netherlands Antilles, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, Guadeloupe, Northern Ireland, and Palestine).¹ Premature though it may be, post-coloniality as discussed within

¹ Carole Boyce Davies. *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 81-3

Black Women, Writing and Identity more accurately describes ongoing discourses of resistance to slavery, colonialism, and imperialism.

Since the publication of Davies' critical volume, black women's participation in what she deemed "uprising textualities" has been reconsidered and acknowledged by several scholars eager to similarly intervene within the field. More recent publications, such as Judith A. Byfield et al.'s *Gendering the African Diaspora*, introduce their work with familiar concessions, acknowledging previous generations' insufficient gender analysis as well as the evolving place of gender within African Diaspora studies. Byfield et al. contend that "earlier generations of writing on the African Diaspora obfuscated women's engagement in the heavy work of traveling, building networks, and imagining the Diaspora."² However, as *Gendering the African Diaspora* illustrates, the inclusion of women within the discussion has not entirely resolved the challenging relationship of gender analysis to studies of this kind. They argue:

We are a decade beyond the period Terborg-Penn identified as the infancy of African Diaspora studies about women. Nonetheless, Gunning, Hunter, and Mitchell insist that 'the use of gender as a category of analysis remains something of a challenge for African Diaspora studies.' Their critique extends beyond integrating women into the conceptual analysis of the African Diaspora. They challenge us to examine the construction of the gendered identities female and male as well as their intersection with sexuality.³

² Judith A. Byfield, LaRay Denzer, and Anthea Morrison ed., *Gendering the African Diaspora: Women, Culture, and Historical Change in the Caribbean and Nigerian Hinterland*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010. p. 3-4

³ Judith A. Byfield, p. 10

Through their acknowledgement of their predecessors (e.g. *The Black Woman Cross-culturally*, and more recently *Women Pay the Price: Structural adjustment in Africa and the Caribbean*), Byfield and her fellow contributors attest to the concerted efforts that have already been pursued to comparatively study the experiences of black women. Yet, as their commentary suggests, gender can't simply be incorporated as a category of discrimination within studies of the African Diaspora. Gender must be additionally analyzed as a construction which does not present scholars with a universal subject to discuss, lacking in class, cultural, and linguistic distinctions that are equally relevant. For when these differences go unacknowledged, they threaten to subsume the expansive historical, geographic, and linguistic parameters of this diverse group of intellectuals, authors, and activists.

Such reductions eclipse the political developments of the 1960s and 70s, during which Civil Rights, the decolonization movement, and global black consciousness converged in a vision of Pan-Africanism, producing the international adaptation of blackness as a political category of struggle. More significantly, this adaptation occurred not just among Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans, but among the globally dispossessed and racially oppressed everywhere. "It was a very important moment politically in Britain," argues Jamaican-born Stuart Hall. "It isn't [however] the moment that we're in now." Hall goes on to say, "That significance has gone. It is partly dissolved into a variety of new, more ethnically specific signifiers... Things have moved into a new kind of ethnicized politics of difference. And that has presented certain profound difficulties of political organization when the signifier 'black' has

disappeared.”⁴ Once politically accessible and therefore unifying in the fight against white supremacist regimes, blackness has instead become progressively restricted in terms of its international portability outside of the U.S.

For the purposes of my theoretical and literary analysis, I will critically engage with the work of Caribbean women writers. Each of these authors belongs to a tradition of African Diasporic literature with their own separate and distinct cultures of origin and each one of these women actively participates in anti-colonial and anti-racist discourses. Specifically, I will discuss the work and commentary of Maryse Condé who was born in Guadeloupe, Merle Hodge who was born in Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica Kincaid (otherwise known as Elaine Potter Richardson), who was born in Antigua. My particular emphasis on global positionality as a trajectory of relocation, dislocation, and, in some instances, return, derives from reading the work of these women and learning of their lived migratory experiences. For example, although she was born on the island of Guadeloupe (a territory of the French Caribbean), Maryse Condé was later educated in Paris at *Lycée Fénelon*. She also lived for a time in post-independence Guinea, was later jailed while living in Ghana, and then eventually relocated to Senegal with her family. She continued to travel, living and teaching in locations such as the U.S.

Boyce Davies argues that the work of women such as Maryse Condé “exist more in the realm of the ‘elsewhere,’ of Diasporic imaginings than the precisely locatable.” “Much of it,” she observes, “is therefore oriented to articulating presences and histories

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities,” in W. Lubiano *The House that Race Built*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1997. p. 295

across a variety of boundaries imposed by colonizers, but also by the men, the elders and other authorized figures in their various societies.”⁵ These critiques of empire are therefore characterized by what she terms “migratory subjectivity,” through which black women are constantly redefining their relationship to the constructs of identity, history/origins, home/place, and the discourse of post colonial theory. Similarly, within *Gendering the African Diaspora*, Byfield et al. reiterate this sentiment, acknowledging the continued centrality of local experiences and global positionality to Diaspora studies. Early on, they specify that “Travel is a cornerstone of many of the contributions to [their] volume,” citing their desire to further Boyce Davies’ project arguing that “Boundary crossing is not only physical but it also inspires shifts in identity, the creation of new identities, or the familiarity and reconnections of old identities.”⁶ Thus, intellectual, professional, and cultural trajectories accompanied by a physical relocation or dislocation are important literary motifs; particularly, within the work of women writers of the African Diaspora for whom movement signifies the ever changing nature of identity formation.

