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Bosom Buddies and Lonely Hearts

by Daryl C. Dance

In Ossie Davis' *Purlie Victorious*, Ol' Cap'n nostalgically reminisces about the good old days when he enjoyed what he recollects as close loving relationships with Blacks. He recalls to Gitlow "how you and me growed up together. Had the same mammy—my mammy was your mother." And Gitlow responds, "Yessir! Bosom buddies."¹ Despite the satire and irony with which Ossie Davis consciously invests this scene, it suggest to me another irony—one which Davis certainly did not intend—and that is that one of the images of the Black woman which has frequently been shared by both Black and white writers, especially males, is that of a mammy whose goal in life is to provide food and nourishment to them. In much white plantation literature the mark of the Black woman's goodness, indeed often her superiority, is her absolute, zealous dedication to caring for and nourishing her white charges. It is these aspects of her character, despite the wrongs that she may suffer, that cause Faulkner's white Isaac McCaslin to acclaim that Negroes "are better than we are. Stronger than we are . . . [Their virtues are] endurance . . . and pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity and love of children . . . whether their own or not or black or not."² Likewise, though with infinitely greater fidelity and sensitivity, Black male writers (and often females as well) have tended to fashion some of their most admirable characters in a similar mold—that is making them

mother figures whose greatness is measured directly by the degree to which they selflessly devote themselves to the nurturing of others. Thus we, like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, feel relieved when Mary Rambo rescues him sick and helplessly staggering down a Harlem street and assures him, "I'll take care of you like I done a heap of others."³ The same reassurance is felt when the kindly Mrs. Moss rescues Richard Wright off the streets of Memphis and assures him, "you in safe hands here."⁴

It is interesting to note that very often these Black Guardians, fortresses, matriarchs are not actually mothers at all; nonetheless their most important function in the plot is generally their ability to mother, nourish, sustain, protect and defend their "charges." Such is the case with the characters such as Miss Jane Pittman and Missie in *Purlie Victorious*.

It is also important to note parenthetically that not all of these matriarchal-type figures are presented positively; sometimes their abundant bosoms become rather, as they do in Wright's *Black Boy*, a nightmare of frightful, stifling udders, threatening to "drench him."⁵ Whatever indiscretions or offenses these women are guilty of, however, stem from an excess of maternal drives and motives rather than anything outside this propensity to mothering. Such is the case with characters such as Sister Margeret in Baldwin's *Amen Corner*; Daphne Lovejoy

in John Oliver Killens' *The Cotillion*; the mother in Killens' *Youngblood*; and Sissie in John A. Williams' novel of the same name.

That there have been among Black women those who are sturdy Black bridges, who *have* been figures of courage and strength and endurance and sustenance is a fact acknowledged—and *gratefully* acknowledged—by Black women writers as well. The distinguishing factor, however, in the treatment of such characters by most Black female writers and particularly by more contemporary ones, is that they emphatically remind the reader that Black women do *not* find absolute or even adequate fulfillment and satisfaction in the isolated role of mamas and they are sick and tired of those who refuse to recognize the diversity of their interests and needs and persist in continuing to seek at their bosoms motherly comfort and nourishment. Such is the case of Toni Cade Bambara's Sweet Pea of "Medley," who counsels the importance of keeping "clear whose weight is whose"⁶ as she relates her experiences with one of her husbands: "His drinking, for instance, was not my weight. And him waking me up in the night for them long, rambling, ninety-proof monologues bout how the whole world's made up of victims, rescuers, and executioners and I'm the dirty bitch cause I ain't rescuing him fast enough to suit him. Then got so I was the executioner, to hear him tell it. I don't say nuthin cause my phi-

“. . . the prevalent image of Black women that increasingly emerges from the pages of the works of Black female writers is that of lonely women. . . .”

losphy of life and death is this—I’ll go when the wagon comes, but I ain’t going out behind somebody else’s shit. I arranged my priorities long ago when I jumped into my woman stride.”⁷

Nonetheless Sweet Pea tells us, “I struggled with Mac . . . Talked to his family, his church, AA, hid the bottles, threatened the liquor man, left a good job to play nurse, mistress, kitten buddy. But then he stopped calling me Dahlin and started calling me mama. I don’t play that. I’m my daughter’s mama. So I split.”⁸

