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African American literature by writers of Caribbean descent

DARYL CUMBER DANCE

They dubbed it the Port of No Return. When their ancestors left that port at Elmira Beach, Ghana – or Goree Island, Senegal, or any of a number of similar African ports – and set out on the perilous journey over the ocean to the Americas, there was no going back for the New World Negroes. That is what for most Africans in the Americas was the beginning of their history. Whether resident in a small island nation or in the American colonies, whether under the domain of a British, Spanish, French, or Dutch colonial power, and whether shuttled back and forth between several of the above, New World Negroes were tied together by a history of displacement and slavery. However, for them, national domains, language barriers, and geographical boundaries were not as defining and absolute as they were for their European masters. Rather, their boundaries and borders were established by race. The best-known early work of the African Diaspora appropriately stands as the prototype of diasporic writings across borders, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, the 1789 autobiography of an African seeking to survive the Middle Passage, assert his name, vindicate his culture, define his identity, justify his very being, establish his relationship to fellow Africans in the throes of a slave system that viewed Africans as merchandise, and establish a place for himself in a colonial society.

In the ensuing years, especially in the twentieth century, countless dusky voyagers have embarked on a no less perilous journey by sea from their small island nations in the Caribbean to the United States (or some other colonial power). Though the difficulties of entry make them more than aware of geographical borders, the literature produced by these voyagers ultimately forces the reader to question the reality and significance of such geographical borders. Landing in New York, or Miami, or wherever the port of disembarkment, would prove to be only the beginning of the travelers' journey. Then there

would be the efforts to make their place in this cold, strange, and hostile new land, and ultimately the looking back to make the connections with the Caribbean and ultimately Africa in a search for self-identity. Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1973) seems the blueprint of the autobiographical journey over seas that has come to be the story of twentieth-century African American/Caribbean writers seeking to connect the seemingly disparate parts of themselves, secure a home and a mother tongue (i.e., a language), and become whole. *Rights of Passage* is the first volume in *The Arrivants*, Brathwaite's trilogy dealing with the New World Negro's reclamation of his spiritual ground through learning about and accepting his past. *Rights* deals with the dislocation of the New World Negro and his loss of identity, pride, and culture in a colonized society. In *Masks* Brathwaite takes the New World Negro back to Africa, where he is at first lost, but he travels through his history, and the volume ends with hope that he may find himself: "I am learning/let me succeed."¹ The third volume, *Islands*, brings the New World Negro back to the Islands and the realization that the African rituals and gods that gave life meaning have not been completely lost. There are many signs of corruption and ignorance, but there is also occasionally one who remembers.

For many writers in the United States the journey actually began with Caribbean parents who migrated with their children, as is the case with Rosa Guy, Michelle Cliff, and Opal Palmer Adisa; or parents who, after they became settled, sent for these children they had left behind, as is the case with Edwidge Danticat; or parents who gave birth to their children after they arrived, as is the case with Paule Marshall and Audre Lorde (1934–92). Other writers, such as Claude McKay, Eric Walrond, Elizabeth Nunez, Jamaica Kincaid, and Marie-Elena John migrated to the United States on their own and have become a part of the American canon. A final group of Caribbean writers, such as C. L. R. James (1901–89), Derek Walcott, George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, Erna Brodber, Velma Pollard, and Earl Lovelace, were not so much migrants to the United States, as students, professors, researchers, and/or political activists visiting for periods of time, and will not be treated in this study.

The journey of all except the latter group involves both the trauma of sailing away from all that is familiar and the agony of the outsider who does not quite fit into the American or African American world. Then ensues the often contradictory efforts to assimilate, to become a part of the American dream, to "buy house," to embrace white culture and values, to become "white," while at the same time desperately struggling to hold on to island culture and speech. For many this journey was, like slavery, a kind of silencing, a sense of

nonexistence, a recognition that they, their language, their culture, their history, were irrelevant and inferior. Their antagonists were not only white Americans, but all too often African Americans, who made fun of them and their speech and called them “monkey chasers.” Opal Palmer Adisa says that when she lived in New York “West Indians and African-Americans ... were separated by a sea of distrust.”² Though there are certainly numerous indications of cooperation between African Americans and Caribbean immigrants, many of the newcomers often avoided association with their black American counterparts, whom they criticized as unambitious, lazy, and deserving of the discrimination they suffered. Oddly enough, a part of the dilemma of disruption and identity stems from the relationships of the Caribbean voyagers with their own immigrant communities and their parents. Paule Marshall informs that she left Brooklyn “in youthful rebellion against the West Indian ‘buy house’ fixation and the materialism that was so much a part of it.”³

While a number of male Caribbean writers create sympathetic and even romantic pictures of their mothers, many of the female writers present mothers who abandon or alienate their daughters. Sometimes the sense of abandonment that the daughters feel is the result of the mothers’ leaving them in the Caribbean while they relocate in the United States. In some instances the daughters feel abandoned as their mothers pursue the American dream of material success, sometimes working long hours at two or even three (often domestic) jobs to make ends meet. Many of these mothers are larger than life and come to represent not just mother, but the ultimate oppressor: the mother country/the powerful colonizer, with the daughter being the colonized subject. Simone A. James Alexander argues that the daughters “experience zombification not singularly by the mother country but also (subconsciously) by their mothers, whose love becomes suffocating.”⁴ Many of these mothers fit the young Barbadian artist Clive’s description of the immigrant mothers in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: “For giving life they exact life.”⁵

Issues with the fathers are no less problematic in the literature. In many instances the fathers are never present in the daughters’ lives, sometimes never even acknowledging their existence; in other instances once-present fathers desert their family. The present fathers are all too often philanderers, harsh and repressive parents, or strivers for the American dream, whose children feel removed from them, fearful of them, or alienated by their rejection of black culture.

While the protagonists in most of this literature often have problems connecting with the mother and/or the father, the crucial figure in many of their lives is the ancestor, living or dead, who remained in the Caribbean and

serves as their guide to forming ties with their Caribbean homeland as well as with their African past. Many of the travelers either are raised by their grandmothers and “other mothers” or spend memorable periods with them. Their connection with the ancestor is often the source of their sense of self.