The concept of diaspora commonly describes a condition of displacement from a shared place of origin and the sense of perpetual exile and alienation from self, home, and culture. However, its meaning and definition are consistently discussed and contested. Within Tiffany Patterson and Robin K. G. Kelley’s article “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” they suggest

⁵ Carole Boyce Davies, p. 88

⁶ Judith A. Byfield, p. 8-9

that “population dispersal does not by itself constitute a diaspora.”⁷ Responding to Patterson and Kelly’s work, Byfield et al. propose that:

...the linkages that tie diasporas together are not inevitable; they are ‘always historically constituted.’ Thus ‘diaspora is both a process and a condition. As a process it is constantly being remade through movement, migration, and travel, as well as imagined through thought, cultural production, and political struggle.’ As a condition, the African Diaspora exists within a global context shaped by hierarchies of class, race, and gender. These hierarchies that manifest in different formulations and compositions within imperial and national boundaries inflect the ways in which diasporic linkages are made and remade.⁸

Understanding hierarchical difference to be a feature of Diaspora and not an obstacle to its study is currently a far more acknowledged aspect of African Diaspora scholarship. In the words of Brent Edwards, “...*diaspora* points to difference...[specifically] the ways transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language...[as well as] the status of that difference--not just linguistic difference, but more broadly, the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists or escapes translation.”⁹ Implicitly, Edwards’ statements not only describe the “fractures,” which can and do inhibit communication as well as complicate political alliances along racial lines, but also demonstrate how certain categories of difference take priority over others. In other words, nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language may all function as analytical subcategories within the discussions of black internationalism; however, black internationalism is

⁷ Judith A. Byfield p. 1

⁸ Judith A. Byfield p. 1

⁹ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2003. p. 12-3

typically over-determined by concerns with the nation-state as well as the linguistic differences of a “universal” black subject. And this abstract subject, more often than not, can be understood to be male.

Understandably, scholarship engaged in such a historically and geographically expansive topic must be selective, resulting in the narrowing of its scope and considerations. However, Edwards does not conduct his study at the expense of a close examination of gender. Within the *Practice of Diaspora*, he includes a chapter entitled “Feminism and *L’Internationalisme Noir*,” in which he discusses the scarce acknowledgment of African and Caribbean women, such as the Martinican student and writer Paulette Nardal, in discussions of key contributors to black international print culture and political movements of the early twentieth century. Edwards argues:

With her fluent English, Paulette Nardal became the most important connection between the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ writers and the Francophone university students who would become the core of the Négritude movement... The narrative of the emergence of Négritude has been a story of ‘representative colored men’: Senghor, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Aimé Césaire. The symbology of the movement is sung... through a range of commentary on the black woman’s role that systematically overlooks the direct contributions of women... to the movement’s emergence.¹⁰

Nardal is recognized among others, such as her sister Jane, as well as a number of transnationally mobile and intellectually/politically vocal African American women, including teacher Clara Shepard, feminist Anna Julia Cooper, and writers such as Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston among others. These women had their

¹⁰ Brent Edwards p. 121

own set of political endeavors and priorities determined by their distinct experiences in France. Therefore, Black internationalism, as Edwards suggests, contains (and sometimes suppresses) a narrative of the emergent feminism taking root among internationally and upwardly mobile women of African descent.

It is not *The Practice of Diaspora*'s contention that international feminism in France has gone undocumented, especially recently, by scholars invested in this particular field of study. Yet, Edwards observes, "...one is hard-pressed to find work on French feminism that includes any discussion of feminist participation in debates around French colonialism in the interwar period."¹¹ Furthermore, while Edwards' scholarship participates in a project of recuperation, his study is largely limited to the discovery of "space(s) of autonomy in the metropole" (i.e. international print culture and publications such as *L'Etudiant Noir* which were generated in France) as a site of convergence and articulation for black intellectuals, both male and female. For instance, although Edwards references Paulette Nardal's return to Martinique prior to the outbreak of World War II, he has very little to say about her after her departure from France. Her location in the "elsewhere," which Carole Boyce Davies describes as significantly constitutive of black women's diasporic or "migratory" subjectivity, is not a concern of his project. However, it is this very condition of repositioning and relocating oneself in relationship to the metropole and the so-called "margins" that determine the shifts and slippages present in several black women writers' critiques of empire.

¹¹ Brent Edwards, p. 130

Amid his recollections of the intellectual work and the international engagements of black women in early twentieth century France, Edwards asks, “What would it mean to theorize a feminist articulation of diaspora?”¹² Although his question is well intentioned, it also presupposes that this work is not already underway by 2003. In addition to the critical works I’ve previously discussed, such cross-cultural feminist articulations of diaspora can be found in earlier works such as Consuelo Lopez Springfield’s critical volume *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century* (1994) and more recent publications such as Ketu H. Katrak’s collection of essays entitled *Politics of the Female Body: Post Colonial Women Writers of the Third World* (2006). Together, these critical volumes share the goal of discussing the resistances Caribbean women enact for themselves locally and globally and strive to improve the conditions under which women of the “third world” work and live. Within her introduction to *Daughters of Caliban*, Springfield contends, “Whether through language, labor, or feminist movements, the ways in which women’s quest for equality has evolved under local conditions is critical to feminist discourse. Unfortunately, most ‘case studies’ apply Western perspectives to an analysis of island cultures...”¹³ This same sentiment is present in *Gendering the African Diaspora*, published more than 10 years after Springfield’s articulation of these concerns. However prevalent and persistent these concerns may be, scholars continue in their efforts to address new and engaging questions amid feminist articulations of diaspora.

