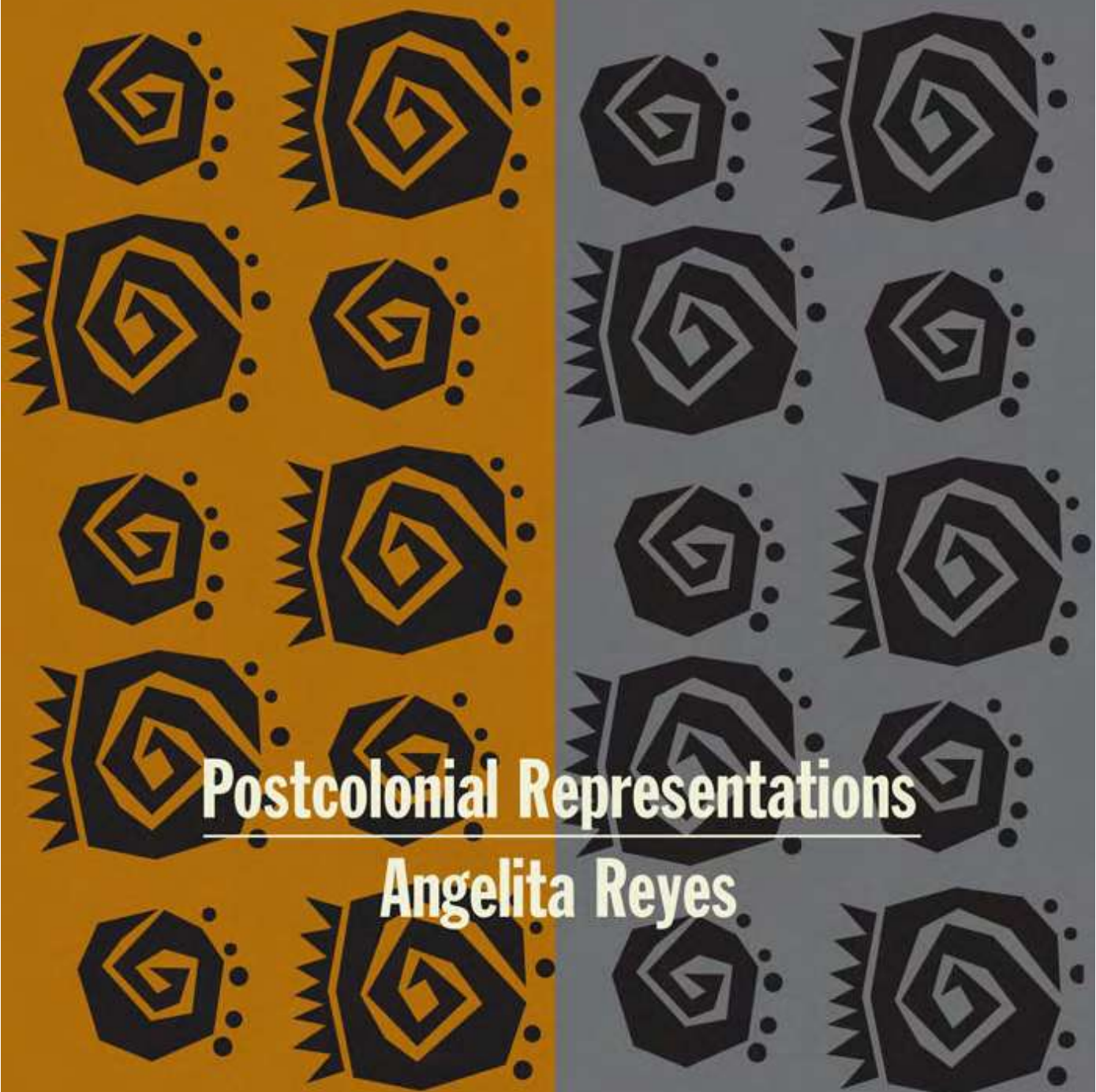


Mothering  
A C R O S S  
Cultures

**Postcolonial Representations**

**Angelita Reyes**



# Mothering Across Cultures

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# INTRODUCTION

## I'm Not Mad, I'm Postcolonial, a Woman, and a Mother

et aucune race  
ne possède de monopole de la beauté, de l'intelligence, de la force  
et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous de la conquête  
[and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength  
and there is room for everyone at the convocation of victory]  
—Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*

Is there a line between middle-east and far east?  
And where's nearly east?  
And can't someone be black, Asian *and* far eastern?  
In my colonial style geography books  
With whole areas coloured empire pink  
There was a line.  
—Kamila Zahno, "Ethnic Monitoring or a Geography Lesson"

The title of this introduction, "I'm Not Mad, I'm Postcolonial, a Woman, and a Mother," is, in part, inspired from a line in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1848 poem, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point." After killing her baby girl (an issue of rape) the protagonist, a fugitive slave mother, exclaims, "I am not mad, I am black." She asserts that her racial heritage is not the reason or substitute for irrationality. To what extent should we have compassion for a slave mother who, out of desperation, commits infanticide and then suicide? Browning wrote the poem for the abolitionist cause in the United States. The murder of a child by its mother would appear to most generations of readers as fanatical and irrational.

For Browning, however, real history intersects with the literary imagination. Browning's paternal family owned and operated sugar plantations in the West Indies during the nineteenth-century era of slavery. From them she had heard about a fugitive slave incident similar to the one she depicts in the poem. Browning voices the fugitive mother's blackness, or her plight as a slave, in terms of mothering, bondage, and miscegenation.

The subject who declares that she is not mad asserts her identity as a *rational* woman caught in slavery and with the *human* consciousness of what freedom means. Freedom. Freedom at the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century crossroads of the momentous European and African encounter was weighed down with economic rewards that overshadowed the moral consciousness about slavery. In this present historical moment many of us continue to negotiate the aftermath of colonialism as we are affected by the reverberations of postcolonialisms. We're not mad, we're women who have shared certain kinds of histories connected to colonization. We are connected through transnational identities, ideas, and values that are fluid and that overlap with our transcultural alliances.

What do we mean when we talk about postcolonial conditions? Before attempting to answer, I would like to address some potential concerns. My use of *we* is deliberate; it's a signifier for solidarity among women of color who are the progeny of slavery and colonization.<sup>1</sup> I have met women from other ethnicities "of color" (especially in Europe) who question its usage. Doesn't it put us in opposition to "white" women? Why does color have to be the essential determinant of identity? These challenging questions are justified. This term isn't meant to subsume particular ethnic identities, and the term doesn't have to put us in opposition to white women in Europe or the Americas. I like the term "of color," because it creates possibilities for networking and solidarity. My use of the term "of color," to echo Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff, affirms those aspects of history and culture that we were taught to despise; the image of color connects us to our shared global histories.

There are numerous discussions regarding the idea and usage of the term "postcolonial." It is not my intention, nor is it necessary, to engage in or summarize those critical responses and debates. Decidedly, redefining who or what identities are, for example, as new nations, dethroned patriarchies, or emerged ethnic groups, is a profoundly complex and debatable process. There should be a term better than "postcolonial" that can describe the dynamics of this collective heritage stretching across

many time frames, cultures, and geographical boundaries. Just as we realize there are diverse definitions and theories of and ways to practice feminism, we can discuss the reverberations of colonial history and insist on attributes that empower us even as we continue to search for worthy decolonizing descriptions.