A key element in the connect or disconnect with ancestors and tradition is language. From the beginning, the language of the oppressor was forced upon the slaves, and it continues even today to be the language of the schools, the language that is proper, the language that is standard, the language that is acceptable to publishers. The necessity of adopting the language of the colonial masters creates a disconnect in the writers’ goals and their expression, as suggested by Tobagoian Canadian poet Marlene Nourbese Philip: “The challenge for me was to use that language, albeit the language of my oppression, but the only one I had, to subvert the inner and hidden discourse – the discourse of my non-being.”⁶ Similarly Jamaica Kincaid laments, “The only language I have in which to speak of this crime [colonialism] is the language of the criminal who committed the crime.”⁷ Derek Walcott discussed the quest for a “language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection, and which began to create an oral culture of chants, jokes, folk-songs and fables.”⁸ Most of the writers are committed to rescuing their own Afro-Caribbean language and utilizing some elements of the folk speech/dialect/creole in their work, even if they make modifications to make it accessible to a “foreign” reader. Their language is, after all, as Paule Marshall insists in her case, the language of “the poets in the kitchen.”⁹ As Rosa Guy puts it, the speech patterns these writers had sometimes ridiculed as children have now “be[come] our poetry.”¹⁰ Maryse Condé declared in an interview with Emily Apter, “I’d like to create a ‘Maryse Condé language.’ I haven’t found it yet; I’m still searching.”¹¹ Ultimately, the writers know, as Paule Marshall has declared, that “language is the only homeland.”¹²

The related matter of the silencing of women is often an issue. The battle to find a voice includes the freedom to express oneself, to break out of the historical silence imposed upon Africans as slaves, upon women as second-class citizens, upon immigrants as outsiders, upon outsiders with limited access to the media. Clearly reflecting this dilemma is the frequently appearing character in the literature who, like the young Maya Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, refuses to speak. Clare of Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* does not speak for years.¹³ Xuela of Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* did not speak until she was four,¹⁴ and then she spoke in English, a language she had never heard spoken and “the language of

a people I would never like or love”;¹⁵ tellingly, the “first words [Xuela] learned to read [were] THE BRITISH EMPIRE.”¹⁶ This silence must be transformed into language and action, Audre Lorde insists: “what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared.”¹⁷ Elsewhere, she has proclaimed, “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”¹⁸

Though the literary journey to the United States is often viewed initially as permanent, most of this immigrant literature focuses upon *return*, going back, recapturing the Caribbean homeland, the African ancestral home, and the ancient belief system, and preserving it for posterity. Neither time, nor death, nor ocean, nor the betrayal of mothers and fathers can deny the voyagers their recapturing of the Caribbean and Africa, and thus of their true selves. Through the power of language, they give birth to their African American/Caribbean selves and provide a blueprint for later generations. While these journeys apply as much to male writers as to female, there is no question that concomitant with – and even a part of – the Renaissance of African American women writers has been the remarkable oeuvre of female writers of Caribbean descent, and the focus in this chapter will be on the women.

Within the context of their nation, their race, and their sex, many of these women writers – not unlike their male counterparts – seek to distinguish and distance themselves from the old prescribed Western male-dominated theories that have not reflected *them*, their lives, and their works. While among the writers and critics are diehard modernists, postmodernists, deconstructionists, postcolonialists, feminists, etc., there is still often suspicion of Western criticism as another imperialist project. Indeed some, like Barbara Christian in her 1987 “The Race for Theory,” still insist that current linguistic jargon of elite critics seeks to silence black women writers.¹⁹ This is reinforced by scholar/writer/professor Opal Palmer Adisa, who insists that these “theories ... rather than illuminating the works under exploration, obfuscate and problematize these works so that students are rendered speechless, [one telling me] ‘I can’t talk that talk, so I end up not saying anything.’”²⁰ In the session “The Daughters of Anacaona Speak: Haiti and the Caribbean,” at the 2006 Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Scholars and Writers, the women generally discounted the term “magical realism”: Evelyne Trouillot declared that magical realism is “not a literary scheme or literary choice, but a way of looking at life.” Edwidge Danticat asserted, “If things seem out of the ordinary, it is not magical realism, but something that has been in our realities. We wrestle with a shifting reality. Feeling brave enough to write it is magical realism.” For many of these writers who are creating new characters in unfamiliar situations, telling new stories in a new language, and addressing themselves to a new audience, there is a need for theory that grows

out of their own lives and responds to their own culture and experiences. As Marjorie Thorpe pointed out in her keynote address to the Second International Caribbean Women Writers Conference in Trinidad in 1990, "I am persuaded that it is incumbent on us, the most recent arrivals [on the literary scene], not only to gain admittance to the game, but to seek to transform the rules under which the game is played."²¹ And as Audre Lorde warned in her memorable speech at the Second Sex Conference in New York on September 29, 1979: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."²²

The African Caribbean/American writer nonpareil is Paule Marshall. One of her goals throughout her long and productive writing career has been to provide the education that will lead to liberation, liberation from slavery to freedom, from silence to expression, from death to life, from ignorance to knowledge. For Marshall the first step of that journey is reconnecting with Africa and appreciating the historical links between African Americans and West Indians, "the two great wings of the black diaspora in this part of the world."²³ In fact, Marshall insists, "I don't make any distinction between African American and West Indian. All o' we is one as far as I'm concerned. And I, myself, am both."²⁴ This is the lesson of her body of fiction, which includes *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), *Reena and Other Stories* (1983), *Daughters* (1991), and *The Fisher King* (2000).

Crucial to Marshall's canon is the short story "To Da-duh, in Memoriam," first published in *New World* in 1967 and reprinted in *Reena*. In this story a Barbadian immigrant takes her confident nine-year-old New York daughter to Barbados to meet her mother, familiarly called Da-duh. Biblical and African imagery used in the description of Da-duh immediately suggests that this tiny old lady is larger than life. There develops an immediate competition between granddaughter and grandmother to prove the superiority of their respective homes. At first the child is frightened by the unfamiliar sugar cane and unimpressed by the natural wonders of Barbados, and Da-duh is incredulous of her granddaughter's tales of skyscrapers and other mechanical wonders, not to mention a place where black people "[beat] up white people!"²⁵ When finally the granddaughter projects some mechanical wonder to overshadow every aspect of Barbados's magnificent plants and mountains that Da-duh proudly shows off to her, we sense Da-duh's defeat in a world that she "can scarce recognize ... anymore."²⁶ By this time, however, the granddaughter feels no sense of pleasure in her triumph, for the fact of the matter is that she has been more influenced by Da-duh than she recognizes and through her she has already begun that journey to her roots. The contest between these two

highlights the destructive forces of colonialism that destroy the world of Da-duh. At one point she comments to her granddaughter: “they does throw these canes into some damn machine ... and squeeze out all the little life in them to make sugar for you all so in New York to eat.”²⁷ Again, we are told that Da-duh’s son had died working on the Panama Canal. Soon after the child returns to New York, Da-duh dies of a heart attack when British planes swoop down over her village in a “show of force,”²⁸ “rattling her trees and flattening the young cane in her field.”²⁹ Thus she is killed by the technology that she resisted and feared all of her life, but she lives on in her New York granddaughter who, as an adult, retreats to paint pictures full of Barbadian scenes and African images, all inspired by Da-duh. There is no doubt that we have here the *raison d’être* for the work of Marshall, as she says in an interview:

