

Mothering the Motherless

Portrayals of Alternative Mothering

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Plusieurs textes de la diaspora caribéenne exposent des styles alternatifs de maternage dus à l'absence physique de la mère. À travers le maternage communal et l'auto-maternage, ces textes montrent des filles qui retrouvent un monde plus naturel avec une vision et un savoir critiques accrus, avec en même temps, une généalogie féminine nouvelle quoique modifiée.

Black women are often portrayed (and even stereotyped) in contemporary western cultures as the matriarchal foundations of their families, instilling faith, culture, and wisdom in their children. Benefiting from their mothers' life experiences, black children learn ways to survive and surpass moments of racism and oppression within their daily existence. The mother's presence delivers crucial knowledge to subsequent family generations. This generational wisdom strengthens the family, enabling children to succeed often where their mothers could not.

However, a recurring maternal loss pattern also has a rich history within black female diaspora literature. This pattern occurs transnationally, traversing literary genres and time periods. Linking many of the first English narratives and writings of enslaved black women to nineteenth- and twentieth-century autobiography, literature, and popular fiction, the written pattern of maternal loss shares an injury that has been perpetrated too regularly. The subsequent essential regenerations from this injury offer reparations, connecting characters (and through them, their readers) to fragmented histories that are absent but are also still present in mythic ways. Accessing these dis-

jointed pieces and re-assembling them reinvents the original histories as well as creates new stories, repairing the

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Within several Caribbean diasporic texts, alternative styles of mothering compensate for maternal losses, guiding motherless daughters to ancestral strength. In fact, three texts navigate the maternal absence by portraying numerous examples of communal mothering for, and even self-mothering by, young black girls and women. These alternative methods fill the void caused by the absence of a mother and reflect the importance of mothering for all children, but especially daughters.

Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey* and Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* offer similar collective mothering practices, showing women within a community nurturing daughters whose mothers are absent. Their pur-

pose is to help the daughters acquire qualities which will allow them to develop into strong adult women. Similarly, Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and again, Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* present the possibilities of self-mothering when a surrogate community is not available. By offering possibilities of communal mothering and self-mothering, these texts show black daughters coping without the important physical presence of a mother.

Communal mothering and self-mothering occur within these texts because actual mothers have been displaced, usually by an untimely death, but also occasionally via other tragic circumstances. For example, Xuela's mother dies "at the moment [Xuela] was born" (Kincaid 3), while Tee's mother dies at the birth of her third child (Hodge 3). In the short story montage *Krik? Krak!*, many mothers die or are displaced: in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," Défilé's mother (Eveline) and Jacqueline's mother, as well as many other mothers, die at Massacre River in a horrific genocide (40); Josephine's mother, Défilé, dies in prison (38); in "The Missing Peace," Lamort's mother dies at her daughter's birth (109), and Emilie's mother is missing after a coup takes place (111). In all of these portrayals, the young girls grow up without their biological mother present for most, if not all, of their lives.

However, even within these absences, mothering still takes place in significant ways. Female substitutes provide a communal mothering influence for the motherless daughters. Alternatively, the daughters, finding few or no community resources avail-

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able for their mothering, begin to create cultural ties to their past themselves. Through both communal mothering and self-mothering, the daughters re-connect to the natural world, earn critical insight and knowledge, as well as gain a new, albeit modified, female ancestry. These opportunities provide innovative avenues for the daughters to acquire a maternal wisdom they have missed due to the physical absence of their mothers.

Several of the alternative mothering practices are associated with nature, offering new ways to understand cyclical phases of birth and death, i.e., via “Mother Earth” and “Mother Nature.” These practices help the daughters view the world in its natural state, requiring a healthy distance from the effects of practical colonialism and restoring Caribbean beauty to the next generation of mothers. Through communication with nature and appreciation for its power, Hodge’s Tee, Danticat’s Josephine and Jacqueline, and Kincaid’s Xuela all benefit from mothering.

Hodge’s motherless character, Tee, is partially raised by her grandmother, Ma, who is identified with the unaffected world of landscapes and endless time. By distinguishing this character in this manner, Hodge invents an idyllic vision of Ma, invoking the beauty and strength of a natural setting within the Caribbean. Establishing Ma’s need to be part of her physical environment, Hodge emphasizes the relationship between Ma and the sensual world, allowing readers to participate through vivid descriptions. For example, after the rain, Ma



Marie-Denise Douyon, “*Sein de mère*,” oils and engraving inks on masonite, 40” x 14”, 2000 Photo: Paul Simon.

had to go and see the river.... [The children] walked behind her squelching joyously in the new puddles and mud. The air smelt brown and green, like when the earth was being made. From a long way off the river was calling to [them] through the trees, in one continuous groan, so that when [they] finally came to it, wet and splashed from the puddles and from the bushes [they] had brushed against, it was as though [they] had been straining along in it the whole time. (Hodge 18)

Ma’s desire to visit the river after the rain and bring her “children” with her marks Ma as a mothering presence to all the children visiting her home. Ma aches to connect with nature and her children feel those twinges too. As Roy Narinesingh states in his introduction to Hodge’s novel, “[t]he joys of early childhood—children’s games, fruit picking, walks—are presented effectively through images of sound, sight, scent and movement. The child’s sensibility is fully alert to the natural world” (ix). For Tee specifically, Ma illustrates the possible (and desired) relationship between humanity and the world. Through Ma, Tee learns that the natural world is one with which to foster a personal communication. They are both joyful here as they check the height of the river and splash in mud puddles. By teaching Tee joy for the physical processes of nature, Ma helps Tee learn respect for the ancestral Caribbean world in which they still can live.

