The Mother as Archetype of Self: A Poetics of Matrilineage in the Poetry of Claire Harris and Lorna Goodison

DANNABANG KUWABONG

BETTY WILSON AND Pamela Mordecai contend in *Her True-True Name* that Caribbean women's writing deals with a multiplicity of issues that include mother-daughter relationships, female bonding, and the struggle against sexism. Similarly, in *Watchers & Seekers*, Rhonda Cobham and Merle Hodge write that while Caribbean women writers may hold critically "nostalgic or celebratory, sentimental or distanced" perspectives of their Caribbean origins, what comes out repeatedly is a "sense of sisterly solidarity with mother figures, whose strengths and frailties assume new significance for daughters now faced with the challenge of raising children or achieving artistic recognition in an environment hostile to the idea of female self-fulfilment" (6). Mother-daughter relationship, therefore, is central to the development of Afro-Caribbean poetics of matrilineage, identity, and voice among Afro-Caribbean women. It is through mother-daughter bonding that Afro-Caribbean women develop a collaborative feminist consciousness of struggle against multiple oppressions.

Afro-Caribbean daughters develop their voices and identities through recognition and celebration of their matrilineage by celebrating their mothers. This concept is underscored by feminist's theories on the positive effects of mother-daughter bonding. Laura Niesen De Abruna writes that in the Caribbean "the young female self is defined not through independence from the mother but through bonding and identification with her. [Therefore], the nature of adult female identity arises from the daughter's relationship with her mother" (85-86). In a similar vein, Janice Lee Liddell contends that Afro-Caribbean women

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accord mother-daughter relationship a centrality in the definition of themselves because of the pivotal image of the mother in the consciousness of Afro-Caribbean children, and much more so, among daughters. She writes that "the image of the mother" is that of "giver and nurturer of life; teacher and instiller of values and mores" (321).

Even though this may not be unique to Afro-Caribbean mothers and daughters, it nevertheless corroborates Andrea Rushing's idea of the core nature of the mother image in African and African American poetry (*Afro-America* 75), and traces this far back to the sociocultural dynamics of the African cultures from which enslaved people were brought to the Americas. Rushing rejects the suggestion often made purporting to indicate that this dynamic Afrisporic mother image is a positive consequence of slavery, and sees it rather as a legacy from Africa. For Rushing, the root of the mother's pivotal role in the development of daughters among Afrisporic people goes back to the position of the grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, aunt in most African societies of both the past and the present. For instance, Annie John's relationship with her grandmother, Ma Chess, in *Annie John*, Goodison's celebration of her Guinea great-grandmother's uprising ghost in *I am Becoming My Mother*, and Harris's pregnant narrator/writer in *Drawing Down a Daughter*, who dreams of the self, by dreaming of her mother are testimonies of their recognition of the importance of their matrilineage in antislavery, anticolonial, antiracist, and antisexist interventions in the lives of Afro-Caribbean women. Thus, African and Afrisporic mothers generally are "guardians of traditions, the strong Earth mother who stands for security and stability" (*African* 19), and play the important role of custodians of culture and core values, which they then transmit to their daughters.

Nonetheless, Carole Boyce Davies quotes Philomena Steady as saying that the importance of "motherhood and the evaluation of the childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women" (243). Similarly, Pat Ellis

notes that in the Caribbean, "the great importance attached to motherhood has provided women with considerable influence, authority and respect. . . . For many women, having children is seen as an economic investment for their old age" (9). Thus, whether in Africa, or in the Caribbean, as Jane Bryce-Okunlola contends, mothers and daughters make use of the privileges accorded motherhood to counterbalance the restrictions imposed on women by males (201). Consequently, Vivien Nice postulates that it is in the matrix of matrilineage that "Afrisporic" daughters receive from their mothers the survival spirits of "self-reliance, independence, assertiveness, and strength . . . passed on to Black girls at a very early age" (68). In this matrix neither daughters nor mothers see the others as rivals, but as comrades in their collective liberation. To these daughters, mothers are the bridges linking them to their past and helping them toward their future. To these mothers, daughters are the reflection of their past, and a security of their future. Thus, as Mary Helen Washington puts it, both mothers and daughters prosper through this interdependent relationship (148).

These arguments may sound persuasive, and they may demonstrate some notions on transfers of some power and authority in gender relations among Afro-Caribbean and African-American women. However, they tend to be rather limiting in the way they romanticize Afro-Caribbean mother-daughter relationship to the neglect of possibilities of ambivalences in this relationship that may exist. Thus, Liddell (322), Grace Nichols (284), and Fabian Clements Worsham (118) all argue for more objective and critical examination of romanticized mother-daughter relationship. This, they put forward persuasively, will lead us toward a praxis of exploring the often ambivalent nature of those relationships (Nice 11). A move this way is necessary for the representation and validation of all the multiplicities that need to be included in the construction of an Afro-Caribbean matrilineage.

