

“Writing Home”:  
Claire Harris’s  
“Drawing Down a Daughter”

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IN HER FIFTH collection of poetry, *Drawing Down a Daughter*, Claire Harris theorizes maternal subjectivity and geographies of “home” as shifting and polyvalent. A Canadian poet born and raised in Trinidad, Harris participates in what Carol Boyce Davies identifies as a black female diasporic concern with a “migratory subjectivity” (4) and a “challenge to the meaning of the mother” (128), as well as an Afro-Caribbean woman writer’s interest in “writing home.” Harris’s text is a collage of prose and poetry that transgresses boundaries of genre, as its speaker shifts between and re-negotiates subject positions, national boundaries, and cultures. *Drawing Down a Daughter* consists of two prose pieces, entitled “A matter of fact” and “. . . She wakes,” and thirteen poetic sections that make use of different typefaces to distinguish between the poems Harris’s pregnant speaker writes for her daughter and those Harris writes which centre on her speaker’s experiences. Harris represents her speaker’s experience of motherhood as a repeated renegotiation of identity that frequently turns on ambivalent feelings for her unborn child, her husband, the Caribbean, and her own mother. Harris mobilizes this trope of ambivalence in order to problematize what I call consolations of “home,” vested in the figure of the mother, “mothertongue,” and “motherland.” I am interested in Harris’s attention to these particular sites of home, because they represent, in part, demands women may experience within the African diaspora. James Clifford notes that while “diasporic experiences are always gendered . . . there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact” (258). What is the consequence for women in the

diaspora to be “culture bearers,” preserving connections even while they experience the loss, displacement, and renegotiation of identity in a new location?

Harris’s focus on ambivalence also serves to mark the diasporic condition as dialogic in a number of ways. Throughout the collection, Harris consistently represents the experience of diaspora as irreducible to any easy reconciliation of seemingly opposed positions, such as between exile and home or self and other. Harris attends to her mother-speaker’s ambivalence regarding a role that may diminish, even while it fulfils, her. Repeatedly, Harris challenges constructions of “the mother” as a site of safety and wholeness by stressing that the mother’s identity is shifting and her subjectivity divided. Moreover, she extends a similar challenge to romantic notions of the “motherland” as a static site wherein the diasporic subject is finally “at home.” Harris also questions nostalgic conceptions of “mothertongue” by commingling standard English and Afro-Caribbean dialect in many sections of the collection.<sup>1</sup> Such a fusion also hybridizes discourses traditionally viewed as written and oral, or as the languages of colonization and resistance. This hybridization extends to her inscription of a Caribbean oral tradition in the prose section entitled “A matter of fact,” where Harris represents the situation of a female storyteller or griot passing an oral tradition to the community’s children. It is my contention, then, that Harris invests her work with what we might call the dialogics of diaspora by writing “oraliterature.”<sup>2</sup> Not only does Harris’s speaker repeatedly renegotiate identities, but this collection is also one in which Harris herself negotiates several positions. The collection’s hybridization of voice, as well as its inscription of an Afrocentric oral tradition within the written text, work to keep shifting the Trinidadian and Canadian influences on Harris’s work. Consequently, Harris seems to position herself as poet within both a tradition of Afro-Caribbean women writers and a growing body of Canadian Caribbean poetry concerned with interrogating identity, language, and a politics of “place” or belonging.<sup>3</sup> “Home,” as Harris theorizes it, seems to be no easy resting-place, but is characterized by an ambivalence that Harris marks as a condition of diaspora.

## I. Uneven Experiences, Unmanageable Bodies and Identities

One of the central challenges to a consolation of "home" that Harris poses in *Drawing Down a Daughter* is to question culturally constructed notions of "the mother" and the experience of motherhood. In the mid-1990s, a number of articles focusing on feminist theories of motherhood identified a need to begin theorizing motherhood in its specificity and variety. Such critics as Patricia Hill Collins called for a discourse that would consider "divergent experiences with motherhood" generated by the race, class, sexuality, and age of a variety of mothers. Collins argues that such a diversity "promises to recontextualize motherhood and point us toward feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality" ("Shifting 73).<sup>4</sup> Collins stresses the importance of an attention to the differences between the experiences of mothers across cultures, histories, and social positions. However, Harris's collection challenges us to rethink our concept of "the mother" and our notions of mothering along two lines. Harris attends to the cultural, historical, and social differences between women and mothers, but she also represents the maternal experience itself as one of self-difference, as one in which the mother we fantasize as an ideal of wholeness perhaps experiences a heightened sense of her alterity or divided subjectivity.

Perhaps the most radical difference in women's experiences of motherhood has been that between white and black mothers in countries based on slave economies. This uneven experience of "mothering" was central to the (re)production not only of a labour force, but also of identities both "liveable" and "abject."<sup>5</sup> Black women in such slave-holding societies as the Caribbean and the US were forced to enable the white woman's "consecration" as the ideal woman and mother by taking up maternal functions for white mothers.<sup>6</sup> Bondswomen were forced to act as bodies in the capacity of nursemaids to white children, even while they were sometimes denied the right to mother their own children. These slave-holding societies, then, "virginized"

the white mother and re-assigned the functions of the maternal body to her slave, who was forced to supply breast milk to white children, frequently leaving her without milk to nurse her own children. Black women in these slave-holding societies were valued as bodies: as sexual bodies for their masters' pleasure and as producing bodies, "breeding" the next generation of slaves, filling the masters' pockets or feeding the master's babies. For bondswomen to be mothers to their own children was an act of asserting their singularity over and against this construction of their otherness. As Toni Morrison has argued, for a slave woman to claim the role of motherhood for herself entailed her "becoming a human being in a situation which is earnestly dependent on [her] not being one" ("In the Realm" 8). This assertion of "singularity" or "humanity" would entail a complex negotiation of recovering their bodies from the objectification to which they were subjected both under slavery and well after its abolition.