[Da-duh] appears in one guise or another in most of my short stories and in *all* of the novels. She embodies for me that long line of unknown black men and women who are my forebears. It’s about creating a history for myself ... I only knew her briefly and I was a little girl at the time. But even so I sensed her special force and her resiliency, her spirit ... She was this stalwart Black woman. I’ve always identified with her. In fact I’ve always felt that I was more *her* child than my mother’s. And her heir as well, in the sense that I have the feeling I was perhaps put here on this earth to preserve and continue her essence ... I am in many ways an unabashed ancestor worshipper. I need the sense of being *connected* to the women and men, real and imaginary, who make up my being. Connection and reconciliation are major themes in my work.³⁰

Though Marshall has dubbed “Da-duh” her most autobiographical work,³¹ the one that follows more closely the particulars of her own family and life growing up in Brooklyn is *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Here there is a detailed account of the young Selina Boyce, born like Marshall to immigrant Barbadian parents in a Caribbean community in Brooklyn who religiously hold on to some of their Caribbean culture (speech, music, rituals, foods) and raise their children to regard Barbados as home, at the same time that they ferociously strive to establish a place – a house – in America. Indeed the community’s center is the Barbadian *Homeowners* Association, whose goal is ownership of a brownstone in the right community. Throughout we are reminded of the racism and prejudices all of these people face or faced in their Barbadian homeland and in New York – segregated housing, economic deprivations, difficulties in the education system. None of this, however, deters most of this determined community, whose goal is provided by one of their spokesmen: “We ain white yet. We’s small timers! ... But we got our eye on the big time.”³²

Selina's father, Deighton, does not share his community's aspirations. He remains a romantic who dreams of return to Barbados, a dream that seems possible after he becomes heir to some land there. He is seen by his daughter Selina as a "dark god" who "had fallen from his heaven and lay stunned on earth."³³ His inability to adapt to a new technological, materialistic, capitalistic society dedicated to attaining a brownstone is reinforced when he crushes his arm in a machine at the factory where he works, an event that Selina envisions in language reminiscent of Da-duh's description of the destruction of sugar cane: "the huge hungry maw of the machine ... clamped down on his arm, sucking it in... then spewing it out crushed."³⁴ The mother, Silla, on the other hand, becomes a machine, willing to work her fingers to the bone and even sell her husband's land without his knowledge, in order to get her brownstone. Silla, here, is not simply "mother" but "*the* mother,"³⁵ not just *the* mother, but *mother country*, representing the powerful colonizer with the daughter and the husband her colonized subjects. Like the colonial power, the aptly named Silla (suggestive of the Greek monster Scylla) is cold, formidable, self-centered, greedy, and destructive. Her husband frequently reminds her, "You's God."³⁶ Further, the house for which Silla sacrifices everything represents in the novel not just the security that she seeks but also imprisonment, division, destruction of family.

Deighton has about as much chance in his conflict with Silla as Da-duh has in her confrontation with the British planes. Deighton, who is associated with the sun and the natural elements of Barbados, sleeps in the sun parlor, separated from Silla's bedroom by tall, locked French doors. Once Deighton secures his revenge by squandering all of the money that Silla has got from the sale of his land, he leaves the family and joins the Father Peace Movement. Silla retaliates by reporting her illegal-immigrant husband to the authorities, and he is deported. He either falls or jumps overboard as the ship comes within sight of Barbados. Much of the novel and the battles between Silla and Deighton and Silla and Selina are set in the context of the Second World War, which ends on the same day the family receives notification of Deighton's death.

Deighton's aborted journey is one that his daughter must take in his stead. Having rejected the scholarship offered her by the Barbadian Homeowners Association and arranged passage on a ship to the Caribbean, she walks down a street of brownstones that have "been blasted to make way for a city project."³⁷ Viewing this destroyed community is "like seeing the bodies of all the people she had ever known broken,"³⁸ and she emerges as the "sole survivor amid the wreckage,"³⁹ tossing as a tribute to this American neighborhood one of the bangles she has traditionally worn since childhood. The other

bangle we assume she will wear on her return to the Caribbean homeland she has never before seen – except through the dreams of her father. Throughout the novel Selina vacillates between love and hatred for her domineering mother, whom she bitterly attacks as a Hitler when she reports Deighton as an illegal immigrant. Despite Selina's frequent anger toward Silla, she and others recognize how much they are alike; and as she prepares to leave home, Selina confronts her mother and acknowledges, "I'm truly your child."⁴⁰

We recognize that Selina's upcoming trip is one part of the journey that she must take, but within the full context of Marshall's work we realize that the quest for self and roots is only beginning for Selina. She has recognized her loss of identity, declaring to a stranger, "I don't know what I am";⁴¹ she has experienced real and symbolic death; she has declared her independence from her mother; and she is setting out on the journey to give birth to herself. Many of the issues raised in this novel will be elaborated and resolved in later works, not the least of which is the issue of the father.

The issue of the father was finally resolved in Marshall's fourth novel, *Daughters*. In our interview, Marshall poignantly described "the pain and outrage [she suffered] at having been rejected by the one person that you loved most"⁴² when her father Samuel Burke, like Deighton in *Brown Girl*, deserted their family to join the Father Divine sect and forbade his children to call him Daddy. Unlike Deighton, Primas MacKenzie of *Daughters* is a successful politician, who despite his ongoing relationship with a "keepmiss" never leaves his family. Unfortunately, however, he becomes more and more enmeshed in the colonial politics and less and less committed to the people whom he represents, ultimately threatening to betray them. His daughter, Ursa, born in the United States and raised in the fictional Caribbean nation of Triunion, lives in New York, where the novel opens with her getting an abortion and dreading the thought of visiting Triunion and her dysfunctional family there. Ursa finally moves through the symbolic death suggested by abortion to independence and freedom on many levels, perhaps the most important coming when she returns to Triunion and conspires with her mother to overthrow her father in order to protect her island nation and its slave heroes, Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe ("coleaders, coconspirators, consorts, lovers, friends,"⁴³ whose relationship is a model for repressed black men and women everywhere, whom she was taught to revere by her American mother Estelle, and whose magnificent statue was a part of the beloved land that her father was about to hand over to American capitalists). Finally in this novel, Marshall declared, "through the story of Ursa[s]'s relationship with *her* father ... and her ability finally to cut away that emotional dependency, I think

I've also achieved a final purging. I've been able at last to forgive, to bless, and to release Samuel Burke from my life while retaining and honoring the love I still feel for him."⁴⁴ This novel is one of Marshall's most dramatic treatments of the handsome, charismatic, but inconstant father, of the memorable ancestors, of the relationships between black men and women, of the relationships between mothers (Ursa has several mothers in this novel) and daughter, of the relationship between African America, the Caribbean, and Africa, of the perfidy of colonialism, and of the quest of nations and individuals for voice, freedom, wholeness, and rebirth.