This matter of the rejection of the role of matriarch is also treated in a forceful and symbolic, albeit somewhat ambivalent, scene in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. In this novel Jadine is haunted by a horde of matriarchal figures who crowd into her room, disturbing her lovemaking, frightening, and then angering her. Among them are her dead mother, her foster mother, her lover’s dead mother, and several other maternal figures, including particularly Therese, the blind Martiniquan woman who had made her living as a wet nurse and proudly claimed to still have milk in her “magic breasts” even after she became old, and who, it is important to note, had taken the appropriately named Son as her special charge, devoting herself to saving him and helping him discover himself. These women significantly take out their breasts and show them to Jadine, refusing to believe that *she* has breasts.

Consequently Jadine devotes her-

self to rescuing Son “from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building.”⁹ She pleads, “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me?”¹⁰

One of the earliest and still among the most dramatic treatments of a woman who rejects the role of traditional wife and mother and insists upon seeking personal fulfillment, including (God forbid!) sexual gratification, is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. All of her life, Hurston’s protagonist, Janie, was motivated by the memory of a blossoming pear tree in her back yard. One day, lying under that tree, “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.”¹¹ Thenceforth she is motivated to “be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!” and to find “the singing bees for her.” (25) It becomes obvious that despite her efforts to learn to love and to be happy with her aged husband Killicks, whom her grandmother had selected for her, she finds that not

only does marriage not end the “cosmic loneliness” (38) as she expected, but that indeed her loneliness is just beginning. As Killicks takes her to his home, her seat on the wagon “was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been.” (39) Thus it is no surprise that though “Janie waited a bloom time and a green time and an orange time” (43), hoping her marriage would blossom, she finally accepts the fact that Killicks “desecrat(ed) the pear tree” (29). Thus Hurston leads us to applaud Janie’s courage and perseverance as she leaves him and sets out with Joe Starks who “spoke for far horizon” (50), flinging her apron away from her and determining that “from now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom” (54). It turns out, however, that Joe has no respect for her as a person but rather regards her as a proud possession who must submit to his every whim and be “classed off,” never associating with her neighbors or participating in the life of the community. Janie is so lonesome on that “high stool” on which Jody isolates her that, as she tells her friend Phoebe, “Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere” (172). Further Joe treats her cruelly, humiliating her in front of others and even on one occasion slapping her. Thus we are not surprised that “she wasn’t petal open anymore with him” (111). From that day she determined to “[save] up [her] feel-

ings for some man she had never seen" (112). This unusually persistent quest for self fulfillment at the sacrifice of material comfort, for a lover and a partner who will treat her as an equal, is finally realized when Janie is a middle-aged woman and the charming, carefree, lovable, and youthful Tea Cake strolls into her life. She knows immediately, Hurston tells us, that "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps" (161). Discarding home and security and community respect, she goes off with Tea Cake, asserting that she is "[aiming] tuh partake wid everything" (186) with him. When she is warned of the dangers of an older woman's risking her wealth and property to run off with a much younger man, she retorts, "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (171).

This early, shockingly forceful declaration of independence from the limiting role of nourishing mama and reinforcing wife certainly projects the possibility of a Black woman's finding happiness and fulfillment in another more glamorous role; but it is interesting to note that the romantic interlude that is Janie's life with Tea Cake is presented in such a way that it is possible to view it as a dream rather than a reality, indeed this *chanson d'amour* is so shortlived before Hurston brings it to its nightmarish end that we question whether such an episode were more than temporary fantasy. Certainly nothing that has come after it has suggested that a Black woman can find love and contentment in such a romantic, equalitarian, and fulfilling relationship. And just as Janie suffered from loneliness most of her life and is ultimately again left alone, the typical Black female in contemporary literature by Black women is characterized mainly by her loneliness, as is illustrated in this poem by Carolyn Rodgers which eloquently presents that dilemma of the Black woman which is one of the main concerns of the literature today

Poem for Some Black Women *

*i am lonely.
all the people i know
i know too well*

*there was comfort in that
at first but now
we know each others miseries
too well
we are
lonely women, who spend time waiting for
occasional flings*

*we live with fear.
we are lonely.
we are talented, dedicated, well read
BLACK, COMMITTED,*

we are lonely.