To abstract the body from lived experience renders it somehow manageable, a manoeuvre Caribbean Canadian poet M. Nourbese Philip documents as a valence of oppression and colonization ("Managing the Unmanageable" 295-300). Harris's collection, dominated by woman's experience of the maternal body, reasserts the body's presence, recovers its experiences, and thereby refuses to perpetuate a managing of the unmanageable. Both Harris and Philip recover the body as a text and as an "eruption . . . into the text" of their poetry ("Managing" 298). Philip theorizes the African body as a text inscribed by the oppressor and as a text carrying the historical memory of resistance and survival: "When the African came to the New World she brought with her nothing but her body and all the memory and history which body could contain. The text of her history and memory was inscribed upon and within the body which would become the repository of all the tools necessary for spiritual and cultural survival" ("Managing" 298). Similarly, Harris evokes her foremothers' enslaved bodies in her poetry, recalling their suffering while also locating hope for future generations in the continued remembrance of the history the body offers as its text:



Daughter  
 as your grandmothers  
 chose once chosen  
 in market places  
 mouths peered into  
 harsh fingers searching sex  
 oh Child  
 think of the self secret  
 stone in a clenched fist  
 and then the branding . . .  
 and you . . .  
 from the deep well  
 of time of possible  
 to give them hope  
 so you must choose  
 life action (84)

The body protects "the self secret / . . . in a clenched fist" in the hope that the self's history as lived experience will be recorded in memory, and that the text will be passed, as it is here, from mother to daughter.

This text of the body's memory and ancestral history also serves, at times, to regulate identity in contradictory ways, as Harris's poem "*She rises*" reveals:

a child  
 skin shimmering black God's  
 night breath curled crisp  
 about her face courage  
 of enslaved ancestors in her eyes . . .  
 and this man  
 fleeing racism as his body must once  
 have fled the coffle (17-18)

Harris's pregnant speaker foresees her daughter taking courage from her ancestors' text, enabling her to unite her ancestral past with her personal present in Canada; however, the speaker's husband reads only fear in a similar text passed on from his enslaved ancestors. The body as text functions not as an unchanging essence but is read and responded to differently through the diaspora according to each descendant's needs, fears, and beliefs. While her husband seeks escape from the horrors passed

on to him through the body's memory text, Harris's expectant mother believes that this text is necessary to the survival of both her ancestors and future generations.

Harris signals the body's powerful and controlling "eruption" into the text by mirroring the maternal body's shape in her poetry's form:

*She rises*  
 going  
 out to  
 day that existed  
 in/ and  
 before  
 her body  
 her body  
 day's  
 memory  
 of it illusive  
 imprint  
 waiting for  
 her nakedness (17)

In this stanza, Harris interrogates cultural constructions of the mother and the maternal body. She evokes the essential in the stanza's figuration of a pregnant woman's abdomen; such a focus serves to fragment and reduce the maternal body to its biological function of carrying and sustaining the developing child. Yet, while Harris evokes the essential, she does not inscribe it; rather, I would argue that this stanza and the body figured in and by it foreground conflicting cultural constructions of the mother and the maternal body.

The mother has been culturally constructed to represent two conflicting ideals that result in her occupying a somewhat paradoxical social position. In the West, we frequently call giving birth a "natural" act for women and nurturing an "instinct" that women possess. The mother's body as "nature" is theorized as inhabiting a realm beyond culture or the social. Yet the mother's social responsibility is central: in Western culture, the mother ensures the continuance of the patronymic through genealogy; and in the context of the African diaspora, she ensures the survival of cultural traditions from Africa. Gay Wilentz notes that

"generational and cultural continuity — 'to look back through our mothers' — is seen as a woman's domain" (*Binding* xiv). Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn further complicate and elaborate the significance of the mother to identity, culture, and the land in a Caribbean context: "For Caribbean women, the notion of a motherland is especially complex, encompassing in its connotations her island home and its unique culture, as well as the body of tropes, talismans and female bonding that is a woman's heritage through her own and other mothers. The land and one's mothers, then, are co-joined" (219). Thus the mother takes a central position in the transmission of African and Afro-Caribbean culture; and, as "nature" or as a figure inextricably linked to the land, she is figured as an essence impervious to the upheavals of diaspora and cultural change.

Harris exposes this somewhat paradoxical positioning of the mother in the first stanza of "*She rises*." The mother-speaker's body exists "illusively" beyond the social. Simultaneously, however, the maternal body and the mother follow culture and occupy a position in the social. In this stanza, Harris clearly marks a distinction between a public or social realm — the "day" that her speaker goes "out to" — and the domestic space she usually occupies. By foregrounding the maternal body's position at the borders of "nature" and the social, Harris problematizes the highly contradictory ideals of motherhood central to both Western and Afrocentric cultures. Julia Kristeva makes a similar point when she argues that the maternal body in Western culture is called to function as a "*filter . . . a thoroughfare, a threshold where 'nature' confronts 'culture'*" (238). Paradoxically, then, the mother and the maternal body have been constructed as "nature" not "culture" — at times, as both. This paradoxical positioning of the mother at what Kristeva calls a cultural threshold has frequently been elided in favor of constructing the mother as a figure of uncomplicated wholeness.<sup>7</sup> Harris here seems to contend that the mother is split selectively according to constructions of her as either an agent of culture or as some essence unaffected by social changes and developments, offering her child a protective bond to herself and the "motherland."