Helen Pyne Timothy, for instance, shows that in mother-daughter relationship in Caribbean literature, such ambivalence in mother-daughter relationship in the construction of an Afro-Caribbean poetics of matrilineage is powerfully dramatized in Jamaica Kincaid's two novels: *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie*

John. Kincaid's novels, Timothy writes, deal with the "complex moral cosmology Caribbean girls must inhabit" (242) in which ambivalent signals of their Afro-Caribbean girlhood and womanhood are flashed to them by their mothers. These ambivalent signals create confusion in the minds of adolescent girls. These confused minds may then develop into rebellious spirit in the daughters, who for a period, may regard their mothers as real barriers to their progress. As stated above, this ambivalence in the relationship originates also in the desire by daughters to identify with their mothers. Identification for daughters is "a highly pleasurable integration of the child's body and the mother's as part of the relationship of loving and caring" (236). But Patricia Hill Collins postulates that "this mother-daughter identification is problematic because, under patriarchy, men are more highly valued than women. Thus while daughters identify with their mothers they also reject them" (53). Daughters therefore do not want to be identified with inferiors. The daughters' desires for identification with the mothers are attempts at the retrieval of the daughters' pre-pubescent nourishing relationship with their mothers, but which suddenly ends with the daughters' post-pubescent period. The desires by daughters for identification with mothers is the nurturing ground for an Afro-Caribbean female resistance to a system, that has persistently been used to misconstruct, misinterpret, devalue, and victimize Afro-Caribbean womanhood. In this case, Afro-Caribbean daughters link up with their oppressed mothers to seek sites of collective survival. In writing about African-American mother-daughter relationship, Patricia Hill Collins states that in the relationship, African American mothers, (and Afro-Caribbean women since quite a lot of them live, work, and write in the United States), try to prepare their daughters to survive and transcend the psychosomatic, economic, and spiritual terrorism experienced by Afro-Caribbean women in the multiple systems of patriarchy: slavery, colonialism, racism, and sexism (123-29).

Gloria Wade-Gayles writes that this preparation assumes the attitude of maternal overprotection of daughters. Within this overprotective canopy, African American mothers provide that safe homeplace (see hooks 41-44) where they "socialize their

daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident" (12). Wade-Gayles further argues that this attitude of overprotectiveness is necessary if the daughters are to become "whole self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women" (12). But as Rosalie Riegle Troester has suggested in her reading of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, such overprotectiveness of the daughter by the mother can develop an emotional isolation in the daughter. This can then lead to an emotional intensity in the daughter toward the mother, which if left unrelieved by mechanisms of other-mothering, the "spillways in the form of other adult women who help guide and form the young girl, thus relieving some of the pressure on the mother-daughter relationship" (163), may be destructive to the young daughter as she struggles for personal space and voice. Thus, as Moira Ferguson has observed in her reading of *Annie John*, such overprotectiveness develops into "obsessive connectedness" (52), and later degenerates into tensions caused by a dread of losing that "obsessive connectedness" (52). Subsequently, Ferguson reads Annie John's ambivalent attitude to her mother in subversiveness and anger. Anger for Annie John is a means of achieving a balance and getting self-compensating for her "traumatized feelings of abandonment and domination, both personal and political" (52).

But as Kincaid herself testifies in an interview with Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Annie John's rebelliousness does not originate from a hardness of heart toward her mother, but is more of a reaction against the too abrupt physical and emotional separation from the mother's world. This abrupt separation creates in Annie John feelings of insecurity in the unknown world into which most Afro-Caribbean daughters are suddenly thrust without the protective guidance of mothers (227-28). Moreover, as Timothy asserts, "even in the act of rebellion Kincaid strongly shows that the break between mothers and daughters can never be final or complete, that the women are linked irrevocably to each other" (242). Thus, in spite of this ambivalence in mother-daughter relationship in Afro-Caribbean women's writing, Afro-Caribbean women writers generally would tend to agree with Alice Walker when she writes that

> it is not my child who tells me: I have no femaleness white women must affirm.... It is not my child who has purged my face from history and herstory, left mystory just that, a mystery;... We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, *sisters* really, against whatever denies us all that we are. (75)

This idea of mother-daughter togetherness is echoed by Harris' pregnant daughterhood expert in *Drawing Down a Daughter* as she tells her "Girlchild" that we are moving "together / on this swell of water / this swimming and whirling" (43).