To highlight the idea of a new global consciousness and to recognize that there could be unity within the diversity of the human family, the epigraphs to this introduction include an image from Aimé Césaire's famous *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: "et aucune race / ne possède de monopole de la beauté, de l'intelligence, de la force / et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous de la conquête." The belief in the oneness of humanity, the equality of men and women, and the idea of unity in diversity does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal theoretical position. Rather, believing means that we know that an organic change is very necessary in the structures of present-day societies.<sup>2</sup>

Human rights activist Kathy Lee dealt with some of the gender issues of postcoloniality in a keynote presentation, "Prelude to the Lesser Peace." Lee discussed how we all are a part of a global upheaval because all of humanity is *pregnant* with new perspectives about world peace, racial unity, equality among men and women, and so on. She emphasized that most of humanity doesn't know that it's *laboring* to give birth to something wonderful. This pregnancy began in the nineteenth century with such events as the abolition of slavery, new inventions in science and technology, and women's suffrage. Humanity continues the labor pains of this monumental pregnancy that *will* come to term. Kathy Lee concluded her gynocentric metaphor by saying, "I used to live in South Africa. When a woman was eight or nine months pregnant, they would say she is 'highly pregnant'! Well, our world is highly pregnant with its urgent need to deliver what will be the era of a most great peace that can only be realized when we no longer have the injustices that are still among us. It's never easy to give up anything familiar, even if it doesn't suit you anymore; it's a painful loss. We feel the loss when we give up prejudices until we grieve, give it up, and take on new ideas which replace the old." The postcolonial consciousness began in the nineteenth century and its momentum will continue to reverberate until humanity gives birth to new ways of being with each other in the world.

During nineteenth-century European expansion, there was a popular expression, "the sun never sets on the British Empire." Indeed, it was a

painful loss for the British to slowly forfeit their empire and adopt a different policy toward emerging nations. As I write here in Nottingham, England, I'm fascinated by the fact that at one time the British had colonies in all hemispheres of the globe. The diverse ethnic groups living here in Nottingham are the progeny of that colonization. I've developed a friendship with an Indian woman; despite our fluency in other languages, we both have English as our primary language. We are political "minorities" in our countries. Although we may not like the semantics of "minority," it's forced on us by the media and by usage. I'm a "minority" in the United States and she's a "black minority" in the United Kingdom. We're also mothers and are trying to bring about distinct transformations that will make a better world for our children. Carole Boyce Davies highlights the "politics of location and geography" in relation to women of color as "migrating subjects" (*Black Women, Writing and Identity* 20). No one identity label characterizes all of our qualities as individuals. Many of us have migrated socially, psychologically, and logistically; we have married interracially and interculturallly; we're single mothers, married mothers, adoptive and adopted mothers, other mothers, lesbian mothers, and childless mothers. We're trying to transform the old societies and the old ways of thinking. We believe that, as women and mothers, we're the first educators of children.<sup>3</sup> As the first caregivers, we're also the first teachers. Therefore, it is important that *we* have the education, through formal and nonformal learning, and are responsible not only to ourselves, but to our families and to our communities.

Because we are first teachers, our male and female children learn from us. First teachers are not adequate if they are ignorant or illiterate. Our children are distinct products of our beliefs and the way we act. We also forge new pathways for the next generation. Just as, early in their development, children can learn prejudices from those who interact with them every day, they can instead learn tolerance and can grow to appreciate difference. Many of us live with the hope and anticipation for our progeny that there will be better words to describe people's differences in nonracist and nonethnocentric terms. Whiteness is erased by whites. Blackness, however, is racialized. Nonwhites in the United States are consistently marked by the larger society from the viewpoint of race.<sup>4</sup>

This is an exciting time and also a challenging historical moment. To be the progeny of any once-colonized people means to be a modern-day complexity of different histories in different places and cultures. Govern-

ment systems that can no longer operate and modes of thought that have outlived their own times are being dismantled; global, political, and cultural forces are still in a volatile flux. And both women and men are caught up in these crises of cultural representation and transformation. Edward Said states that “representation has thus had to contend not only with the consciousness of linguistic forms and conventions, but also with the pressures of such transpersonal . . . and transcultural forces as class, the unconscious, gender, race, and structure” (“Representing the Colonized” 206). Indeed, both representation and transformation, in the context of our contemporary lives, have complex implications. And certainly, as women coming from histories of colonization, we do not exclude our male kin who have also been a part of those same histories. In explaining and practicing our feminisms, we understand the extent to which we can align with our men because of the very system of colonization that has constructed systems of both racism and sexism. It’s not possible for us to deny the role that racism has played in our history even as we investigate “truths” that will transform old ideas about gender and class. We can acknowledge the importance of past male thinkers, statesmen, and public intellectuals, even if some of these figures may have been less than insightful about our gender issues; they nevertheless addressed ideologies of colonization that also affected women’s lives. We believe that there is room for both women and men at the convocation of global feminisms.<sup>5</sup>

Representation and transformation. How do we get people to consider new avenues for exploration and investigation into culture and ideas? How can we effectively move people into new ways of seeing and categorizing the world around them? What should we call each other collectively? Colonial legacies have influenced contemporary transnational identities, which further complicate how others view us. How do our transcultural identities inform ethnicity, class, and gender in the context of national alliances? How should we deal with outdated legacies of colonialism that persist despite the influences of progressive thinking and ideas that are conveyed by global technology? How can knowledge about colonialism and slavery empower us? To what extent have the legacies of slavery informed our contemporary identities as women?

I am reminded of the time when I was conducting field research among the Maroons in Jamaica. I met a young doctor who, having recently graduated from medical school in England, was in Jamaica doing research



on sickle cell anemia. She has a Persian first and surname and is surprised that the Jamaicans think that she is “white.” Shahnazz (not her real name) was born in Iran, then her parents migrated to England when she was four years old. She had never returned to the place of her birth. Even though she is a *British* citizen, the English do not consider her to be “English.” Shahnazz says that the English and Britishers (the nonwhites in England) see her as a “woman of color.” The English assume that she is from somewhere else even though England has been the only home in her memory. She doesn’t even have the chance to make an “ethnic choice” because she is always from “somewhere else.” Likewise, a third-generation Caribbean woman, Beryl, who was born in England, tells me, “No matter how much of this country [England] is in us, they will never allow us to be English.” I hear the anger in her voice. For Beryl, representation is a painful reminder of color prejudices and colonial signatures that, she believes, should remain in the past.

How can there *not* be a crisis when migrating subjects attempt to situate and transform identities that are all-encompassing? Does this mean sheer madness for the migrating subject? How do people like Shahnazz answer the compelling question “who are you?” when they migrate to new places? Coming to terms with his own representation (his father is Cameroonian and his mother is French), tennis star Yannick Noah says that when he is in France, he is black; when he is in Africa, he is white.

We may view postcoloniality as a dynamic decolonizing process of change and continuity, not as a conclusive event in history marked by geopolitical boundaries and national flags. How then do we begin to transform ways of thinking so that we are not categorized by phenotype and other superficial indicators? The personal and political chameleons with which Shahnazz, Beryl, and Yannick Noah have to contend are everyday reminders of the colonial conditions that are being challenged, transformed, and decolonized across cultures.

### What Does This Awl Mean?

I believe that writing takes a lot of courage. Many women writers have the courage to create new ways of interpreting history and culture. My particular approach to writing about women writers focuses on theory, practice, and the application of autobiography and memory through personal scholarship. How can we “do” theory so that it becomes meaningful enough to put into practice?