## II. Migratory Subjectivities and “Mothertongue”

Not only does Harris expose the way in which cultural constructions of the mother are in fact split selectively, she also contends that a mother’s experience may be one of self-difference. Harris repeatedly insists upon her pregnant speaker’s alterity in a variety of ways. The role of language is perhaps the most significant. Harris’s mother-speaker begins this collection speaking as “I,” but upon waking from a dream of her own mother, she abruptly states, “I prefer the third / person” (9). Harris foregrounds this division between self and other within her pregnant speaker by alternating between designating her grammatically as object (“her”) and subject (“she”) in these lines: “her will not be satisfied in this dream / she closes all against the whirling world” (9). This alternating use of “I,” “she,” and “her” can be read as an inscription of what Davies refers to as the centrality of “migratory subjectivity” (4) in black women’s diasporic writing. Harris and many other women writers in the African diaspora see black women’s subjectivity as defined by a shifting, rather than rooted, sense of identity. For Davies and, it would seem, for Harris, the dislocation of place and identity that is part of diaspora is also the radical aspect of black women’s subjectivity:

If we see Black women’s subjectivity as a migratory subjectivity existing in multiple locations, then we can see how their work, their presences traverse all of the geographical/national boundaries instituted to keep our dislocations in place. This ability to locate in a variety of geographical and literary constituencies is peculiar to the migration that is fundamental to African experience. (Davies 4)

Rather than a diminishment of her sense of self, the speaker’s shifting use of “I” and “she” articulates her identity in varying ways, which serve to render it polyvalent. Moreover, these shifts signal the degree to which the speaker’s “migratory subjectivity” is not limited to any identity she negotiates in any given place or culture; rather, it is a complex composite that keeps alive her Caribbean past in her negotiations of a Canadian present.

In many Afro-Caribbean cultures, to subvert the grammatical rules of standard English amounts to a political subversion of or resistance to colonization. This is true of Rastafarians, who de-

liberately refuse to use the object case when speaking in the first person, as Joseph Owens says: "The pronoun 'I' has a special importance to Rastas and is expressly opposed to the servile 'me.' Whether in the singular ('I') or the plural ('I and I' or briefly: 'I-n-I') or the reflexive ('I-sel,' 'I-n-I self') the use of this pronoun identifies the Rasta as an individual . . . . Even the possessive 'my' and the objective 'me' are replaced by 'I'" (qtd. in Ashcroft 49). In Rastafarian speech, then, the individual refuses to designate himself or herself as object, insisting upon the subjecthood historically denied peoples of African descent in the colonized Caribbean. Significantly, Harris marks both the way in which colonization sought to dehumanize Afro-Caribbean peoples and linguistic forms of resistance to that oppression through her speaker's frequent alternating use of the third and first person as well as the subject and object case. Even as she asserts herself as subject, Harris's speaker refuses to elide the "otherness" that is also a part of her identity.

Harris's alternation between "she" and "her" also signals the intrusion of Afro-Caribbean dialect into the standard English that dominates this collection. For Caribbean Canadian poets, the use of dialect has become a growing, if not central, concern in their poetry and critical work. As Harris writes in her essay "Poets in Limbo," she, Dionne Brand, and M. Nourbese Philip were all born and educated in Trinidad, where the use of African languages and Afro-Caribbean dialect were outlawed to facilitate slavery and colonization (116-18). Harris's use of Afro-Caribbean dialect in her poetry is arguably both a privileging of African language forms that survived dislocation and an inscription of her positionality in the Africa diaspora that acknowledges at once both her Afro-Caribbean heritage and Caribbean-Canadian present. This foregrounding of positionality is perhaps most evident in the speaker's recollections of Trinidad and her childhood:

Girl all of us in this family know how to make float how  
to make bakes the real real thing and acra not even  
your father's mother make so good and pilau and  
callaloo with crab & salt pork barefoot rice rich black  
cake cassava pone (is true your Carib great aunt on your

dad side teach your mother that) but the coconut ice cream  
and five-fingers confetti buljol souse those are our  
things (44)

The speaker's heritage of recipes that travelled from Africa and were adapted to the Caribbean is passed down in a commingling of Afro-Caribbean dialect and standard English. She, in turn, passes them on to the daughter whose birth she prepares for in Canada. While Harris here celebrates a heritage passed from mother to daughter, she resists representing it nostalgically as "pure" or "originary." Instead, she highlights the influences from outside the matrilineal line that compose this heritage of bakes and cassava pone. Similarly, Harris's hybridization of Afro-Caribbean dialect and standard English works to call into question the notion that a "mothertongue" may exist free from "foreign" influence and from the struggles for power and ideological control so frequently vested in language.<sup>8</sup> However, it seems to me that Harris's representation of a hybridized "tongue" should not be read as a failure of Afro-Caribbean resistance and as a diminished influence of African cultural and language forms in the Caribbean. Rather, as Paul Gilroy argues, such hybridity signals an evasion of "capture": "creolisation, metissage, mestizaje, and hybridity . . . . These terms are rather unsatisfactory ways of naming the process of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents" (2).

Harris's use of Afro-Caribbean dialect also marks her participation in the investigation of language and its ability to express or deny one's experience and identity — an investigation common among writers in the African diaspora. Caribbean poet and historian Edward Kamau Brathwaite argues that as a result of an education in both the colonizer's language and experience, Afro-Caribbean people "haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall" (8-9). Similarly, Toni Morrison speaks of her writing as, in part, a struggle with language:

I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority,

cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal . . . in my work. . . . The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (x-xi)

In Canada, poets like Brand and Philip experiment with language, mixing standard English with Afro-Caribbean dialect in their poetry.<sup>9</sup> Philip identifies "black talk" — what Brathwaite calls "nation language" and what African-American writers and literary theorists refer to as "the vernacular" — as a form of subversion and "civil war":

Surely one of the most overt, explicit and successful acts of subversion has been what has been done to the English language as it passed through the experience of Africans in the New World. . . . Straight English or dialect. So has the problem presented itself to the African writers of the New World interested in exploring the experience of language. . . . Reconciliation of these spheres of interest, rather than choice, is the problem that faces these writers, and to accomplish that, some conscious attempt at destruction of the language (straight English) has to be made. ("Making the House" 43)

Harris's use of Afro-Caribbean dialect and standard English within the same poems arguably represents what Philip would call an act of subversion, and is perhaps a working through of what Harris has identified as "the question of authenticity. How to be true to the black self; to the female self; how to reflect accurately the Canadian experience." These "questions of authenticity" would seem to divide along racial ("the black self"), gender ("the female self"), and national lines ("the Canadian experience") in such a way as to categorize discretely black identity. However, Harris is quick to stress that "the experience of blacks in the Americas is a continuum," along which individuals occupy varied and shifting positions ("Poets in Limbo" 116).