Invariably, Harris's and Goodison's poetics of matrilineage is grounded in the representation of their mother as archetypes of themselves, but contextualized within ambivalences caused by the historical and cultural contradictions in Afro-Caribbean society. These contradictions are explicated by Senior's research into the pervasive myth of Afro-Caribbean matriarchy and its effects on Afro-Caribbean femininity (102). The matriarch's reputed power and dominance over men, Senior observes, are undermined in the light of the reality in Afro-Caribbean gender and socioeconomic relations. Senior writes that while "younger, upwardly mobile women nowadays voluntarily choose single parenthood and household headship, for the older women there is usually no choice; the role is foisted on them by circumstances" (102). Consequently, Senior's research yields the fact that these archetypal matriarchs or "female household heads on the whole are poor, black, uneducated and in the worst paid and lowest status jobs. It is these women who are truly working miracles, in ensuring at least the survival, and sometimes the advancement, of their families" (102). The paradox that arises then is how such terrible conditions of survival economics, so evident in the poetry of Goodison and Harris, can be validating of Afro-Caribbean mothers. But this matriarchal image is so grounded in Afro-Caribbean consciousness, that the predominant image of Afro-Caribbean women in Caribbean literature, writes Daryl Cumber Dance, show these women to be nothing else but powerful matriarchs (21-31).

The evidence that challenges this overarching matriarchal figure notwithstanding, Senior asserts that there is one thing that heterosexual Afro-Caribbean women value and see as validating

of their female existence—motherhood and mothering. It is these views of motherhood that Goodison celebrates in her own poems to her son. Goodison does not see motherhood as a male-inspired construct that binds women to biological determinism. For example, she insists that motherhood "is an important issue. . . . I cannot see my life without mothering a child. . . . It's just something I couldn't see myself not doing because to me having a child is the key to a whole lot of things in myself" (23). Similarly, other writers have commented on the high value placed by Caribbean women on motherhood. Daughters who grow up in this kind of cultural climate will tend to regard their mothers with awe, love, and may desire to become like them even if they live in a different cultural, geographical, and class location.

Subsequently, and notwithstanding Dionne Brand's materialist and negative view of motherhood and mothering (378), Goodison's enthusiasm for motherhood and mothering hold for most Afro-Caribbean women writers as Makeda Silvera insinuates (378). Thus, on the one hand, Senior's research on motherhood in the Caribbean shows that "childbearing is one of the few areas in the lives of Caribbean women that is not surrounded by ambivalence. There is an almost universal impulse to mothering . . ." (66). She further states that in spite of the advances made in the lives of women through education, "the view persists that the real vocation for women is motherhood" (66). Merle Hodge comes to the same conclusion (41). On the other hand, both Senior and Hodge postulate that motherhood may indeed also be an oppressive expectation to some women, or to use Brand's words, a joyless, uncreative "botheration" (378). For instance, Afro-Caribbean women may actually be socially pressured to become mothers early, even when they may otherwise would have loved to pursue a professional carrier in teaching, writing, or banking. But what is worthy of note is Goodison's and Harris's graduation from daughterly positionalities that enable them to revision their mothers positively, and to construct authoritative matrilineages through which they articulate their individual identities as creative writers, a profession that is sometimes associated with mothering (Makeda 378). As Alice Walker argues, African and Afrisporic women writers have caused a rethinking of the way

"our [Western] culture separates the duties of raising children from those of creative work" (70). The rejection of this separation between creative writing and raising children creates a conducive atmosphere for the construction of a poetic of matrilineage through positive archetypal mother figures.

Nonetheless, the construction of a poetic of matrilineage through positive archetypal mother figures by Goodison and Harris is thus contextualized and defined by historical, sociological, and economic locations that are often prescribed and enforced by the guardians of patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and economic dominance. Collins's definition of some of these locations in which African-American women have often found themselves is applicable to Afro-Caribbean women. Included in these categories are the good mammy—as a domestic slave or worker to middle class women and their children; the bad mother—she is not there physically for her own children because she is a mammy to others; the powerful matriarch—creation out of the historical emasculation of the "Afrisporic" male, but now determined to subvert male power and "white" female virtue; the illegitimate mother—seen as a whore and breeder of "illegitimate" babies from the perspective of Euro-American and upper class morality and concepts of legitimacy; the welfare mother—because she cannot get a job in the system that discriminates against African American women (67-90). All these categories into which African American women have been pigeonholed are historicized in "slavetocracy," plantocracy, and racism, and thus cause some of the ambivalences in mother-daughter relationship as pointed out above. The ambivalence, as argued earlier, may arise also from guilt caused by anger at the apparent hopelessness of the situation in which both mothers and daughters find themselves within the system(s). It also stems from a rejection of distortions behind the myth of the self-sufficient, ever-reliable, Afro-Caribbean matriarch (De Abruna 86-88; Senior 1991; Liddell 322; Nichols 284; Worsham 118; Collins 67-90).