In her book *What This Awl Means: A Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village*, Janet Spector discusses how she mapped out a particular feminist approach to understanding the memory of an archaeological dig that she conducted at a nineteenth-century Indian village site in Minnesota. The awl is a perforating tool used to make holes in leather for sewing. The title of Spector's book is meant to indicate how personal and cultural artifacts highlight the accomplishments of forgotten or unknown Dakota women in Minnesota history. Awls could be beautiful tools with carved handles made from antler, wood, or bone. Spector writes, "I turned my attention to an artifact . . . a small antler awl handle, delicately inscribed with a series of dots and lines. I felt certain that a Wahpeton woman had once used that tool at Little Rapids and that its inscriptions conveyed a great deal about her accomplishments to those who understood their meaning" (18). Although small and seemingly insignificant, the awl was an important tool that Indian people used long before their contact with Europeans. To whom could the particular awl have belonged? Spector imagines how

Mazaakiyewin used the sharp-pointed awl for punching holes in pieces of leather before stitching them with deer sinew. . . . When [she] had completed more complicated work, such as sewing and decorating a buckskin dress or pipe bag, she formed diamond-shaped clusters of four small dots which symbolized the powers of the four directions that influenced her life in many ways. She liked to expose the handle of this small tool as she carried it in its beaded case so that others could see she was doing her best to ensure the well-being of their community. (24–25)

With her approach to bringing a human quality to archaeology, Spector places the awl that she finds into an autoethnographic context and traces a memory that could have been.

What does this all mean for New World women of African descent? Our awls—our personal and communal artifacts—have dynamic meanings that may shift as we migrate culturally, psychologically, or geographically. And certainly our awls are taken with us and represent change as well as continuity and diversity. Even though we migrate, we shouldn't lose the awls that could be our artifacts of empowerment. We can't afford to forget context, association, and meaning. Our personal and communal awls have sometimes been lost or forgotten. We can find them as "texts" and return them to a meaningful context. We may not be trained archaeologists, but many of us retrace history and cultural

memories in order to move forward. One of the awls that represent our history is that of mothering. This metaphoric awl contains the idea that we want to celebrate our potential as mothers and celebrate the women who mothered around us. Many of us believe that we are “mothers” even if we never have biological children. We are what I am signifying: the mother-women.

What do I mean by “mother-women”? Kate Chopin used the term in her 1899 novel *The Awakening*. The central character, Edna Pontellier, lives in a society that sanctifies “women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (19). In that context, the biological/reproduction premise foregrounds mothering. The woman who mothers in that way is a long-sufferer for her children and husband: she’s the ubiquitous angel in the house. When I first read Chopin’s novel, I was simultaneously amused by and attracted to her use of the image of certain women as unsullied angels. I began to think about a revised image of the concept, that of mothering-women. The women of my New World history could not be angels in the house; nor could their ancestral mothers have been allowed that privilege. Reality was considerably different across cultures in the Americas. The revised image contributes to defining our heritage and lineages as we transform the residue of colonialism into agencies of empowerment across our cultures and national alliances. Our lineage is transcultural and transnational. In this narrative, lineage is past, present, and future. The title of this book, *Mothering Across Cultures*, accentuates the importance of transformation and decolonizing the representation of mothering. The connections are what Chinosole calls the “matrilineal diaspora” through which poet Audre Lorde celebrated “the house of self.” The attributes of the matrilineal diaspora enable “the capacity to survive and aspire, to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations” (Chinosole 379). The significance of the matrilineal diaspora is central to this present exploration because the idea also engages women-centered histories of Africa and the diversity of its diaspora, and the autobiographical and biographical experiences of memory and history.

Mothering is a term that conveys the intensity of caregiving on many levels. Feminist mothering reclaims the roles of women even as it is also a human attribute. Harriet G. Rosenberg highlights the cross-cultural caregiving role of mothering in such a way that “caregiving is explained

as a quality of human, not female, nature. . . . The web of caregiving . . . moves well beyond the limited confines of the nuclear family. It is based in kinship/community ideology. It is not sentimentalized as a form of self-sacrifice” (Rosenberg 48–49).<sup>6</sup> Mothering, therefore, in this present context is meant as a caring of the mind, body, intellect, and culture of ourselves and our extended kinship of community within the diversity of the matrilineal diaspora. Decidedly, there is the kind of mothering—historical, biological, or other—that devours and destroys. Contemporary black women writers across cultures deal with these issues of fear and the detriment and determent of mothering. Whereas there is fear, according to Adrienne Rich, “in becoming one’s mother” (57), Jamaican poet, Lorna Goodison celebrates the potential journey in becoming her mother. In *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, Simone A. James Alexander succinctly puts it this way:

Amid this fear, the daughter is faced with the task of finding self, of becoming and creating a space where she is at home with herself. The search for self is “complete” when one has a sense of “home,” when one has made peace with the mother and the mother’s land. (25)

I connect with Alexander, who further writes that “this acquisition of ‘wholeness’ is achieved only with the help and nurturing presence of a mother who is defined by her spiritual mooring” (25). Indeed, it is in the moorings of spirituality and spiritual consciousness that the writers and historical figures that I have selected here search for wholeness across historical time and cultures. Mothering-women in this sense represent the womanism of wholeness and the vast possibilities for the once-colonized to achieve victory through self-affirmation.

American feminists have challenged traditional interpretations of mothering. In many instances, mothering has been rejected because of its reliance on the model of the biological mother whose primary responsibility is to raise her own children and offer an idealized, unchanging model of motherhood for her husband. It has meant subordination to others. Indeed, like Edna Pontellier, the ideal mother in middle-class, Euro-American culture had to be a “ministering angel.” In that model, the responsibility for mothering lies with the biological mother for whom the role is exclusively “natural” and a mission of moral imperatives that embrace unconditional love and unconditional doing for others. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg describes the role of the middle-class mother as the

guardian of religion and a paragon of virtue and morality. She discusses at length how these attitudes and beliefs were nurtured and strengthened in nineteenth-century Victorian America:

Such a mother had the task of guiding the more worldly and more frequently tempted male past the maelstroms of atheism and uncontrolled sexuality. Her sphere was the hearth and the nursery; within it she was to bestow care and love, peace and joy. The American girl was taught at home, at school and in the literature of the period, that aggression, independence, self-assertion and curiosity were male traits, inappropriate for the weaker sex and her limited sphere. Dependent throughout her life, she was to reward her male protectors with affection and submission. . . . She was . . . to remain a child-woman, never developing the strengths and skills of adult autonomy. The stereotype of the middle class woman as emotional, pious, passive and nurturant was to become increasingly rigid throughout the nineteenth century. (652)

Affection and submission were played out in the “nondeviant” feminine role of women as wives and biological mothers. The characteristics of the proper “American girl” remind me of Sojourner Truth’s famous “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” speech of 1851. In her speech Truth, as a former slave woman, had to assert herself in a way that the “American girl” could not:

Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber helped me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place and ar’n’t I a woman? . . . I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ar’n’t I a woman? I have born thirteen chilern and seen em mos’ all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar’n’t I a woman?<sup>7</sup>

Sojourner Truth challenged gender attitudes stipulated by nineteenth-century Euro-American society. Ahead of her time, she interwove race, class, and gender while abolitionists and women’s rights advocates still saw these categories as mutually exclusive. Repeating the question “ar’n’t I a woman?” throughout the speech for a resounding rhetorical effect, Truth forced her audience to think about what she was saying. Truth knew that her experiences and physical attributes made her capacity for being a woman rather profound. She never had the luxury of being a member of the socially defined weaker sex, a definition that created and glorified the American girl-woman. She understood that although

she too was a woman, her body had been savagely denied the luxury of weakness.

Among women of African descent in the Americas there has been considerable variation in the definitions of mothering. In New World African cultures there are many ideas and practices of mothering based on cultural perceptions about kinship. During the early centuries of conquest and bondage in the Americas, newly arrived African women had to adjust the way they constructed and practiced family unity under the harsh and traumatic conditions of slavery. At that time, women were on mutual nurturing grounds with men trying to sustain family unity. The people believed that women were the first teachers of the children, thus women needed to be responsible and prepared for the role. They had these memories not only from women who mothered and the male kin who helped to sustain them, but from their traditions: hope, endurance, and the spirituality of their ancestors. What kind of spirit did the ancestral mothers leave for us? How do we rediscover the past in order to come to terms with our present historical moment? How does the past construct our feminist destiny? When will colonization cease to influence the construction of gender, race, and class? I use the concept of mothering-women to discuss transcultural and transhistorical mothering themes in novels by Toni Morrison (United States), Jean Rhys (Dominica/England), Simone Schwarz-Bart (Guadeloupe), and Mariama Bâ (Senegal). My approach to cross-cultural representations of mothering emphasizes how mothering itself intersects the cultural milieu and conditions of history and memory within the matrilineal diaspora. Through their writing these authors share their personal and collective awls with the experiences of history, race, ethnicity, class, generation differences, and gender. I conclude the exploration with an autobiographical text that locates my own sites of memory and culture through the voice of the woman who mothered me.