¹² Brent Edwards, p. 122

¹³ Consuelo Lopez Springfield ed. *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997. p. 1

II. Caribbean Women and Post Colonial Feminist Perspectives

What are the particularities of Caribbean feminism for women of both the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean as outlined by scholars such as Consuelo Lopez Springfield or conveyed within the fiction/criticism of Caribbean women writers such as Merle Hodge? Much of the writing I'll discuss engages with the various politics of the female body, gender inequities in employment and education, as well as the social determinism of race, class, and the acquisition of "privileged" languages (e.g. French or Standard English). Springfield asserts that "Caribbean feminism must be understood not in the light of other women's feminist histories and goals but in the light of their own experiences and practices. Feminism, if it is to lead to its goal of assuring women as full and multifaceted an existence as possible, must be responsive to the condition in which that existence must unfold."¹⁴ The fiction and commentary of Caribbean authors such as Maryse Condé, Merle Hodge, and Jamaica Kincaid may consist of their singular "migratory" perspectives, but their work also exists within a continuum of black women writers who have led fairly nomadic, upwardly mobile, and transitional existences.

Many writers and scholars (e.g. Carole Boyce Davies, Toni Cade Bambara, and Maryse Condé) have undertaken the project of anthologizing black women writers, locating their work within canons and categories such as African Diasporic writers, Caribbean writers, post-colonial writers, and so on. More recently, these projects demonstrate efforts to expand the territories under consideration, isolating the commonalities shared among dispersed black women and post-colonial women in an

¹⁴ Consuelo Lopez Springfield. p. 4

effort to transform them into an extensive community participating in and constructing a movement. Ketu H. Katrak is a prime example, distinguishing her book *Politics of the Female Body* as one of the most diverse considerations of postcolonial women published as of 2006. She contends "...[although] there are several social science and literary studies on Indian, African, or Caribbean women as separate regional studies, there is no comparative study that connects these postcolonial regions as I attempt to do..."¹⁵ Such scholarly endeavors to extend their comparative scope contribute to the efforts of readers and critics to better understand the multi-cultural and multi-linguistic audiences these authors hope to reach:

For the many Black women writers whom we read in English or French or Portuguese, a variety of boundary crossings must occur. English or French or Spanish or Portuguese become indispensable for the writer who wants to reach a larger community. And for the women who tell their stories orally and want them told to a world community, boundaries of orality and writing, of geography and space, engender fundamental crossings and re-crossings. For the readers as well, a variety of languages, creoles, cultural nuances, history has to be learned before the texts can have meaning.¹⁶

Within the Caribbean context, a comparative approach to feminist scholarship is a testament to the wealth of cultures which comprise the unique mixture of Caribbean inhabitants, including those of Amerindian, African, East Indian, European, Semitic, and Asian descent. In Gay Wilentz essay "Toward a Diaspora Literature", she suggests that there was far more cultural resistance in the presence of a white colonizer who remained

¹⁵ Ketu H. Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006. p. xvi

¹⁶ Carole Boyce Davies, p. 20

the minority among a vast array of island inhabitants. Wilentz notes that, “although European colonials were privileged, they were never a majority since the islands of the Caribbean were seen as places to be exploited rather than settled. Other cultures thrived despite pressure to assimilate to the dominant European culture.”¹⁷ Therefore, despite the ravages of colonialism and the abuses West Indians have suffered at the hands of foreign powers, the Caribbean has responded to these injustices with the production of numerous and hybrid counter-cultures.

Furthermore, Caribbean literature written in the language of the colonizer (i.e. Standard English and French) has received considerably less attention within correlating European canons. Christiane Makward and Odile Cazenave’s article “The Others’ Others: ‘Francophone’ Women and Writing” demonstrates how localities such as Martinique should be ever present within discussions that establish points of convergence between the margins and the metropole. Within their essay, the French speaking subjects under consideration must not only be identified and unified on the page. They must also be distinguished as diverse individuals within the French canonical narrative. Therefore, Cazenave and Makward devote considerable attention to Francophone women writers living outside of Europe, suggesting that they “...have one important trait in common...They are subject to specific tensions and conflicting allegiances which arise not only from their identities as women but also as citizens of threatened or unstable political entities.”¹⁸ As such, “The Others’ Others” contains an important subsection on

¹⁷ Gay, Wilentz., p. 395-6

¹⁸ Odile Cazenave and Christiane Makward, p. 192

Francophone Caribbean women writers, including a discussion of the unique set of themes which emerge for these authors and the challenges posed for women living and writing in developing countries.