In *Tamarind Season* (1980), *I Am Becoming My Mother* (1986), and *Baby Mother and the King of Swords* (1990) Goodison's construction of her matrilineage is done through woman's issues dealing with daughterhood, motherhood, gender relationships,

and patriarchy. These issues transcend class, sexual, and generational boundaries. They are therefore far from being contentious borders between mother and daughter, and rather are bonds that unite them umbilically in a family of sisters, mothers, grandmothers, granddaughters, and daughters. As a daughter then, Goodison identifies with her mother through these issues since she too, like her mother, will experience these biological and social constructs of her womanhood. In addition to these corporeal realities that engage Goodison's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship, she explores her matrilineage through a reclamation of physical, social, and biological similarities and historical linkages between her subordinate position as a woman in the Caribbean today, and the historical silencing and colonization of her West African great-grandmother in *I Am Becoming My Mother* (39). She cannot separate her own desire to break the cages of silence caused by patriarchy and racism from the struggles of her foremothers:

> They forbade great grandmother
> guinea woman presence
> they washed away her scent . . .
> controlled the child's antelope walk
> and called her uprisings rebellions. (39)

Paradoxically, these attempts at erasure only prove further that no amount of indoctrination, denial, and renaming of Afro-Caribbean women by patriarchal Europe can stop an uprising of African femininity in Afro-Caribbean women through the ghosts of their African foremothers. Subsequently, and as Carolyne Cooper shows (64-89), Goodison, like other Afro-Caribbean women writers, re-establishes an empowering spiritual and uterine relationship with her great-grandmother. This prepares the framework for the positive view she has of her mother. In re-establishing the validity of her African identity through the ancestral spirit and uterine connection, Goodison, seeks a spiritual, racial, and gender re-energization of herself. Her act is a political statement of defiant resurrection of her matrilineage. Moreover, the poem's remarkable ending echoes Derek Walcott's early celebration of the browning, the Africanization, of his physical and literary personality in "Veranda" (39). Goodison accepts

this spiritual uprising of her matrilineage through her great-grandmother, and through Nanny in "Nanny" (*I Am Becoming My Mother* 44-45), as a positive representation of who she is. It reestablishes her great-grandmother, and therefore, all Afro-Caribbean mothers and daughters as prominent in the process of social and racial reconstruction:

> But, great grandmother
> I see your features blood dark
> appearing
> in the children of each new
> breeding
> the high yellow brown
> is darkening down.
> Listen, children
> it's great grandmother's turn. (40)

Thus, Goodison's spirited celebration of the great-grandmother's blood, age, and spirit legitimizes and gives moral agency to her recovery rhetoric. Her celebration of the great-grandmother's ghostly presence in spite of centuries of negation, is symbolic of and gives credence to what Davies in *Black Women Writing and Identity, Migration of the Subject* calls Black women's "uprising textualities" (80). Davies's term suggests and implies a rereading of female texts produced by women in places like the Caribbean and Africa. These societies, which she describes as neo-colonial and generally patriarchal in structure, are far different from the settler postcolonial societies in the outposts of empire such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. As a consequence, female texts from these neo-colonial societies, she argues quite rightly then, even if they critique empire and patriarchy, nevertheless still are rarely referred to in the formulations of feminism and postcoloniality. It also then implies, by extension of Davies's suggestion, that if they are absent from the formulations of feminism and postcoloniality, they are also absent from canonical formulations of mother-daughter relationships. It is this virtual absence or neglect of these texts in postcolonial and feminist literary formulations that makes her conclude that their "work exist in the realm of 'elsewhere' of diasporic imaginings" (80), and, therefore, should be seen more as uprising textualities, rather than as postcolonial texts.

Goodison's celebration of her great-grandmother's ghostly presence in *I Am Becoming My Mother* (39-40) as a source of inspiration is in the context of Davies's idea of uprising textuality. Her celebratory welcome of the great-grandmother's ghost subsequently differs from Harris's character's desire in *The Conception of Winter* and in *Drawing Down a Daughter.* In *The Conception of Winter,* the mother is defined as a "spell / a plot / i could not be like her" (59). The daughter acknowledges that she could never learn to be like the mother:

> it was something
> could not learn the way
> i learnt
> to make buljol
> stuff cucumbers
> match patterns (59)

What the daughter wants to do is to create her own path, to repudiate the mistakes of her mother and her child's grandmother:

> Girl i'm not going to make your grandmother's
> mistakes no no
> i'm going to make a whole
> new bunch of my own
> the most we can hope
> kid is primal mesh
> occasionally take it from me daughterhood expert (32)

Such resistance also means a refusal to make permanent choices in life. For example, the daughter rejects the mother's request to choose from a rainbow of ribbons for her parted hair. This refusal to choose is symbolic of the daughter's liberated consciousness that sees that the choice of any permanent position blocks off other possibilities and individuality:

> My mother her fingers part my hair make
> four neat plaits that dovetail on each side
> become one that is crossed and pinned
> She holds out a rainbow of ribbons says
> *choose one* ribbon hanging from her fingers
> like paths how can I choose when any choice
> means a giving up . . .
> (*Travelling to Find a Remedy* 37)