### III. The Ambivalence of the "Meaning of the Mother"

While clearly a negotiation of language and "migratory subjectivity," the speaker's alternation between first and third person in *Drawing Down a Daughter* is also an exploration of the way

pregnancy and the maternal body may affect a woman's sense of wholeness:

look Girl *i'm* tired are you coming  
 or can *i* lie down  
 my flesh porous  
 my bones hollow  
 spirit in bitter waters  
*she* is thinking  
 a billion no eight billion women before me  
 all of whom more or less survived  
 all of whom come with us (80; emphasis added)

In this passage, the speaker's awareness of her pregnant body is both framed by and appears to give rise to her articulation of a divided subjectivity as signalled by her shifting use of the first and third person. Here Harris's concerns with language, with recovering the black female body from an essentialized realm, and with critiquing constructions of the mother as a figure of wholeness, come together. Through this framing, Harris represents the body as mediated and mediating, rather than essential. The body mediates this mother's subjectivity or sense of her/self. In other words, she perceives an internal, bodily division between herself and the unborn child she carries which, in turn, heightens her sense of self-difference or alterity. Yet the body is simultaneously mediated by the mother's perception of herself as lacking wholeness and solidity. Rather than experiencing her body as whole, during her pregnancy she perceives it as the "thinnest of porous membranes" containing herself and her unborn child:

her melanic skin disperses she  
 becomes transparent and particular beauty the mauves/  
 soft blues the reds of her insides are visible  
 she is contained only by the thinnest of membranes (82)

Harris seems to contend that her speaker's perceptions of her body and of her subjectivity act as mutually constitutive — one is complicated by the other. Perhaps most important is the fact that Harris deliberately represents neither her speaker's identity nor her body as whole, thereby challenging romanticized cultural constructions of the mother.



Harris further challenges received understandings of mothering by representing the mother-child bond as a conflicted and ambivalent one, rather than as an ideal unity. This mother is "opened" to a greater awareness of alterity through the experience of carrying her child to term, ostensibly a time when mother and child are one. Rather than a unity between mother and child, Harris offers us a mother who is brought to an undeniable awareness of her bodily split and divided subjectivity by the "Child who / opens me" (8). Moreover, Harris figures the act of carrying her child to term as a possible danger to this mother. Harris represents the sustenance of the speaker's unborn child as menacing to her, comparing the child to a spider that drains her mother of lifeblood:

i picture your hair sprung black brushing my chin  
 delicate as spiders  
 it incites me  
 as if already you bend over me knowing  
 a husk when you see one (112)

This mother is "incite[d]" by the belief that she has become her daughter's prey — a protective "husk" that is progressively and intentionally depleted. She perceives a separation between herself and her child resulting from what is, at times, a conflict of interests. Harris represents pregnancy and motherhood as highly conflicted, as acts of nurturing the child at the possible expense of the mother's mental and physical well-being.

The ambivalence the speaker feels toward her role as mother extends to conflicting feelings for her child that surface throughout the collection. She both wants and fears her daughter's birth:

inside her the child thrashing  
 daughter she needs  
 dreads  
 for who would bring a child  
 skin shimmering black . . .  
 who would choose to cradle such tropic  
 grace on the Bow's frozen banks (17-18)

She writes poems to her daughter revealing her belief that the child will make her world whole: "Child all time waiting world incomplete / with out you" (85). Yet she also speaks of

the futility of such a hope, knowing that her daughter is separate from her:

i imagine your hands . . .  
grasp the air casually taking your own self back  
as if all my striving to order existence with your birth  
were less even than this view (112)

The moment of her daughter's first breath will forever sever the tie with her child experienced during pregnancy: "just out of sight / though we are roped to each other" (112). Yet this "unity" is repeatedly complicated by Harris's attention to the division her mother-speaker senses through her maternal body: "are you awake Girl she strokes her belly / Daughter we are bare foot and pregnant / in the kitchen" (28).

The ambivalence the mother-speaker feels toward both her unborn child and her role as nurturer are further reflected in her contradictory characterizations of her pregnancy as both a "gift" and enslavement of her body:

she struggles up in bed the child low heavy  
she is thinking of all his "my"  
as if he had somehow acquired her for all time  
as if theirs was not a contract of gift  
renewable from moment to moment  
she still herself's  
on loan to her daughter to him  
as if they were on loan to her (109)

While this pregnant woman freely "loans" herself to husband and unborn daughter, she also likens her labor to slavery:

it rips her so suddenly  
shaking her . . .  
flinging her  
breathless  
against cliffs . . .  
for a moment i am  
as the stunned slave under the whip (111-12)

As she does throughout this collection, Harris resists here resolving what is problematic and contradictory. This mother experiences childbirth as at once both a willing gift of her body to her child's needs and an enslavement of that body. The speaker

cannot escape the labor pains that "rip" her body like a "whip" and usher her into motherhood, an experience that Harris represents as hardly unique to this mother. Harris grounds her speaker's contradictory experience of childbirth in a veritable heritage of "childbed pain":

what is deep  
and secret she begins to sing  
something dim throaty vague  
as memory lost ur  
song of childbed pain (18)

Harris works consistently to dramatize black motherhood as a complex site of renegotiated relationships, ambivalent feelings and contradictory positions, as her mother-speaker repeatedly and at times simultaneously moves from desire to fear, from wholeness to lack, from unity to division. Harris's representation of her speaker's experience resonates with Patricia Hill Collins's assertion that "black motherhood consists of a series of constantly re-negotiated relationships . . . it is both dynamic and dialectical" (218).