The concept of mothering-women summons Sojourner Truth's legacy. The concept also encompasses Alice Walker's paradigm of womanism. Implicit in Walker's assertion of womanism is the presence of the woman and girl-child as potential "mother." Empowered girl-children grow into women who learn how to assert themselves, who become "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female." Walker also redefines what it means to act "uppity." When the girl-child becomes a woman and acts up, she is her own agent in a society that often denies

her potentiality. She is “[t]raditionally capable, as in: ‘Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘It wouldn’t be the first time’” (“Definition of a Womanist” 370). Indeed, when the mother-woman acts uppity, it is not the first time. The phrase “walking to Canada” signifies the escape from slavery into freedom, facing difficulties and meeting challenges, and it pays tribute to women of color who participate in the process of social and political transformations *without* leaving the family behind.

Women, regardless of ethnic heritage or prescribed racial identifications, can become mother-women; in good health, we have the capability to walk to Canada.

As individuals creating pathways into the new millennium, we want to act responsibly for ourselves, our families, and our societies. Yet we are not superwomen. Like the collective voice of an oracle of infinite knowing, we perceive that, indeed, *as an individual I love myself because there is no time for the long-sufferer. I have the capacity for many different roles and alliances across cultures. I am the professional woman and the working-class woman. I am the woman who stays at home as a first teacher. If I have ever been depressed and in the attic, I have come out. I am not there. I am the woman who gives counsel, and who seeks it. I am the woman who empowers herself to move off welfare. I theorize agency because I am the agent of transformation. I lose my patience and become exceedingly tired and feel very unloved. I am also the compassionate woman who is able to regain patience and be loved as if I have never been hurt or belittled, dehumanized and left out of histories—or out of the boardroom. I am the woman who believes in freedom and in claiming my choices as if my forebears were never enslaved or colonized and always had a choice. I am the woman who dances like nobody is watching. Along with my sisters and mothers of the world, I contribute to the diversity of inclusive feminisms from grassroots theories to transforming practices.*

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a  
respect for strength—in search of my mother’s garden,  
I found my own.

—Alice Walker

A mi madre a quien amo con toda mi vida  
[To my mother whom I love with all my life]

This project began to grow as an inquiry into the theme of mothering across cultures through literature and autobiographical memory. Many events have taken place in my life since I first began thinking about the cultures of mothering. My scholarly ideas have been unabashedly influenced and shaped by the personal and transnational dynamics of my life in Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. Before I could finish this project, my own beloved mother passed on. My mother provided me with stability, education, a belief in myself, and a foundation for the opportunities life could offer. To echo Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison, may I inherit half of my mother's strength. My incredible mother had so many dreams and ambitions; she was not able to fulfill all of the personal ones. She deferred her dreams and sacrificed her ambitions so that I could have the opportunities to "jump at the sun." Mothering is an enormous responsibility that women of African ancestry have not had time to challenge or reject in order to protest sexism in our communities or in our larger societies. Most of our mother-women wanted their daughters to jump at the sun—nothing should stop us from pursuing the gift of life. My grandmother from Belize, Apolonia Estrada Hill, used to say in her Garífuna accent: "Aim for da moon, daughta, 'cause if you miss, you still among da stars."

On the one hand, during the decades of the sixties and seventies, theories about black women and mothering were often viewed in romanticized terms. Filomina Chioma Steady wrote about the overall biological heritage of women in traditional African societies:

No doubt the most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role for society as a whole. Even in strictly patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the husband's lineage, and it is because of women that men can have a patrilineage at all. . . . For African women, the role of mother is often central and has intrinsic value. (*The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* 29)

Mothering extends beyond those sociological and biological paradigms or the need to satisfy men who must have children at any cost.

On the other hand, how do we balance the traditions we need to hold on to with those intrinsic ones that should be left behind? Another generation of women writers and thinkers of African descent do not



view women as inert mother-vessels. Edwidge Danticat, Tina Asa McElroy, Toni Morrison, Simone Schwarz-Bart, and Alice Walker are among the contemporary writers who assert the diversity of women's mothering roles. Mothering may begin with a woman's relationship to a child, but it can no longer simply end at that relationship. I agree with Johnnetta B. Cole, who writes,

Among the rules of patriarchy are that all women are to be mothers, a rule applied to Black women no less than to White women. This ideal persists despite the fact that not all women are biological mothers and many women do not wish to be. What is of particular interest with respect to Black women in America is that racism and poverty frequently bring about situations in which many Black children will have surrogate mothers. These are the women who care for our young and fill in for mothers who cannot be there. . . . Many young African-American girls have multiple models of "mother." (*Double Stitch* xv)

The concept of having other mothers in the community is not unique for African American girls.<sup>8</sup> Among Caribbean, Latin American, and African societies as well, women often perform similar roles. In these cultures there has always been the other mother. Edith Clark's *My Mother Who Fathered Me: A Study of the Family in Three Selected Communities in Jamaica* is among the early studies that highlighted the role of other mothers in the extended kinship family in Jamaica in particular, and by extension throughout the Caribbean. Among Jamaicans, certain women in the neighborhood "yards" may be significantly referred to as "me odder madda."<sup>9</sup> Among the Garífuna in Honduras, an older woman who has arrived at a certain age and may not have had her own children is often called *abuela* (grandmother) by members of her extended family and community in their respect for her role as one of the revered other mothers. This is a personal title that carries prestige.<sup>10</sup> In such a capacity the honored woman is known as the other mother, *macomère* or *comadre*—the role that also extends the definition of godmother.<sup>11</sup>

We continue to create "feminine feminisms" that celebrate the fluid and diversified roles of mothering that move beyond the biological foundations of mother and child. When new perspectives of mothering across cultures are formulated and historical perspectives revisited, mothering will not be the biological *right* of passage. We will continue to mother our minds and intellect, a concept that Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley illuminate in their collection of essays, *Mothering the Mind*.

The mothering terrain is often ambivalent and may at times seem to be contradictory. The heroine of Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* sits quietly in her therapy session. The psychotherapist is somewhat annoyed because Tashi has not responded to therapy and he tells her: "Negro women . . . can never be analyzed effectively because they can never bring themselves to blame their mothers" (18). That fictional observation is a slice of reality; many psychologists and other medical therapists believe that, regardless of race, culture, and class, relationships between mothers and daughters should be problematic. The remark made by the psychotherapist is comic irony because his therapy cannot succeed unless the patient "blames" and "indicts" her mother for her mental illness and the disruptions in her adult life. Debunking Western stereotypes of motherhood, psychologist Shari L. Thurer challenges what numerous American psychologists advocate:

Psychological theories, especially those which have trickled down to a general audience . . . have not been kind to mothers. If a mother is too involved with her children, whatever that means, she is considered overprotective, stifling, or intrusive. If she is not sufficiently involved with her children, whatever that means, she is rejecting, cold, and narcissistic. Some psychotherapists are so sure that bad mothering is the cause of all later idiosyncrasies that they tend to discover it in every patient they treat. (xxi)

Like the doctor in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, if modern psychologists cannot find blame for the problem, many of them will invent the bad mother and irresponsible (biological) motherhood. Yet, despite any ambivalence about mothering that mother-women of African descent in the Americas may have presented to their daughters, the importance of extended mothering provided the entire family with a source of refuge when the larger society failed and dismissed them. Mother-women continue to have connective and collective identities. We must not blame the mothers, because if we blame them, we also blame ourselves.