The daughter's decision here is not to be confused with matrophobia. Rather, the hair is a metaphor which Harris uses, not only to insist on the overlapping differences and similarities between mother and daughter, but also as a site to critique the stereotypes that her foremothers have been forced to accept from society in relation to Afro-Caribbean female beauty. In another sense, the choice of a ribbon can even be seen as symbol of the daughter's liberated consciousness. So, even though society insists she resembles her mother and should strive to be like her, the daughter's choice is to reject that proposition, and to choose a path toward a personal and individual growth. Her position is also a fulfilment and living out of the mother's instructions to her. The mother has instilled in her daughter a philosophy that negates any desire in the daughter to want to be in the same lowly backbreaking position as she is. Thus, she teaches the daughter that "a woman must have a profession / that way you aren't dependent on any man" (59), and "once she said a woman's choice limited / must be quick and sure" (64). We should not rush to read this then as an example of mother-hating merely because the speaker refuses to be like her Afro-Caribbean mother and spends "hours before the mirror / training my mouth to be different" (31), learning newer ways of refusing the mother's alternative gift of the chalice of silent suffering:

> For the calling her eroded hands cupped like a chalice
> she offered me the blasted world as if to say this is our
> sacrament drink I would not this is all there is I
> could not I left school I left she faded (31)

But the memory of "the mother still remains as the central frame in the discovery of selfhood" writes Jennifer Rahim (280). The narrator/poet/mother-to-be rejects the offer of the mother, and thereby rejects "the stereotyped images of Afro-Caribbean femininity" (280). In so doing, she engages her own process of "deconstruction, in order to reconstruct a personalized version of self that does not accept sexist stereotypes" (280). Thus, the pregnant woman does not reject the mother or her matrilineage. Indeed she dreams and yearns for an eternal connection be-

tween her and her dead mother: ". . . I find her my mother waiting at the window / in grey & lilac flowers I remember from childhood / I sit on the edge of a bed where dreams clot" (*Drawing Down a Daughter* 7). She also offers the mother a choice by asking her mother to come with her to a better place, but the mother refuses. The mother will not leave the house "your father bought . . . for me" (8). In spite of the fact that the house in which the mother resides is rotting, the "quiet gaiety," the laughter at the children's stories, and the mother's gentleness all gone (*The Conception of Winter* 58); she never agrees to abandon it. This causes some frustration in the daughter and she develops some resentment toward the mother's adamancy and silence "in the face of certain griefs" (58), and also for "Ravelling and ravelling in her silences / Against death against offspring against / darkness with the soft crumpling of days " (54). In "ravelling her silences" (54), the mother seems to abandon the daughters and retires to her womb (55). The ambivalence shown in the daughter's feelings of resentment and love toward the mother at this point enables the daughter to understand the terrible reality of the mother's position. This knowledge prevents her from romanticizing the mother.

The pregnant woman in the poem has experienced what it means to be a daughter to a woman who suffered a lot in silence. What Harris's speaker is conveying to her daughter-to-be is this: every Afro-Caribbean daughter is related to the mother historically, racially, and biologically, but every daughter must seek out her own space, and world in which to create an individuality, a separate personhood without forgetting the historical and racial realities of matrilineage. That separateness is defined by the daughter's geographical and social location. The mother-to-be is aware of the constant revisioning that is involved in mother-daughter relationship. Thus, she is aware that one day, the daughter-to-be will redefine the mother-to-be's own revisions of what it means to be an Afro-Caribbean woman:

> **Daughter** to live is to dream the self
> to make fiction
> this telling i begin
> you stranded in landscape of your time

will redefine shedding my tales
to grow your own
as i have lost our ancestors your
your daughters will lose me
(*Drawing Down a Daughter* 43)

The woman refers to herself as daughterhood expert because she took lessons from her mother on the quality of dreams and reality. She now transmits that knowledge to her unborn daughter in the form of the text. In the "gospel of bakes" where the daughter, who is soon to be mother, learns from her mother the art of making bakes, floats, acra, pilau, "callaloo with crab and salt pork barefoot rice rich black cake cassava pone" (44), she is accused of being a dreamer by an outsider. The mother understands her daughter and responds by saying that the interlocutor should let the daughter "dream while she can" (46). The mother understands the need for the daughter to have dreams, dreams of a personal space and for a better life than hers. This is the same message the pregnant woman is conveying to her unborn daughter.