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* reinforces Kamau Brathwaite's earlier description of her as a novelist of the "literature of [African] reconnection," one who, in his words, "recogni[z]es the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as root living, creative, and still part of the main."⁴⁵ Here the African American Avey Johnson was raised with rituals that reinforced her African connection, the most memorable of which occurred during her annual summer visits to Ibo Landing in Tatem with her Aunt Cuney. At least twice a week Aunt Cuney and Avey would ceremoniously trek to Ibo Landing, where the slaves had refused to come ashore and had instead turned and, though still in chains, miraculously walked back out on the water to return to Africa. Aunt Cuney, having named Avey after her grandmother who had witnessed the event, ritualistically told Avey the tale as her grandmother had recounted it: "my gran' declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos."⁴⁶ Avey, her husband Jay, and their daughters had regularly enjoyed other cultural rituals that had sustained them throughout the early years of their marriage. However in the frantic quest for material success and social climbing, symbolized by a house in White Plains with its expensive silver tea service, crystal, china, and chandelier, both she and her husband, in effect, sold their souls to the devil. As her husband achieved economic success and acceptance in elite black society, he began to blame poor blacks for their own poverty and victimization, ceased all the rituals that had tied him to the black community, gave up his familial name, and shaved off the mustache that had been patterned after his father's – "the last trace of everything that was distinctive and special about him."⁴⁷ When he dies a stranger to his family, Avey is left an unhappy and silent widow who does not recognize her own face in the mirror; even her name "sounded strange" to her.⁴⁸ While she is traveling with two female friends on a luxury cruise to the Caribbean, the ancestors take over the soul of this lost creature and start her on her journey home. At first she thinks home is her White Plains house with all of its silver and crystal and china,

but the ancestors have a different home in mind. Aunt Cuney comes in a dream, tellingly sparked by the Martiniquan patois that reminds Avey of Tatem,⁴⁹ to drag her away from her present life. Like a runaway slave, a disturbed Avey flees the cruise ship, which, with its Versailles Room, is clearly reminiscent of slavery. Aunt Cuney leads Avey to Joseph Lebert, an ancestral figure suggestive of Esu-Elegbara, the West African god of the crossroads, who, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “alone can set an action in motion and interconnect the parts.”⁵⁰ Proudly acclaiming the African nations from which his ancestors came, he turns to Avey and demands, “And what you is? ... What’s your nation?”⁵¹ A stupefied Avey is unable to respond to that question until she, in effect, relives her personal and race history, experiences a symbolic Middle Passage during which she is purged and becomes an infant, and, in effect, learns to walk again in the Nation Dance at Carriacou, recalling to the reader the Ibos’ determination to conquer the ocean to return home to Africa. At the Big Drum Ceremony, Avey is pulled into the circle of those doing the dances; at first she steps cautiously “as if the ground under her was really water – muddy river water – and she was testing it to see if it would hold her weight”;⁵² soon, however, she moves to the rhythms of the music, easily joining in dance movements that she has never done but always known, having first seen them in the ring shout at a little church in Tatem. And when one of the Islanders asks “And who you is?” this time Avey unhesitatingly asserts her name as her Aunt Cuney had insisted, “Avey, short for Avatara.”⁵³ In entering the circle, Avey reenters the community, recapturing her history, and thus herself; she is now, to quote Paule Marshall, “centered,” “restored to her proper axis.”⁵⁴ The music and the dance in Carriacou serve as atavistic ties that connect her with her past, her family, her nation. At this point she recognizes those other rituals in her life that “had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music ... had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power.”⁵⁵ *Praisesong* closes with the promise of action based on Avey’s new knowledge and rebirth. Avey resolves to testify wherever she goes and to religiously pass on the story her aunt had kept alive for her. She would take her grandchildren and other young black children to Ibo Landing: “It was here that they brought them,” she, like Aunt Cuney, would begin. “They took them out of the boats right here where we’re standing.”⁵⁶ And thus ends *Praisesong*, with the promise that the New World Negro can return, for, like her great-great-gran, Avey finally “picked herself up and took off after [the Ibos].”⁵⁷

No one had more borders to cross and more reasons to be viewed as an outsider than Audre Lorde (1934–92): she was the darkest of the siblings in her

Grenadian family in New York; she was a legally blind child who remained speechless until she was four or five; she was the “biggest child by far in the whole [kindergarten] class”;⁵⁸ she underwent a mastectomy; she was a rebel all of her life; she had an interracial marriage; she was a lesbian, always “want [ing] to be both man and woman”;⁵⁹ she described herself as a “Black lesbian feminist poet warrior mother.”⁶⁰

Lorde experienced the usual conflicted relationships with her parents, both of whom never felt comfortable in America and dreamed of returning to Grenada. Even though her father was a hard-working and dedicated family man who encouraged her reading and writing, Lorde recalls that the “one emotion I can speak of concerning my dad was terror. Absolute terror,”⁶¹ and declares in *Zami*: “My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense, and unforgiving.”⁶² Her mother was not without contradictions. Though Lorde noted in *Zami* that her mother could sometimes be “*a demon intent on destroying me*,”⁶³ she also fondly recalls that she raised her to know that her home was in the Caribbean. The mother took her three daughters to the Harlem River: “Whenever we were close to water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absent-minded. Then she would tell us wonderful stories about ... [Grenada, Carriacou, Caribbean plants, etc.]. Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth.”⁶⁴ Lorde, like several Caribbean American writers, knew what it was to wrestle against the fear that she was becoming her mother, writing in *Zami*, “*I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers.*”⁶⁵ When Lorde returned home after her father’s death, she informed, “I saw my mother’s pain, and her blindness, and her strength, and for the first time I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her.”⁶⁶

Lorde was a prolific writer, producing twelve volumes of poetry: *The First Cities* (1968), *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Coal* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982), *Our Death behind Us* (1986), *Need: A Chorale for Black Women Voices* (1991), *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New* (1992), *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance: Poems 1987–1992* (1993), and *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997); two autobiographical prose works: *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *Zami : A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), a fictionalized autobiography that she dubbed a biomythography; and two collections of essays: *A Burst of Light* (1988), which continued her chronicling of her fight against cancer and injustices in South Africa and the USA, and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). In her poetry, her essays, her autobiographical writing, and her speeches, Lorde was the consummate revolutionary, seeking to empower the outsiders. Throughout

her work, she, like Marshall, focused on bringing together Africa and the diaspora, “all the parts of me that served me.”⁶⁷