One of the major distinctions that Cazenave and Makward identify is the disproportionate access to education for West Indian women. They suggest that “there lies a quintessential difference for the Third World francophone women whose mother tongue is not French and whose ethnicity guards them from assimilation...women’s access to education was severely restricted [, accounting] for the emergence of African women writers several decades later than their male counterparts.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Creole was not always a written language and young girls, particularly from agricultural regions, were not given proper instruction in the reading and writing of French. Therefore, they experienced limited access to better working conditions and higher paying jobs:

Being illiterate and only slightly proficient in French has severely restricted the kinds of work that women could undertake. Although today, girls and boys attend school in relatively equal proportions (like their counterparts in European France), it will take some time before the attitudes about work change and before women are able to gain more equal access to the prestigious and higher paying positions...²⁰

Similarly, an important aspect of Byfield et al.’s project in *Gendering the African Diaspora* is its reinforcement of the commonalities that existed between the educational system implemented within British colonies in both Africa and the Caribbean. In so

¹⁹ Odile Cazenave and Christiane Makward, p. 193

²⁰ Consuelo Lopez Springfield, p. 33

doing, they strive to establish a link between the educational experiences of women across the African Diaspora and illuminate the ways in which education in the Anglophone Caribbean was traditionally less substantive and accessible for young girls.

Essentially, the colonial apparatus implemented by the British introduced and preserved the gender imbalances in enrollment and the overall quality of the education that was made available. Byfield et al. argue that “privileging boys’ education over girls’ occurred throughout the colonies.”²¹ The historical period under consideration extends from the early twentieth century to the 1950s, chronicling the stages of development and public discourse surrounding the educational gender inequalities, which, as their work suggests, did not go locally unnoticed or uncontested. Their study contends that “...by the 1920s and 1930s, girls’ education was accepted, but its quality and content were heatedly debated. By the 1940s, public discussion about the expansion and quality of girls’ education became intertwined with its role in elevating the status of women. Some gains were evident in secondary education overall, even if not always resolving the issue of gender disparity.”²² As all of these studies suggest, the inconsistent educational standards for boys and girls in the West Indies continue to improve with time. However, the process of recuperation is slow and the effects of this particular disparity are still being felt in some communities.

²¹Byfield et al, p. 189

²² Judith A. Byfield et al, p. 189-90

As discussed, language also serves as yet another meaningful signifier within Caribbean literature, particularly within the West Indies, where linguistic choices made by both male and female writers are loaded with racial, cultural, and class implications. In “African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and the Dilemma of Identity,” Joseph McLaren considers how black vernaculars are deployed within literature in some cases to critique the privilege bestowed to “Standard English.” Writing in linguistic variations such as “creole, patois, pidgin, and, in the United States, Black English, African American English, or Ebonics,” he suggests, demonstrates a rejection of colonial ideologies and renders “Africanized English” and dialects as languages with their own value and significance.²³ McLaren argues, “In creolized societies...The spread of the British-style law and order, the so-called ‘civilising mission’ of the colonial power and the associated evangelical and educational work of the missionary societies, called for the suppression of the ‘debased’ forms of English, as they were conceived to be, and their replacement by ‘correct’ bourgeois English.”²⁴ As such, language within Caribbean literature can function as both a tool of the oppressor and as a site of cultural resistance.

Ultimately, in Cazenave and Makward’s concluding reflections on a trajectory of Francophone Caribbean women’s writing, they discuss how representations of women within the tradition of Francophone writing have evolved along with and because of a growing number of internationally recognized female authors such as Simone Schwarz-

²³ Joseph McLaren, “African Diaspora Vernacular Traditions and the Dilemma of Identity.” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Oral Literature and Identity Formation in Africa and the Diaspora (Spring, 2009), p. 97

²⁴ Joseph McLaren p. 103

Bart and Maryse Condé. They suggest that with these writers we have "...enter[ed] the new age of French-Caribbean women's writing where female characters cease to be victims; at the very least they are shown as rebels in spirit and sometimes in actual fact, or as 'modern,' philosophically conscious characters."²⁵ Moreover, with the passage of time women of African descent are, more and more, speaking to one another on multiple levels now available to them as critics, writers and readers of each other's work:

Both a writer and a critic herself, Condé finds in a recurring theme of Caribbean fiction-the questioning and/or rejection of motherhood-an essential difference between African and Caribbean women writers. Condé wonders if this theme is a denial of prevalent tradition or an ultimatum to men justifying their own behavior by their partner's abnegation; refusing motherhood would have a sexual-political function here. Condé takes issue with the pressures on women writers not to discomfit the reader, and to offer positive characters instead of expressing their existential darkness...²⁶

In short, both Condé's statements and Cazenave and Makward's article attest to the kinds of cross-cultural literacy which serve as a precursor to more rigorous and comparative studies of women writers around the globe. Furthermore, their critical contributions assist in our work to isolate the shared political investments and outcomes most essential to women across the African Diaspora.

²⁵ Odile Cazenave and Christiane Makward, p.197

²⁶ Odile Cazenave and Christiane Makward, p.197

III. Maryse Condé and Diaspora Literacy

Françoise Pfaff, a professor of French at Howard University, met with and interviewed Maryse Condé in 1981. *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (1996) is the published compilation of several years of friendship and subsequent interviews in which the author discusses her life and work, transcribed and translated by Pfaff. “A Plural Life,” the title given to the initial chapter of Pfaff’s book, contains interviews in which Condé considers how her travels and encounters have influenced and altered her worldviews. Born in Guadeloupe in 1937, her nomadic existence has taken her to numerous locations throughout the world including Guinea after the country won its independence from France, Ghana, Senegal, and the U.S. She first left Guadeloupe for Paris at the age of sixteen where she completed high school and received a university degree in French as well as English. It was there that she encountered French, Caribbean, and African students and developed a black international political awareness regarding issues such as anticolonialism and decolonization.²⁷ In 1970, Condé returned to Paris where she attended the Sorbonne and worked as an editor for the *Présence Africaine* publisher. Five years later she received her doctorate in Caribbean literature and went on to teach at the University of Paris.