Harris demonstrates the positive, nourishing, and validating relationship between mother and daughter in a genetic cycle and generational circle of past (grandmother), present (daughter), future (unborn daughter/granddaughter). So, even when the daughter's bakes do not come out round, the mother is there to help. The art of making a perfectly round bake against all odds is a metaphor for negotiating the intricacies of life dominated by patriarchy. The bake, a porous combination of different ingredients that comes to perfection after passing through the heat of fire, is analogous to the multiple oppressions that go to create the personhood of the Afro-Caribbean woman, a personhood that is not categorizable, but is constantly negotiating new sites of resistance to oppression. In this negotiation, mother and daughter need each other: "together they cover her bakes with a wet cloth / when the oven is ready her mother will test the heat / sprinkling water on a thin sheet" (47). Throughout the session, the mother instructs the daughter on how to do things to satisfy her father and society's expectations of what the ideal woman, based on Euro-American ideologies, should be: a good manager of the household. She nonetheless allows the child some room

for personal creativity. It is this leverage that provides the girl later with the ability to survive imaginatively against all odds. In instructing the daughter on the art of making well-rounded bakes, and also allowing her some personal space to dream, the mother teaches the daughter on how to be a mother one day. The daughter learns her lessons well in *Drawing Down a Daughter.* She now assumes the role of the teacher, and instructs her unborn daughter in the text that she produces—a text that remembers her mother through the act of revision in writing. Thus the link is maintained between mothers and daughters.

The Afro-Caribbean daughter's concept of the archetypal ideal mother and grandmother is ritualized in Goodison's *I Am Becoming My Mother* (46-48), *Baby Mother and the King of Swords* (2-4; 9-11), and in Harris's *The Conception of Winter* (52-67), *Travelling to Find a Remedy* (31; 37), *Translation Into Fiction* (27-29) and *Drawing Down a Daughter.* In these collections, both Goodison and Harris engage extended metaphors to eulogize Afro-Caribbean mothers. For instance, in *Tamarind Season, I Am Becoming My Mother, Travelling to Find a Remedy, The Conception of Winter* and *Translation into Fiction,* both Goodison and Harris explore the implications of motherhood/womanhood in the Caribbean, including what it is to be of mixed race and female, what motherhood means in her context, and what a warrior-poet who is female can do. In these texts then, Harris and Goodison reject the construct of the Afro-Caribbean woman as a happy, smiling, but a no-nonsense, powerful matriarch. As I have indicated earlier, this stereotypical objectification of the Afro-Caribbean woman, be it in North America or in the Caribbean, has been deliberately constructed as a site of silencing, abusing, and oppressing "Afrisporic" women (Collins 67-90). Harris's and Goodison's interpretation of motherhood may not strictly have been constructed by "slavetocracy," but it nevertheless is situated within a matrilineage that has evolved out of a history of struggle against patriarchy and the peculiarities of Afro-Caribbean history.

Marianne Hirsch explicates the feelings that influence the way Afrisporic daughters shape the portraits of their mothers. These

feelings are governed by a "tremendously powerful need to present to the public a positive image of black womanhood" (417). This tendency to publicly celebrate "maternal presence and influence" (416), Hirsch argues, results in the "portrayals of strong and powerful mothers, on the one hand, combined with the relative absence of fathers, on the other, [which] makes this [a] uniquely female tradition . . . in which to explore issues of maternal presence and absence, speech and silence" (416). This implies that even when the Afro-Caribbean daughter's postmodern, postcolonial, and feminist consciousness and ideology occasionally set her against her mother's apparent accommodationst conservatism, there is still a great pull to define the mother positively. This is the case in both Harris's and Goodison's maternal representations in which they as daughters may appear to be defining "[themselves] in opposition to and not in imitation of the maternal figure" (417), when in reality what they are doing is exposing and rejecting the circumstances under which their mothers struggled to bring them up. They set up the mothers as heroic archetypes, whose pioneering struggles create openings for their daughters to follow and expand upon. This way, the mother is seen more as a heroic victim than a willing martyr, and therefore, as someone worthy of empathy. Goodison writes

> When I came to know my mother many years later, I knew her
> as the figure
> who sat at the first thing I learned to read: "SINGER," and
> she breast-fed
> my brother while she sewed; and she taught us to read while
> she sewed and
> she sat in judgement over all our disputes as she sewed.
>
> She could work miracles, she would make a garment from a
> square of cloth
> in a span that defied time. Or feed twenty people on a
> stew made from
> fallen-from-the-head cabbage leaves and a carrot and a
> cho-cho and a palmful
> of meat.
> And she rose early and sent us clean into the world and she
> went to bed in
> the dark, for my father came in always last.
>
> (*I Am Becoming My Mother* 47-48)

The mother image portrayed here, if not that of a superwoman, is definitely a configuration of an all-resourceful, never-weary, "society-automated" Afro-Caribbean woman, who performs the role of a super mother, as the long lines, and the staccato repetitiveness suggest. But as Collins suggests (67-90), this function of the mother as a matriarch arises from love of family, but this is distorted by socioeconomic circumstances. However, in objectifying and celebrating the mother in such hyperbole, Goodison veers toward desexing, dehumanizing, and desocializing the mother, and transforming her into that indefatigable and emotionless machine that Nichols problematizes. She rejects this archetypal good Afro-Caribbean mother, seeing it as an interiorization of the stereotype of the "'long-suffering black woman' who is so strong that she can carry whatever is heaped upon her" (284), and advocates its rejection. Goodison, however, saves the mother from death by stereotype. The mother shows human emotion and sheds tears of love for her "wayward husband," and cries "For her hands grown coarse with raising nine children / for her body for twenty years permanently fat / . . . / and for the pain she bore with the eyes of a queen" (*I Am Becoming My Mother* 48).