Before she saw her Caribbean “homes” (Grenada, Carriacou, and Barbados), Lorde went to Africa, where she found validation for her feminist and lesbian ideologies. Further, she was amazed there at the “incredible . . . resonances” she recognized: “it is the one place where I identified with my father . . . There are things that rang true for me, which I would otherwise never have put together. So one of the things that I wanted to do in *Zami* was to underline the connections between Africa, the African Caribbean, and Africans in America.”⁶⁸ She focused on the African community wherever she traveled in Europe and the Americas, seeing an “international network [as] absolutely essential.”⁶⁹ Shortly before her death she told Charles H. Rowell, “I am part of many communities. Poetry is a way of articulating and bringing together the energies of difference within those communities, so those energies can be used by me and others to better do what must be done.”⁷⁰ Though Lorde often insisted on a rejection of many of the destructive lessons of the colonial masters, she recognized that this was one of her communities as well, insisting in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” on the fusion of the knowledge of “the white fathers” and “our own ancient noneuropean consciousness.”⁷¹

After her second cancer surgery in 1987 Lorde made her home in St. Croix, “seeking a Caribbean environment,”⁷² one “where stepping out each day was not like going to war.”⁷³ She had, after all, been raised to regard Barbados and Grenada as home and to believe that “someday we would return home.”⁷⁴ She is, thus, one of the few among her fellow artists who did indeed actually go home again.

Similar family and race dynamics are treated in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), where Clare Savage is, like Cliff, a light-skinned Jamaican brought to the United States by her parents. In the novel it is the father, tellingly called Boy, who chooses to pass as a white American and justify all of America’s racism, even its lynching, which he defines as “a form of punishment for wickedness”;⁷⁵ “he counsels his daughter on invisibility and secrets. Self-effacement. Blending in,”⁷⁶ reminding her, “You are an American now . . . We are not to judge this country.”⁷⁷ Unable to pass and preferring Jamaica, the darker mother returns home with Clare’s swarthy sister, leaving Clare to agonize, “if she loved me how could she have left me?”⁷⁸ Clare’s travels in the United States and England in the ensuing years only convince her of her divided state: Cliff writes, “There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments”;⁷⁹ “she belongs nowhere.”⁸⁰ Ultimately she decides to return to Jamaica to help her people, “rebaptis[e]” herself in the Jamaican

sea,⁸¹ seek her “restoration,”⁸² fight the “contamination from the outside,”⁸³ reclaim the slave heroine Nanny, and recover her grandmother’s land to serve as the staging area for a rebellion. Though the novel ends tragically, Clare has made the return home.

In a series of works that might be classified as novels, short stories, gardening books, political essays, memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies, Jamaica Kincaid has basically told and retold the story of the Caribbean girl that is herself. Whether the book promises to focus on the girl (*At the Bottom of the River* [1983], *Annie John* [1985], and *Lucy* [1990]), her mother (*The Autobiography of My Mother* [1996]), her brother (*My Brother* [1997]), her father (*Mr. Potter* [2002]), her gardening (*My Garden (Book)* [1999] and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* [2005]), her nation (*A Small Place* [1988]), or a precolonial utopia (*Annie, Gwen, Lily, Pam and Tulip* [1986]), the narrator (and by extension, the New World Negro) is really the subject and the effort to secure freedom from imperialism and domination is the plot. And whether the narrator is called Little Miss, Annie John, Lucy, Xuela, Jamaica, or Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson (Jamaica Kincaid’s true given name), she embodies the emotional soul of Jamaica Kincaid. The Kincaid narrative is almost always about the young woman’s conflict with domination (usually in the form of her mother), and her efforts to escape, find freedom, and recreate herself; or, to put it another way, the narrative is always about the dilemma of a small Caribbean nation (usually Antigua) and its colonial domination. When asked how much of her work is autobiographical, Kincaid declared, “All of it, even the punctuation.”⁸⁴ Her earliest fiction (and to some degree her later work) basically treats a bright but mischievous child who for the first years of her life enjoys the undivided attention of doting parents, especially the mother, a beautiful Dominican of Carib Indian and Negro heritage. The paradise is traumatically disrupted, however. Not until later works do we realize that the disruption is at least partly caused by the appearance of three brothers, the first of them born when the girl is nine. No longer the center of her parents’ attention, the girl must now sacrifice the things she loves in order to care for these brothers and to see that they are educated.

Much of Kincaid’s oeuvre is rooted in death in one form or another, death of people, relationships, trees, and nations. Several major scenes in many of her works take place in a graveyard. She wrestles with the meaning of death in everything she writes. In *At the Bottom of the River*, she reflects: “Inevitable to life is death and not inevitable to death is life. Inevitable. How the word weighs on my tongue.”⁸⁵ *The Autobiography of My Mother* ends, “Death is the only reality, for it is the only certainty, inevitable to all things.”⁸⁶ Her novels

often begin with death, real and symbolic, and focus upon a young narrator who must be reborn to escape and find life and freedom. *Annie John* treats Annie's evolving knowledge of death as she witnesses funerals, observes the deaths of friends and neighbors, and learns about the deaths of her stepfather's grandmother and her mother's brother. In *Annie John* and several other works there is a similar account of the child and the neighbor woman who died in her mother's arms. Here and elsewhere Kincaid dramatically portrays varying accounts of the death of the mother's brother, whereupon a worm crawled out of his leg because of his father's refusal to allow his mother to use Obeah to cure him (in *The Autobiography of My Mother* it is Xuela's stepbrother who dies thus). Annie John painfully suffers the death of her idyllic relationship with her mother when she is no longer the sole center of her attention. Finally, during a long rain, she undergoes a long illness, during which she becomes an infant again and from which she emerges a different person entering a new and different world and proclaiming her own name. The dominant subject of *My Brother* is Kincaid's youngest brother Devon Drew, who died of AIDS in 1996 at the age of thirty-three. As she wrote this book, she imagined the deceased William Shawn (her editor and father-in-law) reading it: "I wrote about the dead for the dead."⁸⁷ She bitterly hates her brother for being born, for disrupting the family, for impoverishing the family, for causing her to be sent away to Dominica, for being the cause of her mother's burning of her books, for dying of AIDS, for never fulfilling his promise in life ("nothing came from him; not work, not children, not love for someone else,")⁸⁸ and for reminding her of the disastrous life she barely escaped. Throughout this tragic book, we recognize that Kincaid is seeing herself in her doomed brother: he shares her love of books; he is also smart and intelligent; he too does well in exams; he is a talented artist (musician); he might have written a book on gardening. She prolongs his life by providing medications and other material help. She wrestles with the issues she and he have with their mother. She struggles with her own fear of death – "When I heard about my brother's illness and dying, I knew, instinctively, that to ... make an attempt at understanding his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it."⁸⁹