Ideas on mothering and motherhood, such as those initially posited by Nancy Chodorow, privilege individualism, separation from the mother, and autonomy rather than bonding and identification. Feminist writers and thinkers discuss the ambivalence of mothering when they find it difficult to identify with mothering in feminist arenas. In her essay "The World and Our Mothers," Vivian Gornick writes that mother-daughter relationships are complex and difficult because "our necessity, it seems,

is not so much to kill our fathers as it is to separate from our mothers, and it is the daughters who must do the separating” (52). Responding to Gornick’s assertions, Donna Perry writes that “this may be true of the fiction [and reality] of white women, but several women of color have immortalized successful struggles between mothers and daughters in fiction and autobiography. . . . Whereas Gornick and others, following the lead of modern psychoanalysis, claim that our greatest source of tension and conflict resides in the family, black women writers (and many writers of color) recognize that these familial tensions cannot be seen apart from the broader reality of racism” (“Initiation” 252). New World African communities, although frequently the source of male authority, are often the only source for family support away from day-to-day racism. Deborah Gray White explains that black women could deal with life by “falling back upon their families, the black female community, and the positive female identity that family and community helped to forge” (163). Mothering and its relationship to the family were until recently labeled by some feminists as the source of women’s oppression. Our extended kinships provide that sense of place to which women of color can turn for solace and emotional support, even if the communities are not perfect. We unabashedly claim the women who mother us.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all words are created equally; but, they are endowed by their authors with certain inalienable rights.

In 1776 Thomas Jefferson, not yet president of the United States, wrote the preamble and the text for the American Declaration of Independence. The preamble was etched out for posterity. Actually, it reads like, in part, like this: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” We know that when the Declaration was signed and accepted by the newly formed Congress, all *men* in the new nation were not *treated equally*—slavery was still legal and no women or black men had the same rights as white men. From his beautiful Monticello estate in Virginia, Jefferson enjoyed his life, liberty, wealth, and pursuit of happiness while his slaves labored to ensure these things for him.<sup>12</sup> Yet just as Jefferson and other “founding fathers” used documents to formulate and engrave

their beliefs, the people they enslaved began to write about *their* liberty and *their* inalienable rights. Despite laws throughout the Americas that forbade slaves to be literate, some slaves did learn to read and write. We know that literacy is a powerful tool that can become a weapon for the oppressed. Writing about the Haitian resistance to slavery, Jean Fouchard succinctly puts it this way: “A l’esclave sorti du rang, le maître confiera une scie, un violon, un pinceau, une mandoline. . . . Mais il demeurerait interdit d’avoir un syllabaire” [For a slave rising up through the ranks, the master provided a saw, a violin, an artist’s paint brush, a mandolin. . . . But it would remain forbidden for him to have a spelling book] (23). From their masters, they learned that reading and writing were rites of passage into the consciousness called humanity. And particularly in the United States, the slave narrative was one of the ways in which they could assert their *human* right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

Most slave narratives written by men were occupied with obtaining freedom and the adventure of the escape. Jean Fagan Yellin maintains that narratives written by women concentrated on their roles as mothers and protectors of their children. For example, the theme of Frederick Douglass’s well-known *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is about his early life as a slave, his preparation for escape, and his flight to freedom. But in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) postpones her actual escape from the South for seven years because of her children. Her role as a mother at that time is more important than escape. Jacobs’s *Incidents* is a full narrative of her life before her escape, while Douglass’s *Narrative* is an account of incidents in his life before he escapes. Nevertheless, the grandmother in both narratives, to the extent that she is able, fulfills the role of mothering.

The capacity of the grandmother is cross-culturally prominent in autobiographies and novels such as Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Nafissatou Diallo’s *De Tilène au Plateau: une enfance dakaraise* (*A Dakar Childhood*), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (*The Bridge of Beyond*), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The grandmother provides what Senegalese writer Ken Bugul refers to in her autobiography, *Le Baobab fou* (*The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*), as one of the reassuring landmarks of her life and culture. Writing about the grandmother in the Jamaican context, Michelle Cliff asserts that the

powerful aspect of the grandmother originates in Nanny, the African warrior and Maroon leader. At her most powerful, the grandmother is the source of knowledge, magic, ancestors, stories, healing practices, and food. She is an inheritor of African belief systems, African languages. She may be informed with *àshe*, the power to make things happen, the responsibility to mete justice. (“Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character” 267)

Grandmothers, older aunts, sisters, and neighbor women often fulfilled the mothering role in the community and out of necessity performed as mother-women. Trinidad author Dionne Brand’s short story “Photograph” movingly characterizes the kind of relationship that grandmothers as other mothers could have with their grandchildren:

All of the words which we knew belonged to my grandmother. All of them, a voluptuous body of endearment, dependence, comfort and infinite knowing. We were all full of my grandmother, she had left us full and empty of her. We dreamed in my grandmother and we woke up in her, bleary-eyed and gesturing for her arm, her elbows, her smell. We jockeyed with each other, lied to each other, quarreled with each other and with her for the boon of lying close to her, sculpting ourselves around the roundness of her back. Braiding her hair and oiling her feet. . . . We anticipated where she would sit and got there before her. . . . She had left us empty and full of her. (180)

Memory of the grandmother is another awl that summons intimate experiences that have provided recognizable cross-cultural strengths.

Perhaps strength is not the most appropriate word here because it has been negatively used to stereotype black women in the United States. Certainly for some people strength in a black woman is a negative characteristic. Much of the early social science research on the black family claimed that the “strong black matriarch” was the cause of its “destruction.” That research ignored how people of African descent created their own unique ways of maintaining family unity. In his infamous study of 1965, “The Negro Family: Case for National Action,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote: “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (quoted in Rainwater and Yancey 75). According to Moynihan and others who supported his position, “power” within the black family was shaped by the mother, the

so-called matriarch, the misnamed, the “called out of name.” The image of the “matriarch” was incorrectly identified as the source of the black male’s social and economic disenfranchisement. The meaning of matriarch should define economic and political power in the same way that the term “patriarch” is used. In the African American historical context, black women have not been matriarchs. In the historical aftermath of slavery, the name of the African American mother continued to be manipulated through the ideology of a supposed matriarchy. Moynihan didn’t understand what constituted the inner reserves of women of African descent. He didn’t know that being an empowered woman is not the same as being a matriarch. “Black mothers,” Patricia Hill Collins tells us,

have a distinctive relationship to White patriarchy, they may be less likely to socialize their daughters into their proscribed role as subordinates. Rather, a key part of Black girls’ socialization involves incorporating the critical posture that allows Black women to cope with contradictions. . . . Black girls have long had to learn how to do domestic work while rejecting definitions of themselves as Mammies. At the same time they’ve had to take on strong roles in Black extended families without internalizing images of themselves as matriarchs. (53)

I heard the following story among a group of friends. It illustrates the kind of fortitude that resonates as part of our collective past—the matrilineal diaspora. Toward the end of Reconstruction in the American South some members of the Ku Klux Klan visited a very pregnant woman one night. She lay in her bed almost ready to deliver her baby, when several of the hooded men forced entry into her little house. The Klansmen surrounded her bed and demanded to know the whereabouts of her husband. Her husband had been stirring up trouble in town by organizing the small black population and demanding certain kinds of social and political rights. Now the Klan was after him. They told the woman that she either tell them where he had gone or they would kill her and the unborn baby. The woman sat up in her bed and said, “Go ahead and kill me; I’m not telling you where he went.” After much threatening and verbal abuse, they decided to leave without carrying out their threat. The only explanation that the woman could give for not being murdered that night was that, indeed, God was on her side. She was ready to die for the cause of justice. Perhaps the Klansmen realized her inner reserves and knew that she meant what she had said to them. The woman

gave birth to a healthy girl-child. The daughter of that girl-child is alive today. She continues to tell her grandmother's story in order that we may know about destiny, determination, and the inheritance of our inner reserves.