Throughout this collection, Harris's speaker reveals profound ambivalence not only toward the child she carries but also toward her own mother, which serves to unsettle the mother as an unproblematic site of "home." In the opening poem, the speaker dreams of a reunion with her own mother but upon waking she writes of "my mother's terrible love" in a notebook kept for her daughter (8). She associates both love and hate with her mother:

. . . dreaming the mother  
dreaming myself dreaming  
the mother dream  
potent as love  
or hate  
helpless as a daughter (8)

Davies joins Collins in contending that a renegotiation of identity is central to both diasporic black female subjectivity and black women's writing: "The re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration as it is fundamental to Black women's writing in cross-cultural contexts. It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-negotiates the terms of Black

women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities" (3). Harris's speaker is enacting just such a re-negotiation between her continued role as daughter and her impending one as mother; the ambivalence she expresses towards her mother is a likely result of attempting to redefine her roles and, thereby, herself. Moreover, as she has left her mother in Trinidad to emigrate to Canada, her ambivalence may, in turn, be seen as an effect of negotiating this geographical and cultural shift. She has left Trinidad because of its own "terrible love." When her husband asks why she came to Canada, "She thinks 'freedom!' Aloud she says, 'You have no idea how small it is . . . you wouldn't believe the way in which everybody knows exactly who everybody is, and what that means'" (69). She has emigrated from Trinidad for "freedom" and has built a life in a new country with its own restrictions and limits based not on being too well known but on a racism that sees only skin color and renders the individual invisible.

The ambivalence Harris repeatedly foregrounds in the collection is as much a marker of this text's position within a tradition of Afro-Caribbean and African diasporic writing, however, as it is a representation of her speaker's ongoing re-negotiation of identity and relationships. Harris mobilizes this recurring trope of ambivalence to signal the condition of, and ongoing negotiation of identity within, diaspora. Davies contends that a characteristic of Afro-Caribbean writing is the act of "writing home," in which writers explore their relationship to a colonized Caribbean "homeland" through ambivalent representations of childhood:

Idyllic yet often difficult, explorations of childhood and coming of age seem to be one of the stock features of Caribbean literature, and may be explained partially by the meaning of "writing home" for, in writing of home, one is often putting oneself in the position of child *vis-a-vis* the Caribbean or African homeland/household. (125)

For Davies, the position an Afro-Caribbean woman writer takes up in writing home to the Caribbean is one frequently fraught with the tension of challenging existing meanings or definitions and working through new ones, a process she identifies as a "chal-

lenge to the meaning of the mother" (128). In her study of black women's writing in the diaspora, Davies asserts that this challenge to the "symbolic importance" of the mother is expressed most often in "mother-daughter struggles" (128). Significantly, Harris's speaker repeatedly alternates throughout the collection between recalling her own childhood and preparing for her impending motherhood. In a sense, then, the struggle Davies depicts occurs between the two identities Harris's speaker negotiates — daughter and expectant mother — as well as between her and her own mother. Through this struggle embedded in ambivalence, Harris calls into crisis the cultural meanings invested in the mother, in mother-daughter bonds, and in the nurturing associated with mothering. In writing the ambivalence of her mother-speaker, Harris works to unsettle this particular consolation of "home": the mother is not a figure of unity, an unbreakable tie to the "motherland" in which the diasporic subject may root her identity.

#### IV. Motherland, Migrations, and Loss

Arising out of her speaker's highly conflicted memories of her mother, memories that frequently turn on her fears of inadequacy, is a challenge to the meaning of the Caribbean as homeland. Rather than associating her "motherland" with a recovery of an idyllic "mothertongue," Harris's speaker foresees a return to Trinidad as exacting her voice:

she won't be able to hold out she thinks of teaching the  
 career she's built her writing Child if he hauls us home  
 your collage may never be published . . .  
 such a weight about her heart . . .  
 stone in her throat  
 no threat of happiness (15)

Indeed, Harris opens this collection with her speaker "fleeing" in the midst of a return "home" to a Caribbean that is menacing, hardly the tropical playground of tourist packaging:

she flees before a red sun that slips across raw earth road/ . . .  
 dream hurrying home finds the garden a web of paths  
 crowded Jadevine grown ruthless Ixoras too thick Aripo  
 a wrist twisted the house is green damp gloom . . .

she begins to search this house gone away day rots at  
 bedroom windows memories in cane rockers dressers  
 distil secrets where eaves hang low full of dead time and  
 messes I find her my mother waiting at the window (7)

Harris, then, is not only working to deromanticize the Caribbean, but also reworking notions of “home” by figuring it as a site of both exile and of identity, a place to flee from and return to. The speaker may return home to “find her . . . mother waiting at the window,” but she also finds a “house gone away,” rotting amidst encroaching vegetation that threatens to overtake it. Moreover, since the condition of her speaker’s utterance in this collage is the ambivalence she feels toward her mother, her unborn daughter, and Trinidad, Harris is also complicating notions of voice and “mothertongue” that are shifting rather than nostalgically rooted. Such a complication again signals Harris’s position within the tradition of black women’s diasporic writing Davies defines: “Black women writers are engaged in all kinds of processes of reacquisition of the ‘tongue.’ And these, I assert, are movements of re-connection and, at times, of re-evaluation” (23).