*we understand the world problems
Black women's problems with Black men
but all*

*we really understand is
lonely.*

*when we laugh,
we are so happy to laugh
we cry when we laugh
we are lonely.
we are busy people
always doing things
fearing getting trapped in rooms
loud with empty . . .*

*yet
knowing the music of silence/hating it/hoarding it
loving it/treasuring it,
it often birthing our creativity
we are lonely*

*being soft and being hard
supporting ourselves, earning our own bread
soft/hard/hard/soft/
knowing that need must not show*

*will frighten away
knowing that we must
walk back-wards nonchalantly on our tip-toesssss
into
happiness,
if only for stingy moments*

*we know too much
we learn to understand everything,*

to make too much sense out
of the world,
of pain
of lonely . . .

we buy clothes, we take trips,
we wish, we pray, we meditate, we curse, we crave, we coo, we caw,

we need ourselves sick, we need, we need
we lonely we grow tired of tears we grow tired of fear
we grow tired but must al-ways be soft and not too serious . . .
not too smart not too bitchy not too sapphire
not too dumb not too not too not too
a little less a little more
add here detract there
.lonely.

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Carolyn Rodgers reinforces loneliness as *the* singular characteristic of her Black women's lives by setting that last word *lonely* on a single line by itself and placing a period before and after it.

One of the several problems creating this dilemma for the Black woman, as Rodgers implies, is the frustration and sense of inferiority that many Black males experience when their mates seem to surpass them in their ability to cope in an economic system which has obviously conspired through every means possible to deny Black males the opportunities to compete for jobs that would bring them pride and instead relegated them to degrading tasks or total unemployment. While the situations portrayed in much contemporary literature by Black women suggest that these writers and their female characters are sympathetic to the dilemma of the Black male, he is portrayed as being too often unable to recognize that the Black woman is similarly victimized, but tends rather to often regard her as villain. In most of



DARYL C. DANCE, THEODORE HUDSON, ARTHUR P. DAVIS, JOANNE BRAXTON

these works this leads either to his physical abuse of her, where he asserts his manhood by proving his greater physical strength; his unfaithfulness, where he asserts his manhood through his sexual prowess; or his reversion to a childlike status, where he accepts his lack of manhood; or in some instances a combination of these reactions ensues.

The resort to violence, touched upon in a number of works, is dramatically traced through two generations of a Black family in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. There Brownfield grows up suffering with his mother the abuse of a father frustrated by the racist economic system. Though as an adult Brownfield begins his marriage happy and optimistic and enthusiastic about supporting his family, his inability to maintain a job at the same time that his better educated wife teaches school, causes him to become even more abusive than his father had been. Walker notes: "His crushed pride, his battered ego, made him drag Mem away from schoolteaching. Her knowledge reflected badly on a husband who could scarcely read and write . . . His rage could and did blame everything, everything on her . . . Every Saturday night he beat her, trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face."¹³

The male who attempts to reinforce his sense of inadequacy by running with other women may be found in a host of novels from Ann Petry's *The Street* through Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The dilemma is succinctly expressed by the narrator of Louise Meriwether's "A Happening in Barbados," who despite her economic success, could look back over her thirty-nine years as characterized by only "loneliness and pain." Her success, she tells us, had "taken its toll. My husband, who couldn't claw as well as I, got lost somewhere in that concrete jungle. The last I saw of him, he was peering under every skirt around, searching for his lost manhood."¹⁴

One of the most poignant treatments of the male who refuses to grow up is found in Eva Peace's explanation of

why she killed her dope addict son Plum in Toni Morrison's *Sula*: "He wanted to crawl back in my womb and well . . . I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, got no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again . . . I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man and not all scrunched up inside my womb."¹⁵

is the eternal child, a fact which he considers inevitable: he complains, "Mothers? . . . they form you in that dark place inside them and you're theirs. For giving life they exact life. The cord remains uncut . . . We're all caught within a circle of women, I'm afraid, and we move from one to the next in a kind of blind dance."¹⁷