Contradictory relationships with parents permeate Kincaid's work. The portrait of the father in *Annie John* is that of an old, unattractive, and poor, but attentive and loving man who cared for the daughter during her illnesses, worked hard to support his family, and built their house and everything in it. In *My Brother* the stepfather is contemptuously portrayed as an old and sickly spawner of children that he could not support, thereby making her life miserable. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* the motherless Xuela is raised

(and often abused) by other families, with whom her father places her, or by her cruel stepmother, who tries to kill her. She denounces “the number of times he had placed me squarely within the jaws of death ... [and] failed to be a father to me, his motherless child.”⁹⁰ This mixed father also chose his Scots heritage over his African: “My father rejected the complications of the vanquished; he chose the ease of the victor”⁹¹ and “came to despise all who behaved like the African people”;⁹² he “had built so completely another skin over his real skin.”⁹³ Thus though she sometimes lived with this father, she never knew him and wondered if he knew himself.⁹⁴ Though patois was the “expressions of his real self,” he rarely spoke patois, and thus “he died not knowing me, not ever speaking to me in a language in which I could have faith, a language in which I could believe the things he said.”⁹⁵ Of this father who preferred his son over his daughter, Zuela acknowledges, “I did not love my father, I grew to love not loving my father.”⁹⁶

Kincaid’s greatest antipathy is reserved, however, for the portrait of her actual father in *Mr. Potter*, the father whom the protagonists in her first novels did not even know existed, the uncaring and licentious father who was completely absent from Kincaid’s early life, appearing only when she was thirty-three and living in the USA, with only his nose to indicate their connection: he proudly proclaims that all his female offspring had noses similar to his.⁹⁷ All the shocked Kincaid can find voice to say to him is, “What am I to call you?”⁹⁸

The overwhelming issue in most of Kincaid’s work is really her emotional rendering of the intense love–hate conflict she has with her mother, whom she sometimes loves passionately (“the only true love in my whole life”⁹⁹ and other times wishes dead. The most painful death in Kincaid is the death of the idyllic relationships she enjoyed with her mother until adolescence, the time varying slightly in different accounts. After this she is more comfortable hiding under the house plotting against her mother, reminiscent of the many symbolic uses of the victim’s underground retreat in diasporic literature, such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Comet” (1920), Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman* (1964), Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990), and Michael Anthony’s *A Year in San Fernando* (1965). Kincaid’s work reveals that she never gets over her jealousy of her mother’s relationship with her father, with her brothers, and even with her own children. She can never forgive her mother for giving birth to her brothers, for anticipating advanced education and accomplishments for her sons and not for her daughter,¹⁰⁰ for her intimacy with her husband

(Kincaid's stepfather), for burning her books ("These books were my life ... the only thing that connected me to a world apart from the cesspool I was in"),¹⁰¹ for forcing her to eat certain foods, for calling her a slut, for turning her back to her, and even for her warm relationship with her grandchildren (they loved her, wanted to be with her, and ate everything she offered them while they would not eat for Kincaid).¹⁰² She blames her mother for all of her problems, even her own sexual rigidity.¹⁰³ One might argue that her oeuvre is her effort to advance her account of the story, since, as she told Brad Goldfarb, "her [the mother's] telling of [events] is always so different from how I remember it."¹⁰⁴ Indeed she told Kay Bonetti that though she imagines her mother does not read her work, she is "the person I really write for."¹⁰⁵ One might also argue that her writing is an attempt to get revenge upon her mother for burning her books; she ends *My Brother* by declaring, "it would not be strange if I spent the rest of my life trying to bring those books back to my life by writing them again and again."¹⁰⁶ The horror of Kincaid's battle with her mother is the recognition that she is becoming her mother. She is appalled at the fact that her children regard her with the same conflicting emotions that she feels for her mother.¹⁰⁷ She seems not to recognize that her response to her daughter's musical interest is akin to her mother's lack of encouragement of her writing (and consistent with stereotypes of West Indian immigrants): Kincaid, desiring a Nobel Laureate rather than an entertainer, encourages her daughter to study math, asking her husband, "Does the world really need one more somewhat brown person singing?"¹⁰⁸ Kincaid's Lucy declares, "I had spent so much time saying I did not want to be like my mother that I missed the whole story: I was not like my mother – I was my mother."¹⁰⁹ In *At the Bottom of the River* her persona speaks of the peace she feels when she imagines that she and her mother are "in complete union ... for I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began ... I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother's arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach."¹¹⁰

Always the Kincaid protagonist remains this child, seeking, in the words of Giovanna Covi, "to become herself, birth herself, re-invent herself,"¹¹¹ seeking to free herself from the overpowering mother, who is sometimes described as godlike and other times demonic. In *Lucy* she is "a ball of fury, large, like a god."¹¹² In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Xuela's stepmother attempts to kill her.¹¹³ In her interview with Goldfarb, Kincaid says her own mother was a "god" and adds, "an ordinary mother would have served me better, one that didn't require great distance to escape from."¹¹⁴

If the Kincaid persona is to escape this eternal, all-powerful, and all-knowing Mother, she must flee Antigua. All of her life Kincaid dreamed about coming

to the United States, and at the age of either sixteen or seventeen (accounts vary) she came to America to work as an au pair in Scarsdale, New York, and go to school, changed her name from Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid, and pretty much cut off any contact with her family for nineteen years. Some of her protagonists eagerly make the trip to the United States or to Britain, always excitedly celebrating their exit from Antigua, which they insist will be permanent. As Annie John contrives her journey away from her mother and her nation, one which "I have arranged to be permanent,"¹¹⁵ she declares that she is leaving her mother, father, and island home "forever."¹¹⁶ As she prepares to leave, she catalogues everything that she is seeing for the last time: "my heart swelled with a great gladness as the words 'I shall never see this again' spilled out inside me."¹¹⁷ However, her mother's last words to her as she prepares to sail away prove to be the prophetic curse that she has spent a lifetime trying to remove: "It doesn't matter what you do or where you go, I'll always be your mother and this will always be your home."¹¹⁸