After listening to such narratives, we may realize how insufficiently schooled much of white America, the other America, is in our suffering. The other America doesn't know how determined many of us are to make a better world for the next generation waiting to be born. This kind of empowerment is an attribute; it's the lineage of strength that Adrienne Rich describes as

a kind of strength which can only be one woman's gift to another, the bloodstream of our inheritance. Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter, from woman to woman across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness. (246)

Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment.

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

The Age of Enlightenment initiated a profound intellectual and scientific upheaval in Western thought; its radical ideals replaced the anthropocentric worldview of Aristotle and the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment era also idealized the meaning of freedom. The inalienable rights of man, however, continued to be promulgated against the backdrop of world slavery. These rights of *European men* created, enhanced, and maintained slavery. "The concept of freedom," Toni Morrison reminds us, "did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery" (*Playing in the Dark* 38). Contemporary historians, creative writers, and culture critics are among those redefining the ages of exploration and Enlightenment in order to reassess history and various truths connected to history. Rereading evidence is a search for new truths that may uncover information on the past. In particular, the slave experience in the Americas is rediscovered with remarkable energy and with, it seems to me, unprecedented interest. Much of this focus is on women and in redefining cultural artifacts, our interconnected awls of the past.

My field research on gender and slavery began with an initiation project commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s “momentous voyage” to the Americas. At that time I was researching the evidence of unsung eighteenth-century women in Jamaica, the island that Columbus “discovered” in 1494 during his second trip to the Americas. I searched for their personal stories because they had been lost in conventional history. I was not so much interested in the institution of their slavery as I was in uncovering some evidence of their personal definition and life stories.

How do we look for evidence in history when that very evidence could have been purposely hidden or ignored by the conquerors of history? James Wilkinson discusses how the “remains of the past comprise what survives of everything that ever happened; evidence consists of those remains that historians use in making histories. . . . The expanded definition of evidence is . . . a response to an expanded definition of history itself. As long as history was primarily a diplomatic and political record of the ‘kings and battles’ variety, evidence was primarily the written word—specifically, words written by those at or near the summit of the political hierarchy, where decisions were made and literacy prevailed” (80–81). My interests would focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women who were illiterate and not in the recorded hierarchy. I therefore had to look for sources where evidence was not necessarily written down. I had to uncover different artifacts because illiteracy often prevailed; I had to look for other signs and directions of communication from the past.

Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me. . . . Ah said Ah’d save de text for you.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

When Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* was first published, I was attracted to the fugitive slave story of Margaret Garner on which the novel is based. Who was Margaret Garner? I couldn’t find anything about Garner in the secondary history books, but during the course of my background research on slavery, I found Samuel May’s little book, *The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims*. May’s compilation referred to the 1856 references on Margaret Garner. I’d found the source that would lead me



to other sources that would result in chapter 1, “Taking Flight and Taking Foot: From Margaret Garner to *Beloved*.”

References to the Garner fugitive slave incident since the publication of Morrison’s *Beloved* are based on literary hearsay or secondary sources that merge facts with fiction and legend. In chapter 1, I present a comprehensive account of the evidence surrounding the Garner case using primary sources from 1856 to 1867. The Garner incident was reported and debated in most of the antislavery tracts and newspapers in the United States, the West Indies, England, and Scotland. Antislavery societies in Glasgow and Edinburgh used the Garner case to help further the cause of abolition in the United States. (By 1856 England had already abolished slavery in its colonies.) Abolitionists of the time claimed that Garner was heroic. Was Garner a heroic slave mother? What *human* right did she have to take her daughter’s life?

I use Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as a point of departure for discussing how the literary imagination can intersect with historical anecdotes and circumstances. But evidence can also be elusive. Obviously, nineteenth-century women like Garner did not and could not leave any nicely written narratives or legal briefs about the remarkable events in their lives. Because they were illiterate many of them could not write their own stories into history. Would they have wanted to? Would they have thought of leaving evidence for us, their historical descendants? In slavery, survival and resistance often depended on *covering up* evidence. Deliberate amnesia was a survival tactic. The people may have needed secrecy in order to gain a measure of stability in their unstable world. Many of their secrets will never be known.

Morrison says she was inspired to write *Beloved* because she was fascinated by a mother’s love that could express itself in murder. I was fascinated by evidence in its relationship to the slave mother who would take flight, murder, and attempt suicide. What is the implication for morality here? Garner was not the first slave mother to commit infanticide; why should her story have been such a sensational one in 1856? Slavery corrupted slave owners but it also corrupted the enslaved. *Beloved* asks us to think about the past and the present: wherein lies the healing for both peoples? Morrison says, “Usually a book on slavery is about slave masters, the institution—a predictable plot. When I say *Beloved* is not about slavery, I mean that the story is not slavery. The story is these people—these people who don’t know they’re in an era of historical in-

terest. They just know they have to get through the day. . . . they are trying desperately to be parents, husbands, and a mother with children” (“Five Years of Terror” 75).

The majority of the slaves (especially women) in the Americas left no written records of their interior motivations. We have to go to different sites that contain artifacts that might uncover things we have not known about. The artifacts invite us to discover clues in letters, diaries, photographs, newspapers, cemeteries, old maps, and quilts.<sup>13</sup> The artifacts provide interpretations of primary source materials that shed new perspectives on the past. How did women of African ancestry in the United States and in the Caribbean try to gain some control of their lives during slavery and colonialism? Knowing the past helps us come to terms with the present and helps us secure new foundations for the future. Such would be my application of research and practice.

My investigation into the Garner case involved the subjects of infanticide and suicide. I began to speculate about the folk motif known as the flying African. Stories about Africans who could fly are told throughout the New World. These legends and folk tales are about African people, brought to the Americas in bondage, who could fly or walk on the ocean in their attempt to return to their homeland. Newly arrived Africans sought freedom through marronage (living as fugitive slaves) or the return to the homeland through death. Did Margaret Garner know about the stories of flying Africans?

What did these stories actually mean? What was the cover-up that the Africans so successfully managed? Here, I speculate (from the evidence of oral history accounts) that “to fly” is a euphemism, a utilitarian cover-up for “taking foot” (escaping) and for suicide. Saying that the people could fly was a deliberate attempt to misrepresent or encode what they, the survivors, knew was really happening. What Morrison calls “dismemory” was a kind of psychological protection—today we would call it a “defense mechanism”; their dismemory was self-inflicted amnesia. In many instances, immediate memories of the actual Middle Passage were deliberately displaced or dismemoried because of this collective survival amnesia. Those who were left behind, the community of kin who did not commit suicide, became the interpreters and the mythmakers. They used their imagination to transfer the meaning and reality of death into the image of the flying African. The survivors could perform necessary rituals in remembrance of the ones who had dared to commit suicide;

they would subvert the horror of suicide in order to preserve what they believed would be the victim's safe spiritual passage back to Africa. Because taking one's own life was forbidden in their ontological beliefs, many slaves needed to conduct cleansing rituals when suicide occurred. For my purposes, I do not concentrate on the documentation or demographics of suicide, but on the encoding of suicide among New World slaves. I speculate on how the belief in the myth of the flying African may have acted as an agency of psychological and spiritual preservation for the survivors.

"Taking Flight and Taking Foot" places *Beloved* in dialogue with traces of this Middle Passage history: the virtual reality of the flying African as suicide, and the attempt for reconciliation with that history. The impact of the taboo (suicide) over a period of time leaves the community with repetitive tales and fantastic stories because the original trauma of suicide has been forgotten. *Beloved* is a story about recovering slaves, but it is also about recovering slave owners. As a very American novel, *Beloved* is both the story of a quest and a plea for reconciliation and recovery.