Another striking comment on the immaturity of some Black males is voiced by Tony Cade Bambara's Marcy in "The Johnson Girls." We are told that "all her life she been waiting for little boys to grow up and put down the pool sticks and come find her, young men to grow up and stop lying to each other in the locker room and come deal with her

*"In creating Meridian, Alice Walker comes close to challenging Alfred Kazin's description of Joe Christmas as 'the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme phase conceivable of American loneliness.'"*²⁰

Paul Marshall's Deighton Boyce is not merely a philanderer; what he really is is another little boy trying to return to his mother's bosom, as is symbolically suggested in the scene following his death in which his daughter Selina fantasizes his joy as he returns to Barbados. Marshall writes, "*For that low mound, resting on the sea like a woman's breast when she is supine, was Barbados. Time fled as the mist fled and he was a boy again.*"¹⁶ Selina finally comes to realize also that her relationship with Clive is a reenactment of her parents' marriage where she is the strong supporting mother and Clive

for real, men to grow up and stop saving themselves for Hollywood, or throwing themselves away on drugs, or kidding themselves with grey girls."¹⁸

Marcy's complaint brings us to a final contributing factor to the Black woman's loneliness as suggested by many contemporary writers—the fact that while some Black men envision Black women as mothers, their image of the ideal mate and lover is white. Noting the absolute and shocking change in the character of the bad Punjab, who might ordinarily be seen "slapping some chick upside the head or collecting coins from this barfly or



ACKLYN LYNCH, DARYL DANCE, JOYCE JOYCE, DIANE GREEN, STEPHEN HENDERSON

that" to a mild-mannered craven "peeping through the window grinning up a storm," Bambara suggests that the only explanation is the Black man/white woman enigma which the novelist explains in her usual unforgettable terse manner: "My theory is the Black man got jammed up the white man's nightmare."¹⁹

This frequently-treated matter is also a significant aspect of the plot of Alice Walker's *Meridian*. In creating Meridian, Alice Walker comes close to challenging Alfred Kazin's description of Joe Christmas as "the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme phase conceivable of American loneliness."²⁰ Meridian's dilemma stems from the now-familiar situation in which she must either remain alone or sacrifice her own individuality, for her lover Truman cannot accept her as a strong, assertive, equal helpmate: Alice Walker writes of Meridian:

At times she thought of herself as an adventurer. It thrilled her to think she belonged to the people who produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who'd

led troops in battle.

But Truman, alas, did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried . . . to claim her own life.²¹

Indeed as Walker reminds us, what Truman wanted was "an attractive woman, but asleep."²² In truth Truman, we inevitably discover, wanted a white woman: "He had wanted a woman perfect in all the eyes of the world;"²³ and if we perchance did not realize what this means, Meridian, on another occasion explains, "[only] white women [are] perfect."²⁴ When pressed for an answer to explain his attraction to white women, Truman can only respond: "They read *The New York Times*."²⁵ He is the kind of idealistic activist who can through his selfishness, his blindness, and his callousness unknowingly drive Meridian to abort his baby and then declare with his usual idealism, "You're beautiful, . . . Have my beautiful black babies."²⁶

If we continued this review of contemporary literature by Black women, we would observe that while there are of course other subjects and concerns,

the prevalent image of Black women that increasingly emerges from the pages of the works of Black female writers is that of lonely women, increasingly more educated, more sophisticated, more economically secure, but lonely, entreating like Naomi Long Madgett:

*Where are my lovers?
Where are my tall, my lovely
princes
Dancing in slow grace
Toward knowledge of my beauty?
Where
Are my beautiful
Black men?*²⁷

Lonely Black women like Reena and the narrator in Paule Marshall's "Reena," toasting "Women alone!"²⁸ while reciting the litany of complaints they hear from Black men about women like themselves: "too middle-class oriented, . . . Conservative . . . Too threatening . . . castrating . . . Too independent . . . Sexually inhibited and unimaginative . . . Not supportive."²⁹