Through her speaker’s ambivalent recollections of a Caribbean childhood, Harris also inscribes and interrogates a tradition of “othermothering” inherited from and still practiced in some African societies. Othermothering has been regarded favorably by many scholars, who regard it as a successful way both to preserve and pass on cultural traditions in Africa and the diaspora and to share parenting, thereby widening the scope of communal responsibility and a child’s available role models. Stanlie M. James defines “othermothers” as “those who assist blood mothers in the responsibility of child care for short- to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or supportive fictive kin” (45). Dominant North American culture has historically validated a mother-child dyad based largely upon exclusive and intensive mothering. But communities in the African diaspora, as Collins argues, have recognized that “vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible.

As a result, other mothers . . . traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood" ("Black Women" 219). Othermothers, then, are regarded as the basis of extended kinship in the African diaspora.<sup>10</sup> The speaker of *Drawing Down a Daughter* carries her absent othermothers with her in the text of their "gospel on bakes" and in the aphorisms that echo in her memory:

*'what you don't want in your kitchen  
will sit in your drawing room' . . .  
'the sea ain't got no backdoor'  
and 'don't marry for color marry where  
color is else the race goin' lost in you' . . .  
'I'm warning you a lazy person is a nasty  
person' . . .  
'don't you go making yourself out  
special now' (43-45)*

While such critics as James and Collins view this Afrocentric system of "othermothering" as beneficial for women in the community and for the community's children, others, such as Davies, point out that the system is built on assumptions that may prove limiting for some women:

There has been, it seems, a need in Black cultures to affirm Black motherhood and/or to construct an essentialized . . . mother as a strategic response to racist constructs. Strategically valid on some fronts, on others this affirmation becomes too defining and limiting for women. Even a radical suggestion in Black mother theory that women mother cooperatively assumes that all . . . women want to participate in this activity. (145)

Harris examines the complications that may arise from this "ideal" of Afrocentric mothering. Her speaker is the daughter of a community of women that both gives her a place within it, and provides her with a number of female role models from whom she must eventually differentiate herself. Consequently, her conflicted feelings for her mother extend to her othermothers; she at once admires and seems "at home" with them and feels inadequate in their presence:

she is better at cricket than at bakes  
she will never be as good at bakes as her mother is  
or her aunt or her great aunt or her grandmother

or even the kitchen maid who is smiling openly  
because the child's bakes are not round (47)

Significantly, Harris's speaker is more skilled at the conventionally masculine game of cricket than she is at the domestic art of making bakes. In this slippage between the ideal of a cooperative and fulfilling domesticity for all women and her speaker's inadequate bakes, Harris points to a heterogeneity of women's wants and experiences elided by the romanticized vision of mothering that is invested in the figure of the othermother.

However, pursuing her own wants and needs — that include leaving Trinidad and the suffocation of all those who know her too well — is not an unproblematic solution for Harris's speaker either. She comes to see her differentiation from her mothers and her migration as a rejection and loss of "home," and the poetry she writes for her daughter as an attempt to preserve "home" in a history of "tales," "gestures," and "recipes":

*Daughter . . .*  
you stranded in landscape of your time  
will redefine shedding my tales  
to grow your own  
as i have lost our ancestors your  
daughters will lose me  
remembering only a gesture a few words . . .  
and a few recipes  
history in a pinch of salt  
a lower temperature a turning  
wrist (43)

The speaker's othermothers become an absent presence in her life. However, it is not only her need to define herself as an individual that actively absents them, but also the "landscape" of her own time and place. Her attempt to retain "home" and her mothers' presence in phrases and recipes is set against her resistance to a physical return to Trinidad with her husband and daughter. Significantly, she seeks to maintain her connection to the Caribbean and her mother through language. In doing so, she draws attention both to the limits of these consolations of "home" vested in the mother, motherland, and mothertongue, and to the desire to preserve what consolations one can. This



simultaneous attention to the limits of home and desire nonetheless to preserve it is characteristic of diaspora, as James Clifford notes: "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension" (257).

Consequently, even though Harris resists positioning the mother as an uncomplicated link to the homeland and its culture, this collection does represent daughters as being "drawn down" in and through language, showing us a speaker engaged in mothering both her unborn child and a female-centered culture through the poetry she writes as "birthgift" (8). Moreover, the collection itself becomes a paradoxical mothering or preservation of culture even as it questions the possibility of preserving culture through the upheavals and loss of the diaspora. The speaker, at times, seems to be positioned as Harris's conduit: "dream space listing those voices feed the root feed the / poem nation of the denied their terrible demanding / mouth infects her with images" (9). It is Harris as poet who undertakes to "mother" Caribbean culture, a "feeding" both "demanding" and strengthening as it connects her work to a tradition of Afro-Caribbean women's writing even while she forges a place for herself in the Canadian poetic tradition.

## V. Oraliterature and Writing Home

Part of Harris's work to "mother" an Afrocentric culture is to write oraliterature. In "A matter of fact," Harris again undertakes a hybridization of voice, mixing standard English and Afro-Caribbean dialect. Both this hybridization of language and the section's focus on the transmission of an oral text, complete with a young boy's "crick-crack" to drive it, mark Harris's collection as oraliterature. Wilentz has coined this term to refer to a characteristic she sees as common to African and diasporic fiction:

For much of the literature of Africa and the diaspora, the debt to the orature is so evident that I have neologized the two disparate terms to convey the process: "oraliterature." Oraliterature refers to written creative works which retain elements of the orature that informed them . . . encapsulat[ing] the orality of the spoken word and the active presentation of the oral tradition within the confines of fiction. (xvii)<sup>11</sup>

“A matter of fact” is a dialogic section of the collection, not only because Harris commingles standard English and the demotic, but also because she works to dramatize the contestation of a number of opposed positions in this section. Harris narrates the tale of John Burrian Armstrong, or Burri, and his car accident near the Lopinot river caused by “La Diabliesse” taking human form as a beautiful young woman. The story is told to the narrator as a child by an old woman storyteller in 1947, yet Burri visits the narrator’s father in 1954, claiming to have encountered La Diabliesse “three years earlier” in 1951, and “four years *after* the night” she first heard this story (62; emphasis added). The narrator sets out to find “the facts” behind this accident and in the process confronts a slippage between “fact” and events that cannot be explained:

I’ll try. But this isn’t easy. For one thing, I doubt the ability of anyone to relate a series of facts accurately. For another, I doubt that it is possible to consider any event a fact except in the simplest use of that word. . . . [W]e do not know if any of this really happened. Yet I remember the story being told. I remember the old woman. (58)

The slippage the narrator confronts leads her to challenge an opposition central to conventional understandings of history or what “really happened” — that between fact and fiction: “I’m trying for fact. A little artistic licence here, a little there, and the next thing you know I’m writing history” (59).