In chapter 2, "Surrogate Mothering: Maroon Nanny, Jean Rhys, and Marronage," I focus on the figure of an eighteenth-century African Jamaican, fugitive slave woman, Maroon Nanny, as a point of departure for discussing Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the archives in Spanish Town, Jamaica, there is a copy of the deed that granted land to Nanny during peace negotiations with the British in 1741. Throughout the Americas marronage occurred when runaway slaves formed hidden enclaves of community and survival. Through archival research and fieldwork in Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Scotland, and the United States I investigated primary sources from slave records, ship logs, judicial records, unpublished journals, letters, land deeds, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century broadsides in search of a different story that could highlight the integrity of Maroon legacies.

How is Rhys connected to Nanny? Jean Rhys and Nanny are "unrelated kin."<sup>14</sup> Their gender-oriented heritage adds to the complexity of their historical kinship. They both struggled for that sense of place they could claim as home. Rhys was a fugitive not only from her homeland, Dominica, but also from her island heritage. I discuss Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as an autobiographical extension of her personal and literary consciousness through the tropes of marronage, surrogate mothering, and gender alienation. Rhys, who died in 1979, seems to have found

her own cultural recovery, her own cultural healing in the writing of her most acclaimed novel. I have placed Rhys's history next to Nanny's history. Living two centuries apart, Nanny was black and Rhys was a white Creole. "White" and "Creole" are flotilla words: the fluidity is, depending on the historical moment and place, a reflection of class, gender, and this thing we call race—all aspects of socially constructed relativity in motion. Who is Creole? Who is white in the Caribbean? Echoing Rhys, I would say damn few. Who is white, but poor? Who remains black *despite* being upper-class and educated? Rhys felt that being a white Creole who had "coloured relatives" carried emotional and cultural ambivalence. Whiteness continues to have more levels of interpretation in the Caribbean and Latin America than it does in the United States. How are "black" and "white" defined in racial terms? *Le Code Noir* (the Black Code) established by France in 1685 affirmed the superior position of Europeans in the Caribbean and by extension in the rest of the Americas. Even though *Le Code* may have defined the division between slaves and masters, it could not maintain the "purity of whiteness" because of the paradoxical intimacy that was inevitable between masters and slaves.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout her autobiographical writings, Rhys expressed her uncertainties toward race and race relations in the Caribbean. In many of her novels and short stories there is an autobiographical dialogue with her characters about her own ambivalence about race, gender, and powerlessness. Rhys creates this autobiographical dialogue not only with the landscape of the Caribbean, but with the character Christophine Dubois in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. A figure of intrigue in the novel's counternarrative, Christophine Dubois, former slave and surrogate mother, is the antithesis of the Rhys heroine. Whereas the central character, Antoinette Cosway, is not able to challenge inherent colonial oppression, Christophine acts as her own agent. Many choices are made by others for Antoinette because of the society's patriarchal, slavery-haunted system of values. Christophine, on the other hand, strives to make her own choices, even if they are limited. My analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* focuses on the role of Christophine in the text and in the context of Nanny's Caribbean landscape. Christophine holds a key to gender empowerment. Despite her hesitations about making Christophine an "articulate" black woman, Rhys must have admired her creation of this character. Christophine is written out of the heroine's life, but in keeping with the trope of marronage, her symbolic presence remains.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on paradigms of mothering-women in specific historical and cultural contexts related to New World slavery. I highlight particular cultural anecdotes that serve as sources of representation for Morrison and Rhys. In chapter 3, “Refusing to Live on Scent: Textures of Memory by Way of *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*,” I begin with a reconstructed autobiography of a West Indian slave woman named Magdalena. The Watcher is a first-person narrator who witnesses Magdalena inscribe herself into history through writing. The narrative that Magdalena writes is not “told-to” but is written “by herself.” Eighteenth-century African Moravian slave narratives and petitions would become the harbingers of the more well-known nineteenth-century slave narratives written in the United States. In actual fact, a woman named Mary Magdalene wrote an autobiographical petition in Creole Danish to the Queen of Denmark sometime in 1739. Magdalene, an African woman born in what is now the Republic of Benin, was sold into slavery when she was a young girl. She was taken to the island of St. Thomas in the West Indies and there became a Moravian among the missionaries of the United Brethren. My portrayal of Magdalene is in the form of an eighteenth-century Moravian journal entry with an excerpt from the Magdalene narrative that was published in *The Proceedings of the United Brethren for 1739*. Magdalene’s narrative (the full text is given in Appendix B) shows how an African woman had to adapt to the adversities of living in the New World as a slave. Many of the African-born slaves assumed new religions as they realized the hopelessness of seeing their homelands again. In the eighteenth century, as new cultures were forming in the Americas, women of African descent began to make significant choices regarding their own lives, which were fraught with indignities. Considering the male model of heroism, their choices may not seem heroic or particularly militant. Nevertheless, these mother-women in the Caribbean found inspiration and negotiated degrees of freedom. Literacy began the foundation for what Farah Jasmine Griffin refers to as “textual healing,” because literacy allowed bonded people to “write themselves into humanity.”

The opening fictional “memoir” of chapter 3 links Magdalena’s story and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s storytelling. Historically we have moved from the raw materials of literacy to the empowerment of writing. The fiction of Magdalena and the fiction of *Télumée* create a liaison between history and the creative imagination, and between history and memory.

From the outset of this chapter I want to highlight different levels of Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). Whose memory is it? Wherein lies the invention of the memoir as testimony and memory in its relationship to our perspectives on history? Schwarz-Bart writes *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* as an inspirational narrative arising out of the folkloric landscape of Guadeloupe. The women and men struggle through their lives as poverty-ridden peasants, but their perseverance and hope are distinct and their spirit for living is forceful. Suffering has to be transcended, hence they refuse to live off the scent of life.

The narrative structure evokes archival memory. Remembering a particular woman named Fanotte helped Schwarz-Bart to create a collage of women she had known in her personal life or read about in history: "Ce n'est pas seulement sa vie, mais aussi le symbole de toute une génération de femmes connues, ici, à qui je dois d'être antillaise, de me sentir comme je me sens. Télumée c'est, pour moi, une espèce de permanence de l'être antillais, de certaines valeurs." [It's not only her life, but it's also the symbol of a generation of women that I knew, who made me be Caribbean, who made me feel as I feel. Télumée is for me a kind of permanence of Caribbean being, a certain kind of valor] (Toumson 14). Fanotte was not someone in the distant Middle Passage past for Schwarz-Bart: "Je l'ai connue pendant mon enfance. . . . Elle racontait sa vie comme quelque chose de nostalgique, de perdu, qui disparaîtrait à tout jamais" [I knew her during my childhood. . . . She would tell her life story as something nostalgic, something lost, which had altogether disappeared] (15). Fanotte's stories are the *learnings* (lessons of experiences) from which Schwarz-Bart creates and accentuates passages of textual healing. Furthermore, similar to Paule Marshall, who pays homage to the mother-women of her life, whom she fondly calls the "kitchen bards," Schwarz-Bart's storytelling creates ancestral *lieux de mémoire*.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf was not impressed by women writers who "think back through [their] mothers" (79). There are those women who don't want to think back through their matrilineal past. And there are others who unabashedly remember the mothers. Chinosole's identification of the matrilineal diaspora embraces "that woman-centered power traced through [the] mother [and] sustained by loving women" (385). The loving women enabled themselves and the generations that would follow. The narratives of mothers—figurative, autobi-

ographical, or biographical—are central to our moving beyond the mediocrity of survival. Elderly women of color often say to one another: “I did the best that I could do for my children, in order to give them mother-wit for life.” We want to think back through the mothers because they did the best they could do. We remember how much our mother-women worked and provided nurturing grounds for us to move on. Alice Walker writes about her “mothers’ gardens” and describes southern women as the “crazy saints” who could not realize their full potential as creators. In writing back through her own cultural matrilineage, Schwarz-Bart negotiates the tensions among memory, life-story, and colonial history. The people who are still connected to that history must come to terms with economic exploitation in its new forms: poverty inflicted on them by the descendants of the slave owners and gender-oriented misery imposed on them by the men in and out of their lives. The Lougandor mother-women struggle against the “rain and wind” of colonialism in Guadeloupe. For them it is empowering to be able to think back through the heritage and ancestral lineage of their mothers.