In her writing, the adult Jamaica Kincaid does not imagine the symbolic return to the Caribbean homeland in the romantic and nostalgic way that some of the other writers do. Rather she privileges her "delicious position of living comfortably in a place that I am not from, enjoying my position of visitor, enjoying my position of not-the-native, enjoying especially the privilege of being able to make sound judgments about the Other."¹¹⁹ She frequently asserts her pride in her American home and family in an all-white town and affirms her desire to escape everything connected with the Caribbean. Yet her occasional recognition of the fact that, even with her "New World sophistication," she is one of those people from somewhere else¹²⁰ forces the reader to discern the need of this woman who renames herself "Jamaica" to embrace and at least spiritually return to that Caribbean home. In *My Garden (Book)*, she writes with pride of the gardens she establishes in American homes previously owned by whites and of her discovery of the histories of these homes and their owners, but the homes remain "old Mrs. McGovern's House"¹²¹ or "Dr. Woodworth's house."¹²² And she acknowledges that her gardens in these homes "resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it," and that those gardens are for her "a way of getting to a past that is my own."¹²³ Symbolic of her outsider status and her alienation from her homeland are those moving scenes when she (or her fictional counterpart), unable to swim and fearful of the water, looks on enviously from the shore as her mother and brother frolic in the water in *My Brother* and as her mother and father sit laughing and "tracing patterns on [a] rock" far out in the sea in *Annie John*. The reader also recognizes the gravity of her loss of

language: in *My Brother*, she claims to have forgotten the Creole¹²⁴ and her British English is so pretentious that her brother ridicules it. The reader also senses her tragic loss of a place in the family: "That night as he lay dying and calling the names of his brothers and his mother, he did not call my name ... [I was] not ... included in the roll call of his family."¹²⁵ Indeed her loss of comfort in the Caribbean and her need to create, in effect, her mother's gardens in her cold, all-white Vermont home belie her need to experience again that ancestral embrace by her grandmother Ma Chess that brings healing and rebirth to her in *Annie John*. For after all she recognizes as she looks out at the water in varied places in the USA: "the frozen waters of Lake Michigan were ... not like the blue of the Atlantic Ocean in the West Indies (the Atlantic Ocean in Nova Scotia or Martha's Vineyard is not blue at all, it is a gray, a gray that signals the beginning of the end of things)."¹²⁶ And most tragically of all, the reader recognizes everywhere her loss of self. Though her brother "called me by the new name I had given myself, he did not know the self I had become."¹²⁷ Even more disastrous, she "did not know ... the self I have become";¹²⁸ "The person I had become I did not know very well."¹²⁹ In *Lucy* she writes that she continues in the process of "inventing myself."¹³⁰ One senses that that process cannot be truly completed until she is able to truly go home again.

The painful mother-daughter conflict that Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat depicts in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) may remind us of Kincaid, but the novelist's goal is more reminiscent of Marshall. Like Marshall she focuses on the dilemma of the Caribbean immigrant's search for voice and identity, and she too relies upon the ancestors to provide the necessary corrective to the history of her nation: "I look to the past – To Haiti – hoping that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with – the ones that have passed on – will choose to tell their story through my voice ... For those of us who have voice must speak to the present and the past. For we may very well be Haiti's last surviving breath, eyes, and memory."¹³¹ In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, published when the author was twenty-four years old, the protagonist, Sophie Caco, is torn away from her beloved aunt and grandmother when she is twelve years old and sent to America to join a mother she does not even remember. In the USA she endures the nightmares of her mother, Martine, "a frightened insomniac"¹³² who, like Haiti, cannot recover from her history of rape and violence. She cannot bear the face of her daughter who, she assumes, resembles the rapist who impregnated her. Martine is also obsessed with issues of color and class, so that she bleaches her skin, suffers eating disorders, and insists that Sophie must become a doctor and marry a person of proper family, education, and profession. Even worse, she subjects her daughter to

“testing,” a painful and demeaning practice of testing a girl to be sure she is still a virgin. Sophie also endures the usual problems of the immigrant in the United States: learning a new language and enduring taunts from cruel classmates because she is different. Even after Sophie escapes her mother’s home and marries, she cannot escape the nightmares and she does not find freedom. Finally she returns to her grandmother Ifé in Haiti. Like many ancestral figures, Ifé possesses the ancient knowledge, tells her the old stories, introduces her to the traditional culture, and lovingly teaches her what she must do to effect a change in her life: “You cannot always carry the pain. You must liberate yourself.”¹³³ Just as it appears that Sophie and Martine, thanks to Ifé, are about to achieve some resolution of their conflicts, Martine succumbs to her nightmares and commits suicide. Though Martine had found it painful to visit Haiti during her life, she will be brought home in death. After her mother’s funeral, Sophie hysterically attacks the cane in the field where her mother was raped. Her grandmother holds back the priest who tries to stop her, and shouts to her, “‘*Ou libéré?*’ Are you free?”¹³⁴ The grandmother then caresses her and reminds her that “words can give wings to your feet ... the daughter is never fully a woman until her mother has passed on before her. There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question: ‘*Ou libéré?*’”¹³⁵ Not only does Ifé lead Sophie to recognize how much she is like her mother, but she is also largely responsible for the promise for the next generation, Sophie’s infant daughter, Brigitte Ifé, who promises to escape the curse of Martine and Sophie. This child is named after her great-great-grandmother Brigitte and her great-grandmother Ifé; she has her grandmother’s face (“we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking in her face”);¹³⁶ she sleeps well; she betokens comfort in her dual heritage; she has a strong and loving American father; she first calls her mother Manman (the Haitian Creole for mother); and, thanks to her Great Grand Ifé, she will own land in Haiti. Brigitte Ifé is both American and Haitian: as an infant she survives her trip to Haiti without any problems and the reader is confident that she is a child who will be at home both in America and in Haiti. Her great-grandmother’s declaration that “we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking in her face”¹³⁷ reminds us of Paule Marshall’s Sonny, with his African, African American, and Caribbean heritage, of whom we are told that to his foster mother, his “face ... reflected them all ... that little face. The outward and visible sign of their continuing presence,”¹³⁸ an observation confirmed by his great grandmother who, seeing in his face her family’s eyes as well as traces of his West Indian family, declares, “You got some of all of us in you, dontcha?

What you gonna do with all that Colored from all over creation you got in you?"¹³⁹ Giselle Liza Anatol's description of Sonny as "the quintessence of the African diaspora ... a perfect representative of cultural bridges"¹⁴⁰ is also applicable to Brigitte Ifé. Both Marshall and Danticat insist on bringing Southern American heritages into these children who symbolize "cultural bridges." It is interesting to note that a number of Caribbean writers have suggested a closer affinity to Afro-Southern culture than to other parts of the US, especially Erna Brodber.