Imbedded within the narrator’s suspicion that “facts” may be inadequate evidence upon which to rely in pursuing an understanding and knowledge of lived experience, is a destabilization in the West of the privilege accorded written texts over oral texts and tradition. A heritage of the Enlightenment has been an overwhelming belief in the West that the written word is aligned with reason, fact, and logic, while the measure of “civilized” societies is their ability to produce written texts. Conversely, oral traditions and their texts have been devalued as the products of nascent or developing cultures, as “folklore” and mere “tales.” However, Harris’s narrator associates “artistic licence” with “writing history,” while the only “fact” she is sure of is the old woman’s oral text. Not only does the old woman’s text represent “particu-

lar events" of lived experience in her community, but her powers are also believed to extend beyond recording Burri's encounter with La Diabliesse to possibly calling it into being: "The question, of course, is what is fact: what is reality. Though the myth of La Diabliesse sticks to convention, the stories themselves are specific to a particular event. Is it possible that that old lady bodying forth a world in that long ago August night gave it flesh?" (62). For Harris, the colonizer's history is a tale of one telling, while the oral tradition is constantly changing and adapting over time to the needs and conditions of the community. This tradition of transmitting cultural knowledge is so attuned to and imbedded in the lived realities of the community that its powers may go beyond recording and transmission to aid in communal survival.

[T]he old storyteller . . . has no truck with this simple form, with its order and its inherent possibility of justice. Though she speaks the language, she knows the real world where men wander is full of unseen presences, of interruptions, of rupture. In such a world, men have only tricks and magic. When she makes her old voice growl, or rise and fall on the gutter and flare of candlelight, her tale is not only a small meeting: chance and the implacable at the crossroads, i.e. in the individual. Her tale is a celebration, and a binding of community. Her theme is survival in the current of riverlife. Her eyes scan the gathered children fiercely, "You can learn how to deal with life; you cannot avoid what nests in you." There is something of the ancestral, of Africs in this. The children hear. (52)

Harris figures the storyteller and the oral tradition as engaged with "the real world . . . of unseen presences, of interruptions, of rupture" that an appeal to "facts" seeks to bridge over, or to explain away as "superstition" (52). Her speaker echoes such a view in the preface, "A matter of fact," that she writes for her daughter: "Drink often remembering there / is mystery inspite of perception / truth despite the word" (49).

In unsettling the hierarchies of written over oral texts and traditions, of standard English over Afro-Caribbean dialect, of fact, logic and reason over superstition, and of history over story, Harris also calls into question epistemological "certainties." While Harris is engaged in blurring these kinds of distinctions, she effectively crosses yet another epistemic boundary,

that between theory and literature. This opposition is at the fore of debates concerning both black women's writing (frequently mobilized as the "experience" to ground a variety of theories used to explicate it in a historical and material specificity) and black feminist criticism (frequently identified as the "politics" or "praxis" obverse of "theory").<sup>12</sup> However, Davies effectively argues that an opposition between theory and literature is a false one when it comes to black women's writing: "So, for Black women's writing, it is premature and often useless to articulate the writer/theorist split so common in European discourses, for many of the writers do both simultaneously or sequentially" (35).<sup>13</sup> In what could be called a polyvalent collection, Harris takes up constructions of the maternal body, the mother, notions of "motherland," and "mothertongue" as sites of struggle to begin to re-theorize their significance and meaning.

In calling into crisis such consolations of "home," Claire Harris "(re)members the role of the oral artist — most often the village woman storyteller," an aim Wilentz argues much oral literature written by black women in the diaspora undertakes to achieve (81). Stanlie James also calls this figure a community othermother: "based upon her knowledge and her respected position, a community othermother is also in a position to provide analyses and/or critiques of conditions or situations that may affect the well-being of her community. Whenever necessary, she serves as a catalyst" (48). Ironically, Harris takes on this role in order to challenge our surety that various sites of "home," such as the mother(s), mothertongue, and motherland survive the dislocation of diaspora in an uncomplicated way. Harris's representation of a black mother's ambivalence opens onto a new theorization of mothering — mothering a child, mothering a culture, and mothering the self through the changing landscapes of time, place, and identity. In her "challenge to the meaning of the mother," Harris creates a dialogic discourse on the maternal that extends to a consideration of diasporic experience and identity as dialogic and ambivalent. Throughout this collection, and in her work elsewhere, Harris sees diaspora as enabling a different sense of

belonging or "home": "One comes home, eventually, to write about the world one has chosen to live in. That the diaspora has made the world 'home' is our good fortune. . . . Liminality, the space between two worlds, is a place of paradox. A 'realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.' A potent space of creativity and fullness" ("Limbo" 125). Gilroy contends that "the themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject" (35). For Harris, this "fragmentation and differentiation" — the polyvalency of black diasporic identity — opens the possibility of reworking such notions as exile and affiliation, and of further attending to the multiple significance of "writing home."