Her work, much like her own life, reflects the cultural, linguistic, and geographic plurality that exilic subjects of the African Diaspora experience and which are, therefore, highly constitutive of that subject’s identity. Condé first won international recognition for

²⁷ Françoise Pfaff. *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. p. x

Segu, a novel about a multigenerational West African family of Malian descent and the slave trade. Byfield et al. posit a critique of Condé's body of work, arguing that her novels "...employ boundary crossing as a critical platform...travel [is] an entrée into overlapping mediations on race, gender, class, empire, and diaspora. [Her] characters reveal competing ways of realizing home and community. For Condé...and many other black female authors, home and the nation are not necessarily celebratory spaces. In many instances, home, community, and nation are places of exile."²⁸ Additionally, within *Gendering the African Diaspora* Condé's female protagonists are characterized as fiercely independent as well as determined to produce their own spaces of resistance. Byfield et al. suggest that "The figure of the woman traveling alone, venturing unprotected into uncharted territory, is a recurrent one in Condé's *oeuvre*, evocative of audacity and independence of spirit, and emblematic of the will to transcend the limitations of patriarchy."²⁹ As the author of several novels, plays, essays, stories, and children's books, she has become an increasingly recognized figure throughout the world. "Maryse Condé's reputation and fame," remarks Pfaff, "are linked to her talents as a novelist whose works contain a spectrum of fictional characters--Caribbean, African, and African-American--which mirror countless experiences in the wake of slavery, colonialism, and diasporic migration...with considerable insight into social and political issues, [she] intermingles fiction, history, and contemporary realities."³⁰

²⁸ Judith A. Byfield et al, p. 9

²⁹ Judith A. Byfield et al, p. 40

³⁰ Françoise Pfaff, p. xi

Condé conceives of her own work within a dynamic and international literary tradition that constantly engages with its past. Pfaff's prompts require Condé to identify and discuss the West Indian canon, comment on the prominent disparities between the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean, and articulate the importance of what she calls "diaspora literacy." Throughout their discussion, Condé's comments addresses the broader, more prominent concerns applicable to readers and writers of Caribbean literature. *Conversations with Maryse Condé* features an interview entitled "Views on the Black Diaspora," in which Pfaff and Condé discuss how Anglophone and Francophone West Indian literatures compare. At the time of this interview, Condé was in the process of preparing an anthology of West Indian literature, a project she'd hoped would demonstrate the range of influences, themes, languages, and histories, which constitute the West Indies. Condé asserts that:

West Indian Francophone literature emerged from protest engendered by the Negritude movement, while Anglophone literature was born out of an immediate awareness of Otherness...Furthermore, issues of language are different in West Indian Anglophone and Francophone literatures. Problems related to *créolité* and to people's relation to Creole languages, which are so acute in the Francophone areas today, are not the same in the Anglophone regions.³¹

Unfortunately, Condé was unable to accomplish her task because of limitations imposed by the publisher who restricted her choices to literature written in French and English. As such, Condé and her co-editors were unable to include the literatures of the former Dutch and Spanish islands. Despite this setback, Condé surmises that the work she and her

³¹ Françoise Pfaff, p. 108

colleagues compiled fulfilled their ultimate goals, remarking that “we saw the differences between the various linguistic zones...[and] we reached the conclusion that within their diversity, unity existed among the Caribbean islands, the affirmation of a personality that was neither African, nor American, nor European...”³² However, the fact remains that a multi-lingual addition of Condé et. al.’s anthology was deemed “too costly a project” at the expense of Dutch and Spanish speaking West Indian literatures which the author suggests are less well known.

Gender does not receive much consideration within this particular discussion of cross-cultural exchanges and diaspora literacy. Although Pfaff praises Condé and counts her among equally prominent West Indian authors, such as Simone Schwartz-Bart and Myriam Warner-Vieyra, the author makes little to no reference to her female contemporaries within this interview. And when asked to list the most representative authors of Anglophone West Indian literature Condé mentions Derek Walcott, Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Edward Brathwaite, George Lamming, and Earl Lovelace.³³ She does not, however, acknowledge Anglophone women writers such as Merle Hodge and Jamaica Kincaid. This may have been an incidental oversight on Condé’s part, but her additional commentary suggests that she perceives a discontinuity between gender and the subject of one’s writing and/or one’s capacity to be heard. For instance, when Pfaff asks, “...Has your being a woman been detrimental to your career as a writer?” Condé replies, “Quite the opposite. It helped me a lot because people were curious to see what a Black woman

³² Françoise Pfaff, p. 109

³³ Françoise Pfaff, p. 110

had to say, what she was thinking. Publishers never refused to read my manuscripts to see what I might be writing.”³⁴ Yet Condé makes no references to the fact that this curiosity is partially generated by a scarcity of black women’s writing which is often produced by social and institutional inequalities.