Since she came to the USA at nineteen to attend college, Elizabeth Nunez, who was born and raised in Trinidad, has written five novels focusing upon the importance of maintaining traditional African and Caribbean cultural and religious practices in an inhospitable dominant Western society. Her autobiographical novel, *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998), portrays the dilemma of Sara Edgehill, who, despite the warnings of her grandmother and others in Trinidad, is not prepared to cope with the racial and cultural issues she confronts as a college student in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Her journey to self-realization includes a recognition that she is "link[ed] ... irreversibly to Black America"¹⁴¹ and an introduction to the ancient arts of Obeah, which teach her to love herself and open herself to her spirit.

Particularly relevant to this discussion – and unique to it – is Maryse Condé's fourth novel, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986), which, according to Ann Armstrong Scarboro, is "the first francophone Caribbean novel to connect the English Caribbean with the colonial United States."¹⁴² Unlike the other writers treated here, this prolific Guadeloupean writer came to the United States to teach at various American universities (including the University of Virginia, the University of California at Berkeley, and Columbia University) only after she was an established novelist. Condé was educated in France and has lived and worked in Africa (Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal) and Europe (London and Paris). She returned to the Americas in 1986, residing since then between the United States and Guadeloupe. Though Condé has declared that as a writer she will always be on the move and though she rejects the myth of the romanticized return to one's native land,¹⁴³ she has achieved a Guadeloupean homecoming not unlike Lorde's, declaring in an interview: "I made peace with the island and having done so, I also made peace with myself in a way."¹⁴⁴ In *Tituba* Condé reclaims and gives fictive history and voice to the Barbadian slave who was arrested for witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, while denouncing American hypocrisy and racism ("little has changed since the days of the Puritans," she told Scarboro).¹⁴⁵ Her expressed goal was to "turn Tituba into a sort of female hero, an epic heroine, like the legendary 'Nanny of the maroons'"¹⁴⁶ – and,

one might add, like Marshall's Congo Jane. Also like Marshall, Condé aspires to correct and revise history. She declared, "This woman was unjustly treated by history";¹⁴⁷ and averred, "It is a kind of challenge to find out exactly what was there before. It is not history for the sake of history. It is searching for one's self, searching for one's identity, searching for one's origin in order to better understand oneself."¹⁴⁸

Condé conceives Tituba as a mixed child born in Barbados to Abena, a black slave raped by a white European, who, like Danticat's Martine, is unable to look at her daughter without being reminded of her rape by a white European. Abena's husband, however, claims the child as his own and gives her a name to signify his love.¹⁴⁹ Condé has the adult and free Tituba follow her lover to Massachusetts, where she allows herself to become a slave to both her husband and his white master. Though she is a woman trained in ancient knowledge and African rituals, including sorcery, conjuring, and Obeah, she is separated from the ancestors who are her mainstay when she is, in the words of the spirit of her biological mother Abena, "dragged off to the other side of the water";¹⁵⁰ Mama Yaya, her main ancestral spirit guide, warns her that even the spirits have trouble "cross[ing] the water."¹⁵¹ Ultimately Condé's Tituba is freed from prison and slavery and returns home to Barbados, where she is, ironically, hanged for her role in a doomed rebellion, her executioner exclaiming, "What they should have done to you in Boston, we're going to do here."¹⁵² Though this rebellion, like Cliff's in *No Telephone to Heaven*, ends in martyrdom, the Epilogue leaves the reader more sanguine, for Tituba is in the spirit world with her ancestors and she and her Barbadian homeland have "become one":

And then there is my island. We have become one and the same. There isn't one of its footprints I haven't trod. There isn't one of its streams I haven't bathed in ... This constant and extraordinary symbiosis is my revenge for my long solitude in the deserts of America. A vast, cruel land where the spirits only beget evil.¹⁵³

Reminiscent of the tragic but triumphant return home treated in *Tituba* and *No Telephone* is Marie-Elena John's first novel, *Unburnable* (2006), whose heroine, Lillian Baptiste, came to the USA as a young teen but is obsessed with the need to return to Dominica to clear the reputations of her grandmother, who was hanged for murder, and her mother, who suffered persecution as a prostitute, both subjects of scandalous *chanté mas* songs during Carnival. This novel brings together African American and African Dominican cultures informed by their African background. Instead of finding her release

in life, Lillian joins her ancestors and her folk culture through a planned suicide that she manipulates at the place “where the Maroons had jumped”¹⁵⁴ in order to motivate songs of her death as a feared *soucouyant*. The author, who was born and raised in Antigua, came to the United States to study at New York’s City College. She plans to continue to write about the impact of slavery and colonialism, the interactions of West Indians and African Americans, and the African influence on New World Negroes. Given her study at the University of Nigeria, her focus on Africa in her graduate studies at Columbia University, her work as an Africa development specialist, and her determination to “reconstruct ... our history for ourselves,”¹⁵⁵ it seems clear that she joins the sisterhood of countless African American women writers of Caribbean descent whose work negates the finality of the Port of No Return, demonstrating rather that return can take place in the physical sense or through the spirit, as was the case with Avey’s grandmother: “her body ... might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos.”¹⁵⁶

Notes

1. Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* [1973] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 157.
2. Opal Palmer Adisa, “I Will Raise the Alarm: Contemporary Cross-cultural Sites of Racism and Sexism,” in Carole Boyce Davies and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (eds.), *Moving Beyond Boundaries*, vol. 1: *International Dimensions of Black Women’s Writing* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 21–37; p. 26.
3. Paule Marshall, “Rising Islanders of Bed-Stuy,” *New York Times Magazine* (November 3, 1985): 67, 78, 80–82.
4. Simone A. James Alexander, *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 19.
5. Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* [1959] (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981), p. 262.
6. Marlene Nourbese Philip, “Managing the Unmanageable,” in Selwyn R. Cudjoe (ed.), *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference* (Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990), pp. 295–300; p. 296.
7. Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988).
8. Derek Walcott, “What the Twilight Says: An Overture,” in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1970), pp. 3–40; p. 17.
9. Paule Marshall, “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” in *Reena and Other Stories* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1983), pp. 3–12; p. 3.
10. Rosa Guy, “Introduction,” in Opal Palmer Adisa, *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1989), pp. viii-x; p. ix.
11. Emily Apter, “Crossover Texts/Creole Tongues: A Conversation with Maryse Condé,” *Public Culture* 13.1 (2002): 89–96; 96.

12. Marshall, "From the Poets," p. 7.
13. Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), p. 91.
14. Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p. 6.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
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