In chapter 4, “Crossing Bridges and Memory-Telling: *Une si longue lettre*,” I build cultural and historical bridges to an African text. Literacy as empowerment in Magdalene’s world is a foundation for the writing of slave narratives as well as for the memories of Africa. What are the recognizable transformations when we cross bridges to Africa? Whereas in the previous chapter the eighteenth century is the setting for the opening memoir, chapter 4 opens with what Pierre Nora calls a “real environment of memory that lingers” on the island of Gorée. Gorée, off the coast of Senegal, is history, place, and memory. If to some people the island is a monument to slavery, how do we disengage it from the wounding of the memory? Gorée may have a history to pass on, to echo Toni Morrison in *Beloved*. Through memory-telling, however, we know the past in order to empower ourselves for the future. I use Gorée as a site of memory in order to situate Mariama Bâ’s *mémoire* (the letter), which tells us that we have to selectively and effectively disengage from the past.

Mariama Bâ’s novel, *Une si longue lettre*, is an epistolary narrative in the first person. Remembering the words of Zora Neale Hurston, it’s one of the texts from on high. *Lettre* is about a Senegalese widow’s emotional and spiritual redemption after the death of her estranged husband. What Eldred Jones wrote at the time of its publication in 1980 is

still relevant: “Mariama Bâ’s first novel offers a testimony of the female condition in Africa while at the same time giving that testimony true imaginative depth. The distinguishing feature of this novel is the poise of its narrative style which reveals a maturity of vision and feeling. *Lettre* deals with the theme of women’s emancipation in West Africa. But to say that it explores only the subject of emancipation is an oversimplification” (10). The novel is an excellent exploration of the complexities of mothering in a modern African nation. In this chapter I focus on a close reading of the text as representation. “No literature,” writes Michelle Cliff, “can be understood as discrete from the culture from which it arises. Black women’s literature embraces everything: it is visual, sonic, multilingual, percussive, explosive, Hollideist, Jamsonian, Hurstonian, Ida B. Wellesian, Hamerian, Bambaran—you get the drift. It should be read, or attempted, from the inside out, not from the outside in” (“Women Warriors” 20).

The central character of Bâ’s novel, Ramatoulaye, finds herself in the difficult position of the contemporary non-Western woman caught up in a modern transitional society. She needs to express herself as a progressive woman who can oppose certain patriarchal traditions that would be detrimental to her and the progress of the next generation of women. How are the old ways modified? How do we embrace tradition as we disengage from those activities and values that no longer work for us? Her worldview becomes all-encompassing: she moves from a heightened awareness of herself, of the family, and of the nation. Ramatoulaye eventually sees herself connected to the larger domain of global feminisms. She is an educated, middle-aged widow and mother. Through the letter of memory-telling, Bâ allows Ramatoulaye to transform herself spiritually and emotionally. What kind of importance does the letter bring to memory-telling? Ramatoulaye reminds herself, “Le mot bonheur recouvre bien quelque chose, n’est-ce pas? J’irai à sa recherche. Tant pis pour moi, si j’ai encore à t’écrire une si longue lettre. . . .” (131) [The word “happiness” does indeed have meaning, doesn’t it? I shall go out in search of it. Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter. . . .” (89)]. Through memory-telling the letter is written, and it becomes an artifact (or awl) in the milieu of Ramatoulaye’s own foundation for healing.

Chapter 5 is the conclusion that explores autobiographical memory through my own mother’s autobiographical narratives. The title “From



a Lineage of Southern Women: She Has Left Us Empty and Full of Her” is inspired from Dionne Brand’s short story “Photograph.” My mother, indeed, left me empty and full of her. When this project was near completion my beloved mother passed on. Johnnetta B. Cole states: “Because of the countless ways in which individual mothers and daughters are different, is it any wonder that Black mother-daughter relationships are presented in all their various forms and stages of development? Mothers and daughters can be competitors or conspirators. Their relationship can be synergistic or parasitic; they can be adversaries or the closest of friends and allies” (xiv). I was not only the daughter in our relationship, we were sister-friends. Many times when people saw my mother and me laughing, teasing, and joking with each other, they said that we acted more like sisters than like mother and daughter. A few days after she died I started writing about her. I needed to write out the memories of her in order to deal with my love and my loss, my emptiness and my fullness. The memories would fill spaces of sorrow and upheaval. Writing memory helped to heal the wound of loss.

I believe my mother could have been one of Alice Walker’s crazy saints because, although she had wanted to write, she didn’t—at least not for a publisher’s audience. Her writing was only the stuff of letters and the wisdom of orality. But her writing and memory-telling were my nurturing ground. She provided the sermon, the words and guidance my siblings and I needed as touchstones. She provided the sermon; her relentless work and energy enabled me to learn how to write the text. I’ve tried to gather the legacies of some of her cultural awls into meaning.

My mother’s memory-telling often held thousands of years in one moment. I still hear my mother’s speech patterns, feel her fears of the outside world; I listen to her spirituality, and see her humbleness even when she had validity for self-promotion in front of others. She lived in the house of the matrilineal diaspora. I’d like to connect back, rather than cast off, and pay homage to her inheritance of purpose, endurance, and prosperity. Many of us are involved in collecting oral history and connecting to the past through genealogical searches—in order to move forward. Our sense of unrelated kinship arises out of the importance we give to our learning stories, what Maxine Hong Kingston calls “talking story.” My mother often told the story of how she had to fight on her way to school. She did not articulate this little story as an episode of gender, race, and class in a small East Coast town during the forties. In

order to attain that weapon of freedom, education, she simply had to fight certain white boys who didn't want black youth attending *their* high school. She would hide rocks in her lunch pail every day, because she never knew exactly when the boys would ambush her and her little brother on the road. How could anyone have wanted to harm that beautiful, soft-spoken schoolgirl who was to become my mother? Whenever I heard that story as a child I would feel sad and wonder what it was like to have to grow up in that social climate.

In her novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Jamaica Kincaid uses a sepia picture to reconstruct and parallel the narrator's memory of her deceased mother. As the story unfolds, the fragmented photo becomes a fully reconstructed picture. The title seems contradictory: how can it be *her* autobiography? We want to know whose story it is, the daughter's or the mother's? Are author, narrator, and protagonist one and the same? In order to come to terms with herself, the daughter-narrator must re-define her own memory of her mother and make it "an account of my mother's life," as it is also an account of her life. Is the daughter becoming her mother, as in Kincaid's previous novel, *Annie John*? In this novel, mother and daughter have the same name and the story belongs to both Annie Johns despite the antagonism between them. Near the end of the novel the narrator says, "She was my mother, Annie; I was her daughter, Annie" (105). Similarly, my memory/testimony takes the form of a shape-shifter—the text becomes someone else's memory—it's not my mother's autobiography, but rather an autobiography of my mother. Rememorying reveals how central the "politics of memory" is to configuring identity and values through oral and written narratives. In women's personal narratives, the autobiographical "I" may also be the autobiographical "we." Women's memories are both distant and belonging because they can represent those montages of public and personal awls.