Krik? Krak!’s Josephine is also introduced to the importance of the

natural world as a child by her mother, Défilé. Josephine renews this important relationship when Jacqueline, a friend of Défilé's (who by this point is in prison) takes her back to Massacre River to participate in an annual ritual. The women discuss finding kinship at Massacre River, the site of the gruesome genocide of Haitians in 1937. Josephine describes this experience to Jacqueline:

When I was five years old, we went on a pilgrimage to the Massacre River.... With our hands in the water, Manman spoke to the sun. "Here is my child, Josephine. We were saved from the tomb of this river when she was still in my womb. You spared us both, her and me, from this river where I lost my mother." (Danticat 40)

Défilé models to her daughter the importance of direct dialogue with nature. Like Hodge's Ma, Défilé believes in the power of the natural world, viewing it as a potential escape route for the horrific events that humanity can create. In other words, Défilé sees the sun and river as more powerful than those who would choose to do her—and women like her—harm. Thus, honoring them is a way to teach her daughter about self-empowerment. Finally, by repeating her mother's words at this later visit, Josephine re-connects with the natural world, re-uniting symbolically and spiritually with her imprisoned mother and her dead grandmother through the repetition of Défilé's thoughts and words. In this way, Josephine self-mothers by recreating her mother's presence in her time of need.

Before her imprisonment, Défilé also broadened the community of motherless daughters by creating adoptive relationships with other women through this river ritual. Josephine reflects that "[e]very year [her] mother would invite a few more women [to participate at Massacre River] who had also lost their moth-

ers" (Danticat 40). In this manner, Défilé helped women bond, forming a community of women whose mothers were murdered there. In doing so, their losses are re-invented as alternative mothering practices, nurturing women who have lost their mothers and allowing communal mothering to occur.

In contrast to the primarily communal mothering practices that are apparent in both Hodge's and Danticat's texts, the lack of mother,

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grandmother, or other positive mother substitutes establishes no primary female characters from which Kincaid's Xuela may progress in values or ideals, decimating the history and significance of her ancestry. The result is that the impact of Xuela's "loss column"—her mother—forces the creation of an inner maternal legacy (Kincaid 76). Having no living family members to connect her with her cultural past, Xuela must imagine a new one, becoming her own mother/grandmother; that is, she must establish a new history and progress from there.

In this way, Xuela self-mothers, listening to "mythic" voices of the natural world, thereby understanding aspects of life requiring a sophistication which she often cannot claim through age or experience. In other

words, she creates and listens to voices explaining various aspects of life that should have been taught by a mother or perhaps a grandmother. These voices offer Xuela an alternative view of reality, one which values women as well as African and Caribbean traditions. Reminiscent of the maternal voices supplied by Hodge's Ma, and Danticat's Défilé and Jacqueline, these voices offer Kincaid's Xuela wisdom, connecting her and the natural world.

Like Hodge's Ma, Xuela has an intense awareness within natural scenes, which reveal an unconstrained acceptance of herself and the physical world around her. For example, she remembers a road where she

spent some of the sweetest moments of [her] life . . . [where she] could see the reflection of the sun's light on the surface of the seawater . . . and from it might flow a joy [she] had not yet imagined. (Kincaid 51)

Earlier she notes another "stretch of road" which had

around each bend . . . the familiar dark green of the trees that grew with a ferociousness that no hand had yet attempted to restrain, a green so unrelenting that it attained great beauty and great ugliness and yet great humility all at once. (Kincaid 26)

These scenes place Xuela within them, content as she absorbs the tastes, smells, and sights of the natural Caribbean environment. Like Hodge's Tee, Xuela accepts her place within nature, learning respect for aspects of Caribbean life that have been devalued by others.

Likewise, Xuela's confident sexuality and acceptance of ordinary, human smells establish another artless link to nature. During one demonstration of this ease, Xuela masturbates, her "hands . . . travel[ing] up and down all over [her] body in a loving caress," while at the same time

she hears “outside, the long sigh of someone on the way to eternity (Kincaid 43).

Xuela is conscious of, and comfortable with, her body and mind, listening to external maternal sources while discovering her physical self. Similarly, Xuela’s early inner guidance is exhibited when at twelve years of age, Xuela is “not surprised” or “afraid” at her “first menstrual flow”—uncommon reactions for most young girls, especially those without a mother present. Instead “it was as if [she] had always known of it but had never put it to consciousness,” an understanding which reflects Xuela’s sophistication and acceptance of being female as well as an implicit prior knowledge of her world (Kincaid 57). Expanding this idea of self-awareness, Xuela realizes that “there was never a moment that [she] can remember when [she] did not know [her]self completely” (Kincaid 225). Clearly, Xuela’s comfort with herself comes partially from her ability to commune with the natural world and understand her own place within it. Similar to the other motherless daughters in other texts, Xuela is able to surrender to nature as a way to gain mothering wisdom.