In Harris's celebration of her mother in "A Grammar of the Heart," we find the same type of eulogy. Harris's poem addresses the same strangulating silence of the Afro-Caribbean mother that Goodison talks about in her poem. The mother's suffering begins at age eight when she loses brothers and sisters. From then on Harris writes:

> . . . now deathbeds have
> become her womb from her first husband's at
> twenty she birthed grief in black veils and in
> honey then her father died she drew from the
> hollow of that death the modern bread winner &
> so fashionable she laughed often was young
> her mother died she shed the daughter became
> wife once more and finally
>
> . . .
>
> Thus she turned away from us all
> retired to her own womb
> (*The Conception of Winter* 54-55)

The mother's days are of course not all filled with suffering. Nonetheless, her internal struggle, never vocalized, is devastating to the children. But as the poem testifies, the mother's silence does not indicate a lack of love and nurturing relationship between the poet-daughter and the silent mother. Indeed, as the poem goes on to show, the mother's silence is a sacrifice to enable her daughters and other children to have speech.

The mother's silence makes it impossible for the children to know her pain and empathize with her. But the silence paradoxically enables the daughter, in her frustration, to enter into the mother's world of resistance to the violence of words, to patriarchy. In that womb of silence it is revealed to the daughter that the mother's silence is not the absence of words, but a strategy of resistance against the violent words of the father. In the mother's silence, the power of the word is held at bay, frustrated, and denied any authority. It is here the daughter epiphanically realizes that the mother's silence enables her on several occasions to win battles against the storming verbosity of the father: "young and laughing I remember how silence / rewarded you my father storming round / your silence then giving in" (66). Also, the death of the mother, which is a bigger silence, does not indicate a break in mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, the dead mother is closest to both daughter and granddaughter now that she has become an ancestral spirit in the Afro-Caribbean pantheon. As a spirit, she is able to communicate much more effectively to her progeny via dreams and visions in an exclusive female sphere of human relations.

In an incantatory and ritualized mode and mood, Harris, much like Goodison, also chants a litany of numerous activities that the mother engages in only in order to protect her children, and fulfil the role society has prescribed for her class and gender within Afro-Caribbean culturescape:

> To sketch
> one who discarded
> words
> with words
> she was a woman
> born in the dawn
> her girlhood startled

by the first world war
she loved
she married
she buried
she loved again married in rose lace and promise
then calm eye of the storm
she mothered
she cooked
she taught
she baked
she nursed
she danced and played and fussed over bruises
and laughed and prayed
and loved
. . .
she was a woman who thought herself unwatched
her heart secret around the first grief she
moved through life as if she wasn't there (54-55)

Similar then to Goodison's great grandmother's uprising ghost who manifests her presence in the great granddaughter's rebellious spirit, Harris's protagonist's mother's ghost in *Drawing Down a Daughter* is ever present with her, and therefore, with the unborn daughter: "I find her my mother waiting at the window in grey & lilac flowers I remember from childhood . . ." (7). Later in the poem there is the description of the unbreakable bond linking the mother, the daughter, and the granddaughter. Such a bond is manifested in the behavioral similarities between either mothers and daughters, or between grandmothers and granddaughters (*Translation Into Fiction* 29; *Baby Mother and The King of Swords* 4; *Drawing Down a Daughter* 7-9). The daughter in *The Conception of Winter* who laments the death of her mother is herself about to become a mother. In becoming a mother, she is, as Goodison puts it, becoming her mother: she is giving birth to herself in her daughter; she most resembles her own mother now in the act of reproduction and continuity, and she now comprehends the motherhood/daughterhood jinx. As Adrienne Rich testifies, "the experience of giving birth stirs deep reverberation of her mother in a daughter; women often dream of their mothers during pregnancy and labor" (221). That is why in that early section of the poem the pregnant woman dreams of her self

by dreaming of the mother. Similarly, in dreaming of herself, she also dreams of her daughter. There is therefore a three generational bond existing in the body of the woman:

> . . . dreaming the mother
> dreaming myself dreaming
> the mother dream
> potent as love
> or hate
> helpless as daughter
>
> still and all for this your birthgift Child who
> opens me (*Drawing Down A Daughter* 8)

In a conversation with Janice Williamson, Harris confirms that the narrator/poet/mother-to-be/daughterhood expert is seeking ways of making "the world safe for her child; the poem prepares a safe space" (123). But as Susan Rudy (86) has pointed out, the poem itself is also an attempt to create a safe space for the mother, since the mother is equally as "helpless as a daughter" in a system that negates Afro-Caribbean women. Thus, Harris writes: "still and all for this your birthright Child who / opens me" (8).