Pfaff later returns to the subject of gender, raising the concerns of African American authors who’ve suggest it is challenging to be a Black woman writer because of the double disadvantages of sexism and racism. However, Condé dismisses her question, stating that “...American women always have exaggerated ideas about everything. That has not been my experience at all.”³⁵ Clearly, Condé can only speak to her personal experiences which have been uniquely defined by attention and praise of her work. However, her dismissal of the international realities of sexism for black women writers appears to be tainted with a perceptible condescension of what she considers to be a Western concern. Furthermore, when Pfaff asks Condé if she considers herself a feminist, Condé replies, “I have been asked this question a hundred times, and I don’t know what it means exactly, so I must not be a feminist. If you ask people in the United States, they probably will tell you that I am not.”³⁶ Once again, there is discernable demarcation of “feminism” as a movement that only has relevance within the confines of the U.S. As Carole Boyce Davies work would suggest, Condé’s critical perspective about black feminism and its relevance to the experience of Caribbean women writers is not an

³⁴ Françoise Pfaff, p. 24

³⁵ Françoise Pfaff, p. 24

³⁶ Françoise Pfaff p. 29

uncommon one. Davies argues that “black feminist criticism began as a subversion and counter-articulation to the terms of both Black and feminist criticism. But its limitation, so far, is that it is almost wholly located in African-American women’s experiences.”³⁷ Therefore, Condé’s response resembles Davies’ formulation of black feminism as alienating to women outside of the U.S. “diaspora literacy,” as discussed by Condé, has little to do with an acknowledgement of black women’s marginal position within a West Indian or global black literary tradition. Instead, Condé insists that black men and women should cultivate their knowledge and recognition of one another’s “heroes” which must extend beyond one’s own national boundaries. Condé maintains:

I have always adhered to what Veve Clark calls her concern for ‘diaspora literacy,’ I believe that we, the people of the Black Diaspora, should know and recognize certain names... I believe we have to get used to sharing our heroes, our creators, our important men and women, so as to have something with which to respond to the White world, which constantly hammers us with its values.³⁸

The oppressor in her opinion is the “White world.” Nevertheless, Condé’s emphasis on sharing one another’s triumphs and recognizing the work of both black men and women throughout the world is a vital component of repositioning black feminism to account for the experiences of the dispersed, culturally, and linguistically distinct women of the African Diaspora.

³⁷ Carole Boyce Davies p. 31

³⁸ Françoise Pfaff, p. 99

IV. The Anglophone Caribbean: Fiction and Gender

Establishing cross-cultural literacy is both a historical and hermeneutic process, rooted in the desire to simultaneously distinguish as well as relate men and women across vast territories who share, in this instance, political objectives. Within Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* and Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey*, physical shifts correspond to changes in their fictional character's psychological stability and social status. Additionally, these texts incorporate themes of culpability and accountability within fictional narratives that critique and examine the enduring effects of colonialism in places such as Dominica and Trinidad. More importantly, the work of both Kincaid and Hodge grant a voice to the seldom heard Anglophone woman, both young and old:

Throughout the African Diaspora; women writers are in the process of unscrambling the letters and (re)naming herstory; their work gives utterance to the formerly voiceless members of their communities-the wife, the barren woman, the young child, the mother, the grandmother, women friends, female ancestors. They see their existence as a continuum from their ancestors to their descendents. Their aim is to find a usable past, to educate in the broadest sense of the word; their creativity is based in the oral traditions of their foremothers.³⁹

Within both *Autobiography* and *Crick Crack* black women are not necessarily portrayed as allies, friends, or lovers of one another in what can be characterized as a hostile environment. Furthermore, although several characters within these novels have the capacity to be mothers or caregivers, not all of them chose to do so or perform this role with care.

³⁹ Gay Wilentz, p. 389

Gay Wilentz suggests that the role of the mother is a particularly significant one within the literature of women of African descent. She argues, “How women become citizens in their own right as well as how they are indoctrinated into limited positions in the society is closely tied to the women who trained them into the culture’s values and traditions.”⁴⁰ Therefore, the production of citizens and the imparting of values and traditions are made difficult and undesirable tasks within the confines of neo-colonial systems of governance, education, and commerce. For example, Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother* is written from the perspective of a young woman whose mother dies during her birth and who is later abandoned by her father. For the first few years of Xuela’s life, she is raised by her father’s laundress. This surrogate mother is a woman who provides for Kincaid’s young protagonist’s most immediate and basic necessities, but does so without a great deal of care and compassion for the abandoned child in her charge. Reared without love, affection, and outside of a “traditional” family and community, Xuela becomes a detached spectator of her own life. Her primary defense against the bitterness, indifference, neglect, contempt, and abuse she has suffered is her refusal to care deeply for anyone other than herself and the biological mother she mourns.