## NOTES

- 1 I am following Harris in her use of "dialect" or "Trinidadian dialect" to refer to Afro-Caribbean vernacular that has influenced and been influenced by English, Spanish, French, and Dutch in the Caribbean ("Poets" 121). Caribbean critics variously use "nation language" and "patois/patwa," while Philip refers to "the Caribbean demotic" in her work (*Frontiers* 20).
- 2 "Oralliterature" is a term coined by Wilentz in her text on black women's writing in the diaspora, *Binding Cultures*. I will return to her definition of "oralliterature" and to a more developed consideration of this term later in my reading of "A matter of fact."
- 3 Harris outlines these concerns in her own poetry and that of Brand and Philip in her article "Poets in Limbo." See also Nourbese Philip's "Who's listening? Artists, Audiences & Language," in *Frontiers*; and "Making the House Our Own."
- 4 Davies also notes "the need for feminists to racialize and historicize their definitions of motherhood: 'Questions of 'maternal splitting' (Suleiman) and 'maternal thinking' (Ruddick) and critiques of the 'perfect mother' (Chodorow and Contratto) become empty and limited understandings if they do not configure the issue of race and history" (137). Both Collins and Davies are building upon earlier critiques of feminist theories of motherhood and the maternal levelled by black feminists like Gloria Joseph and Elizabeth Spelman in the 1980s. Joseph (and Lewis) identify a need for an Afrocentric theory of motherhood that is rooted in black mothers' "roles, positions, and functions within the Black society and that society's relationship to the broader (White) society in America" (76). Spelman argues that feminist theories of mothering like Chodorow's were limited by their failure to consider "the possibility that what one learns when one learns one's gender identity is the gender identity appropriate to one's ethnic, class, national, and racial identity" (88). Black feminists are not alone in their identification of a need to theorize motherhood in its specificity and variety. Nakano-Glenn proposes that mothering must be considered "as a historically and culturally variable relationship" (1), rather than a monolithic experience that holds true for all women. Notably, these calls for revising and contextualizing theories of motherhood along historically, racially and culturally specific axes were published in the mid 1990s, joining what Ellen Ross has called "a burgeoning of thought and research on aspects of motherhood through the lenses of many different disciplines" (402).

- 5 My choice of phrasing echoes Butler's in *Bodies that Matter* because I find compelling her insistence that we must interrogate the ways in which "foreclosures, radical erasures" (8), not only "produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, unliveable bodies" (xi).
- 6 For analyses of the American construction of white womanhood through a differentiation from black womanhood using the black female body, see Carby; Davis; Giddings; and hooks.
- 7 Feminist psychoanalytic critics like Marianne Hirsch have taken Lacanian psychoanalysis to task for its silence on female subjectivity and its conceptualizations of the mother. Depending upon an uncomplicated mother-child bond that is, furthermore, theorized as unmediated because pre-oedipal, psychoanalytic theory constructs a mother that is effectively a fantasy of wholeness. The mother circulates in psychoanalytic discourse as the ideal of wholeness, from which we turn upon realizing our difference, and whom we must reject in order to enter the symbolic or culture and attempt to speak ourselves in, or be spoken by, language. Moreover, in psychoanalytic discourse the mother has come to represent the possibility of the undivided subjectivity we seek in desiring a perfect reunion with her in the imaginary, and from which we are diverted in our metonymic displacement of that desire onto other(s) in our lives.

Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* continues to be a pivotal text in feminist object-relations theories of the subject's ego-formation. Chodorow's theory centres the mother as the figure from whom the child learns his or her place in society: the mother reproduces attitudes about gender in her children, and inculcates mothering roles in her daughter. Through Chodorow's theory, the daughter's coming to "being," or to a gendered identity, is given voice; yet, the mother is represented as an "agent of gender" or of her children's ego-formation, rather than as a subject-in-process herself. In fact, Chodorow asserts that mothers do not even perceive themselves as distinct from their female children during the "pre-oedipal" period: "the mother does not recognize or denies the existence of the daughter as a separate person" (103).

- 8 Language as a form of domination and resistance is a central aspect of Caribbean colonization. African slaves from common kinship and linguistic groups were separated in order to limit communication and prevent the possibility of uprisings. The colonizing Europeans legislated that the official languages of the Caribbean be English, French, Dutch, and Spanish, and refused to "recognize the presence of . . . various languages," African languages, in the educational system (Brathwaite 8). For a study of the development of Caribbean national language as resistance, and the way in which it has come to influence the speaking of these "official" languages, see Brathwaite.
- 9 See Brand's *No Language is Neutral* and Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*.
- 10 See also Wilentz, "Toward a Diaspora Literature" (388-90); and Collins, "Black Women" 221.
- 11 Wilentz notes that her concept of oral literature "is similar to [Henry Louis] Gates's concept of the 'speakerly text' in his study *The Signifying Monkey*. While Gates's focus is on the 'representation of the speaking black voice in writing,' mine is more on the inscription of the orature in the written text" (*Binding Cultures* 121-22, n 7). This is a significant similarity and difference to mark, since it indicates that the written texts of African diasporic traditions are frequently informed by residually oral tropes and rhetoric.
- 12 In "Feminist Theory," hooks draws attention to the fact that all too often "writings by working-class . . . and women of color [are regarded] as 'experiential' while the writings of white women represent 'theory'" (37). Smith contends

that when white feminists and African American male critics seek to "re-embodiment" their work in order to save it from a dehistoricized and totalizing deconstruction, they fetishize "the black woman . . . as a historicizing presence": [I]t is striking that at precisely the moment when Anglo-American feminists and male Afro-Americanists begin to reconsider the material ground of their enterprise, they demonstrate their return to earth, as it were, by invoking the specific experiences of black women and the writings of black women" (44-45). For an overview and continuation of the "theory" versus "practice" debate around black feminist criticism and black women's writing, see McDowell.

- 13 Christian argues that "people of color have always theorized . . . in narrative forms" (226). Key to Christian's intervention in these debates is her proposition that we move from speaking of "theory" to speaking of "theorizing." For critiques of Christian's position see hooks, "Feminist Theory"; and McDowell.

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