Both Harris and Goodison are acutely aware of their mothers' bodies as sites of multiple mutilations and scars of silences and oppression. As Hortense Spillers says, the "Afrisporic" woman's body, from slavery days to the present, is a locus of visible scars from the physical whip, phallocentricism, racism, and rape (80). Both poets end on a note that correlates to Nichols's stand against the suffocating discourse of SWTDTUBW—See What They Done to Us Black Women. As I have indicated much earlier, it is paradoxically this recognition of and association with their much abused Afro-Caribbean female bodies that endears mothers to daughters and daughters to mothers and gives the daughters the necessary, even if not sufficient, strength and spirit to rebel against the system. Following on this, and while recognizing the history of slavery and racial oppression of Afro-Caribbean females, Nichols is nevertheless still ready to "reject the stereotype of the 'long-suffering black woman' who is so strong that she can carry whatever is heaped upon her" (284). Her position is

based on the "danger of reducing the black woman's condition to that of 'sufferer,' whether at the hands of white society or at the hands of black men" (285), as such a reading completely denies the women any agency.

Based on this notion, I want to suggest that both Goodison's and Harris's poetic of matrilineage survives on their positive representation of mother-daughter relationship, which ideologically borders on the Caribbean concept of a daughter becoming her mother. To become one's mother, Edward Baugh writes, is to assume cumulative, repetitious, contradictory, and progressive "identification[s] or bonding[s] with the mother, with [the] female" heritage of suffering, resistance, and transcendence over fixities (2). This identification "translates into a revelatory consciousness that paradoxically engenders the individuation so crucial to postmodern and postcolonial identity polemics" (2). In "I Am Becoming My Mother," and *Drawing Down a Daughter* both Goodison and Harris then assume the spirits of their mothers as daughters, women, wives, and mothers in the life cycle. Furthermore, Baugh has pointed out that to become one's mother implies two identities: first, constructing a self-identity within the limits of a patriarchally constructed gender role for women; and second, taking after the mother, assuming the mother's roles and identities through mimesis. What Baugh fails to include in his perceptive reading is the eternal process of female bonding that mothering engenders through the mother-daughter relationship, which Harris finds problematic but nevertheless nourishing in *Drawing Down a Daughter.*

In celebrating their mothers, therefore, Goodison and Harris set the tone for a revisionist historical narrative that recovers and redeems all those Afro-Caribbean women who were/are vilified by patriarchal historiographers. Goodison gives us some examples of such foremothers: Nanny of the Maroons, Rosa Parks, Winnie Mandela, the women in "We Are The Women" in *I Am Becoming My Mother.* In their perception of Afro-Caribbean mothers, therefore, both Goodison and Harris engage a recovery poetic that explores the relationship between mothers and daughters. In their representation of the mother, these poets

also engage in acts of self-representation. Their rhetorical negotiations are not situated in any abstract word play, but through umbilical reunification to their Afro-Caribbean mothers. Harris and Goodison demonstrate the positive nurturing bonds that exist between Afrisporic mothers and daughters, bonds that unite their different strategies of resistance against oppression of Afrisporic women. These bonds are realistic and not developed from a romantic idealization of the mothers. This creates the good working relationship of love and mutual understanding between daughters and mothers as articulated in the poems. The daughters, who are now adults and mothers themselves, pass on to the new generation of daughters the lessons of survival in a hostile world they learnt from their mothers:

> . . . O Girl all you can do is best
> you ain't God all you can do is best
> and you don't learn to swim by
> swimming against the current all you learn
> so is how to drown (77)

Goodison and Harris in celebrating their matrilineage through a celebration of their mothers, have joined the chorus of other Afro-Caribbean women writers such as Audre Lorde, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Jamaica Kincaid, Erna Brodber, Dionne Brand, Cynthia James, Grace Nichols, Jennifer Rahim, and many others, in their creation of revisionist historical and cultural narratives to reclaim and redeem all "Afrisporic" mothers. The mothers who are celebrated here by Goodison and Harris are matrilineal icons in Afro-Caribbean female liberation. These mothers are ordinary women thrust into the responsibilities of raising their daughters. The daughters celebrate that spirit of resistance and survival which their mothers passed on to them through story telling and active living (Harris 117) and which by their act of celebration they as daughters are passing on to the next generation of Afro-Caribbean daughters. In their writing, both Goodison and Harris celebrate and contribute to Afro-Caribbean women's struggles against dehumanization in slavery, colonialism, and neo-imperialism, and are ensuring the survival of themselves and their daughters.

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