Moreover, although she becomes pregnant several times throughout the novel, Xuela repeatedly induces miscarriages with the consumption of a thick black substance, literally expelling the fetus from her body after days of endured pain. Her rejection of

⁴⁰ Gay Wilentz, p. 390

motherhood is extremely significant, particularly, when considered within the cultural context that Springfield outlines in *Daughters of Caliban*:

Like African women and their sisters throughout the diaspora, Caribbean women critically linked work and the need to labor to their responsibilities as mothers... women's labors in the English-speaking Caribbean must be understood within the broader context of their roles as mothers. While all women in the region are not parents, the centrality of motherhood is and remains a focal aspect of self-identity for Caribbean women. Even those who are not biological mothers often assume the role of 'surrogate' mothers for children in the community. Furthermore, this major component of identity exists among women from various class backgrounds.⁴¹

Furthermore, the narrator's insistence that she remain childless is one more manifestation of her preferred detachment and isolation, survival mechanisms that have kept her alive, independent, sane, and perpetually alone. This she does not lament, but regards as an unavoidable consequence of her life and its many abandonments, beginning with her mother's. Kincaid's narrator asserts, "I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so. The crime of these identities, which I know now more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear. Am I nothing, then? I do not believe so, but if nothing is a condemnation, then I would love to be condemned"⁴² The men in her life, including Xuela's father, produce countless, nameless children who they casually abandon. As such, her refusal to bear children is, in a way, a refusal of her sexual partners' desire to treat her as a body to be conquered.

⁴¹ Consuelo Lopez Springfield, p. 42-3

⁴² Jamaica Kincaid, p. 226

Cynthia or Tee, the young narrator of Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* is also introduced to the reader after the death of her mother during childbirth. Unlike *Autobiography*, Hodge's *Crick Crack* chronicles a much more condensed, yet extremely transformative few years in Tee's young life and the many personal/psychological changes she experiences. After the death of their mother and the return of their father to England, Tee and her brother Toddan are taken in by their paternal aunt, Tantie, who functions as a surrogate caregiver to them both. As a member of Trinidad's urban poor, Tantie raises the children to thrive and survive within a characteristically harsh environment, instilling in them a language of fierce devotion for their family which simultaneously allows them to voice their outrage, anger, and frustration. In Sophia Lehmann's essay "In Search of a Mother Tongue," she asserts that "writers such as Merle Hodge have turned to Creole as a solution to the problems posed by writing in standard English. She defines Creole ('a fusion of West African syntax and the modified vocabulary of one or another European language') as her mother tongue, in opposition to the 'international language' of English..."⁴³ Walters contends:

Tee's youth is dominated by three powerful women who each exert very different linguistic influences on her. Tee's earliest years are spent with her paternal aunt, Tantie, with occasional visits to her grandmother, Ma. These two women provide protective, nurturing, warm, and free surroundings for many young children, including Tee. The language of Tantie, with whom Tee spends the most time, is loud, raucous, and punctuated by creolisms, curses, and squawks. Tantie is emblematic of the multi-faceted woman in West Indian literature described by critic Leota Lawrence as 'strong, indomitable, very verbose, and fiercely loyal to her

⁴³ Sophia Lehmann, "In Search of a Mother Tongue," *MELUS*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Theory, Culture and Criticism (Winter, 1998), p. 105-6

children and her man'. From her aunt Tantie, Tee learns verbal toughness.⁴⁴

However, Tee's success as a student and resulting scholarship require her transfer to "Big-school." And with this change Tee transitions from the house of her childhood to live with her Aunt Beatrice, Uncle Norman, and their three daughters. As a member of the Trinidadian middle class, Aunt Beatrice teaches Tee or Cynthia to revile her past and to feel shame when confronted by certain members of her family who Aunt Beatrice disdainfully regards as "common".

Ultimately, Aunt Beatrice inflicts the psychological trauma of an internalized neo-colonial gaze upon herself and her children, particularly, for Cynthia who is the most altered and alienated character by the novel's end. The humiliation that has been instilled within her is so substantial that, the once homesick Tee who fantasized of running away and escaping back to Tantie's house, comes to dread Tantie's arrival to Aunt Beatrice's pristine home for a visit. However, rather than rejecting one home and embracing another, Tee is left without a place where she feels she "belongs". Her time spent with her aunt serves as a daily reminder of the disadvantages of her low birth and humble beginnings, "defects" from which there appears to be no redemption and no escape. Eager to flee from the grips of disgrace and guilt, Tee is relieved to learn of her formerly absentee father's desire to have her join him in England. Yet, in the final pages of *Crick Crack* Hodge does not provide the reader with any certainty that the "Mother country"

⁴⁴ Wendy W. Walters "More Than 'Girl Talk': Languages as Marker in Two Novels by Women of African Descent," *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 27, No. ½ (Sep., 1992), p. 159

will be a more hospitable and less psychologically damaging environment for young Tee. Instead, the book concludes with yet another fantasy of escape in which Tee imagines that she is on the plane, far away from Tantie's grief and the "ordinaryness of it all."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Hodge, Merle. *Crick Crack, Monkey*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1970. p.123

V. Conclusion: Global Positionality and Political Trajectories

A Small Place begins, “If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see.”⁴⁶ These words are written in a narrative voice that directly confronts the reader who is immediately transported by Kincaid’s text to the “nine-by-twelve-mile-long” island where the author was born and raised. However, as numerous biographies indicate, Kincaid left Antigua in 1965 at the age of seventeen, travelling first to New York where she worked as an au pair and pursued a degree in photography. Eventually, she moved to Vermont with her family where she lived at the time of *A Small Place*’s publication in 1988. Therefore, geographically speaking, Kincaid is much more of a regional hybrid than her text appears to self-reflexively confront or acknowledge. Yet, it is my contention that Kincaid’s struggle to reconcile her dual status as an Antiguan and as a Caribbean-American is exhibited through the author’s use of inconsistent pronouns, particularly when invoking categories of incrimination or belonging. Kincaid writes:

An ugly thing, that is what *you* are when *you* become a tourist, an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and taste that, and it will never occur to *you* that the people who inhabit the place in which *you* have just paused cannot stand *you*, that behind their closed doors they laugh at your strangeness (*you* do not look the way they look...they do not like the way you speak (*you* have an accent)...*They do not like me!* That thought never actually occurs to *you*.⁴⁷

Who comprises the “you” of whom Kincaid speaks? Is this “you” meant to signify all tourists regardless of racial and national affiliations? Or is this passage a narrow

⁴⁶ Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988. p. 3

⁴⁷ Jamaica Kincaid. p. 17

indictment of white European and American tourists specifically? If Kincaid is in fact using the tourist as a universal signifier for those who exist outside of this “small place” with the means and opportunity to travel, is the “you” that she is critiquing a self-reflexive *you* as well?

It would appear that the subject(s) of *A Small Place* are that of Antigua as well as the lived historical and political trajectory experienced on behalf of black Antiguan, specifically the debilitating continuities which have plagued this particular community both during and post-colonialism. Kincaid posits a critique that has an intended audience, however, *A Small Place*'s criticism is not limited to an oppressive state apparatus that is controlled and dictated by a broadly defined white western colonizer/slave master. She is additionally critical of any and all people who continue to benefit from or ignore the abjection and exploitation of black Antiguan life, including other Antiguan. Kincaid's statements on freedom for Antiguan are inflected by the author's hesitant addition of the phrase “in a kind of way” because, as she suggests, “emancipation” was merely a chapter in Antigua's enduring struggle to recover from the legacies of its colonial past. Freedom is effectively compromised for Antiguan by enduring racism as well as their inability to rid themselves of social hierarchies and models for self-governance that are inherently corrupt and exploitative, further widening the gap between the privileged and the destitute.

However, Kincaid's critique was not well received by other Caribbean writers for whom her gaze is all too troubling, reductive, and condemning. Within her essay, “A Small Place Writes Back,” Jane King asks, “What really is wrong with staying at home?”

What is the defect evidenced by all those who stay in the Caribbean?” In response to her own questions King asserts that she “reject[s] the arguments that we are all corrupt, stupid or insensitive... [arguing that] it is possible to read and to communicate with the metropolises and to study in the Caribbean.”⁴⁸ In many ways, King’s critique of Kincaid’s *A Small Place* parallels my own reading of Tee’s transformation and equally distorted gaze within *Crick Crack, Monkey*. Her words are both a testament to her outrage and an overt indictment of Kincaid’s work, specifically; the implied insult of *A Small Place*’s critique which as King suggests undermines her global positionality and thus, her critical perspective.

Juxtaposing the career legacies of Jamaica Kincaid and her Anglophone contemporary, Merle Hodge, one is presented with quite different political and professional trajectories. Frequently described as both a writer and activist, Hodge has been vocal about the role her fiction has played in her lived resistance and social criticism. Commenting upon fiction’s “immense political power” within her own life, Hodge recollects “I began writing, in my adult life, in protest against my education and the arrogant assumptions upon which it rested: that I and my world were nothing and that to rescue ourselves from nothingness we had best seek admission to the world of their storybook.”⁴⁹ Born in 1944, in Trinidad, where she received both her elementary and high school education, Hodge eventually won the Trinidad and Tobago Girls Island Scholarship in 1962 which entitled her to attend college in London where she pursued

⁴⁸ King, Jane. “A Small Place Writes Back,” *Callaloo*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer, 2002), pp. 885-909. p. 902-3

⁴⁹ Sophia Lehmann, p. 109

studies in French. Between 1965 and 1967 she completed her B.A. and received a Master of Philosophy degree. After completing her education, Hodge traveled extensively to places such as France and Denmark, working as a typist and baby-sitter to support herself. She then returned to Trinidad in the early 1970s where she taught French for a short time until she received a lecturing position in the French Department at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. Ultimately, Hodge is often commended for her decision to return to live in Trinidad, where she participated in local activism and taught at the University of the West Indies.

Kincaid was well aware of the distinct choices she and Hodge made over the course of their career pursuits and lived experiences; articulating that the global distribution of one's writing has far greater potential to make an impact and implement social change. And while I share Kincaid's enthusiasm about the worldwide reach and influence literature can and does have, I disagree with her apparent devaluation of overtly political, locally based initiatives. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh, Kincaid openly criticizes the various choices she and Hodge have made over the course of their careers suggesting that "writers who live in the Caribbean tend to become involved in politics." Furthermore, Kincaid directly implicates Merle Hodge within her critique, suggesting that organizing women's groups in Trinidad "...is good but it will never come to as much as her writing would come to. It will never touch as many people..."⁵⁰ Undeniably, there is some truth to Kincaid's statements about Hodge's ability to reach a larger audience with her written work. Hodge's locally based political activism may never touch as many

⁵⁰ Jane King, p. 898

people as her writing will, but Kincaid certainly seems to be overlooking the importance of remaining connected to the local community from which or for whom you speak. Much like Hodges' Tee, Kincaid exhibits the potentially disorienting effects of travel, displacement, and exile for the African Diasporic subject.

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