Lonely Black women like Toni Cade Bambara's "The Johnson Girls," forced to live "a la carte": "First, you gotta

have you a fuckin man, a cat that can get down between the sheets without a whole lotta bullshit about 'This is a spiritual union' or 'Women are always rippin off my body' . . . Course, he usually look like hell and got no I.Q. atall, . . . So you gots to have you a go-around man . . . Course the go-round man ain't about you, he about his rap and his wardrobe and his imported deodorant stick . . . Which means you gots to have a gofer . . . [And then] You gots to have your money man . . . And more importantly, you got to have you a tender man.³⁰ The women long though to "have it all and right on the same plate. Cause a la carte," they conclude, "is a bitch."³¹

Lonely Black women like Louise Meriwether's successful vacationers in Barbados, accepting the fact that they have no choice but to live a la carte—vacationing in Barbados specifically, as we're told in the opening sentence, "to pick up a Barbadian man."³² The narrator is perversely gratified to gloat as Black Barbadian males express a preference for them over male hungry white women tourists, relishing this unaccustomed attention as she recalls seeing "the white girls in the Village and at off-Broadway theaters clutching

their black men tightly while I, manless, looked on with bitterness."³³

Lonely Black women like Morrison's Jadine, sitting by herself in an airport in Dominique, thinking: "Of course I'm by myself. When haven't I been by myself."³⁴

Lonely Black women like Ruth Dead in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, explaining what is presented as her greatest pleasure in life—an occasional furtive midnight vigil at her father's grave: "With nobody touching me, or even looking as though they'd like to touch me. [I started coming to his grave to] talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me."³⁵

Lonely Black women like Ntozake Shange's *Lady in Purple*, pleading,

*i dont know i dont know any more
tricks
i am really colored & really sad
sometimes & you hurt
me more than i ever danced outta
.....
.. please please/ this is for you i
want
you to love me / let me love you/ i
dont wanna dance
wit ghosts/snuggle lovers i made
up in my*

*drunkenness/ lemme love you just
like i am/ a colored
girl/ i'm finally being real/ no
longer symmetrical & impervious
to pain.*³⁶

Lonely Black women like Toni Cade Bambara's girls in *The Salt Eaters* waiting for the members of the motorcyle club: "Women. Women talking in bits and pieces, mostly waiting, mostly impatient waiting, waiting for the men to straddle the machines and turn on the power and take them somewhere."³⁷

Lonely Black women. But if perchance this picture seems bleak, there is a bright compensatory perspective, and that is that as Carolyn Rodgers reminded us, among other things, their loneliness has led to that "music of silence" which has been "birthing our creativity"—and we can all take pleasure in the indisputable fact that some of the most distinctive contributions to contemporary literature have come from the pens of Black American women. Indeed their loneliness has resulted in some of the most beautiful and inspiring and memorable creations of our times. And for that I for one am profoundly grateful.

NOTES

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2. "The Bear," in *Go Down Moses* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), pp. 294-5.

3. *Invisible Man* (1952; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 246.

4. *Black Boy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 229.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

6. In *Midnight Birds: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), p. 268.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Tar Baby* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1981), p. 269.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; rpt. Urbanna: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 24; hereafter cited in the text.

12. "Poem for Some Black Women," in *how i got ovah* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), pp. 47-8.

13. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 55.

14. "A Happening in Barbados," in *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women*, ed. Mary Helen Washington (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1975), p. 54.

15. *Sula* (1973; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 55.

16. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959; rpt. Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1981), p. 190.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

18. *Gorilla, My Love* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 171.

19. "Playing with Punjab," in *Gorilla My Love*, p. 72.

20. "Stillness of Light in August," in *William Faulkner, Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951), p. 253.

21. *Meridian* (New York: Washington

Square Press, 1976), p. 110.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

27. "Black Women," in *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*, ed. Erlene Stetson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 131.

28. "Reena," in *Black-Eyed Susans*, p. 129.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

30. "The Johnson Girls," in *Gorilla, My Love*, p. 168.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

32. "A Happening in Barbados," p. 51.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

34. *Tar Baby*, p. 275.

35. *Song of Solomon* (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 125.

36. *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1977; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 46-7.

37. *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 99.