These scenes of women connecting within nature (sometimes with each other, sometimes alone) establish a comfort level for the daughters. Through nature’s mothering, the daughters feel a nurturing solace that facilitates their growth into young women. The daughters understand they can learn many things from older women in the community as well as the imaginative mothers they construct within their minds. These pathways to earning insight and wisdom teach them to navigate successfully the often racist and sexist worlds around them.

Hodge’s Ma is depicted as a wise woman in control of her own reality, who teaches Tee the power of that position. Indicating Ma’s wealth of understanding, readers are told that “[n]othing took her by surprise” (Hodge 15). Part of Ma’s wisdom is

her acceptance of the worldly things that she cannot regulate. Tee notices that “all that Ma could not crush or confound with a barked word or surmount with her lioness strength, she reacted to with a cheups, more or less loud, more or less long” (Hodge 16). Ma’s ability to determine what is worth her time demonstrates her wisdom; her ability to ignore, even show disgust for that which is not affected by her, demonstrates a personal self-confidence. As bell hooks writes:

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to name one’s reality is an act of resistance because the process of domination—whether it be imperialist colonization, racism, or sexist oppression—has stripped [black women] of [their] identity [and] devalues language, culture, and appearance. (109)

Ma’s cheups reacts against that which she cannot control, re-gaining her sense of power through active opposition. Tee’s edification of this maternal wisdom by Ma is informal; but it shows the strength of black women within a culture that would deny them any authority. Tee learns that power is not always envisioned as force; instead she learns that power is staying in control of her own choices. This is an important lesson for Tee to learn as she will soon live in

an environment which categorizes people by skin color, gender, and class hierarchies.

Similarly Danticat’s text combines communal mothering and self-mothering, showing women gaining wisdom by understanding the importance of their own empowerment. Danticat’s Josephine participates in re-telling her mother’s story, ensuring a re-viewing of herself and other women, as well as her mother, Défilé. Detained unfairly by the police because of the death of a child she tended, Défilé is tortured and eventually beaten to death in prison. As Josephine tells Défilé’s story, it becomes clear that Défilé, and other women like her, are being detained due to their mystical powers. Josephine states that

before the women went to sleep, the guards made them throw tin cups of cold water at one another so that their bodies would not be able to muster up enough heat to grow those wings made of flames, fly away in the middle of the night, slip into the slumber of innocent children and steal their breath. (37-8)

However, when Josephine reiterates this story, it transforms mid-way from a story of abuse or magic into one of hope and connection, linking all women in Haiti who have survived against great odds as well as the women who may not have. Josephine reminds readers of the Massacre River genocide stating

we were *all* daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the ashes and we were the light. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze. (Danticat 41 [emphasis mine])

Although Josephine’s mother is not killed at the river (her grandmother is), she is still a “daughter of that

river." As such, Josephine claims Défilé's maternal loss as well as her brutal prison experience, and subverts them, creating a new meaning for the magic of which her mother has been accused. This re-telling empowers Défilé and denies the power of her oppressors, revitalizing Josephine as well. Josephine remembers:

On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother *did fly*. Weighted down by [Josephine's] body inside hers, [Défilé] leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river. She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames. (Danticat 49 [emphasis mine])

In this quotation, Défilé is neither the brutally beaten prison victim nor a witch; instead Josephine professes her mother's magical powers, asserting Défilé used this power to "fly" away from her captors. By accepting the charges of "witchcraft," Josephine exonerates Défilé, mothering herself as well as Défilé by revising their story which will be told to future generations of women.¹

Similarly, in Danticat's "The Missing Peace" both Lamort and Emilie deal with the loss of their mothers by confronting old memories and reclaiming maternal connections. Emilie travels to Haiti to search for Isabelle, her missing mother, a journalist of the "old régime" (Danticat 111) who has probably been killed. Emilie shares pictures of Isabelle and, with Lamort's help, visits a mass graveyard where Isabelle may be buried. Afterwards, Lamort, nicknamed "death" due to her mother's dying while giving birth to her, is emboldened by Emilie to begin using her real name—the same name as her dead mother (Danticat 122). Although they are unable to discover any news

about Isabelle, both women learn that, regardless of the fact that their actual mothers have died, they can find strength in companionship, realizing that a community of women can mother each other when necessary. In fact, at one point, Lamort lays down with Emilie, saying, "I will stay with you ... because I know you are afraid" (Danticat 121). Renamed and/or rejuvenated, Lamort and Emilie realize the strength of their reciprocal mothering friendship.

Kincaid's Xuela takes a more active role in self-mothering, by confronting racist and sexist hierarchies that surround her. Within the first statement of Kincaid's novel, readers know Xuela believes "there is nothing between myself and eternity," emphasizing an ephemeral status within her own time. Through this impermanence, Kincaid establishes Xuela's inner wisdom within the acquisition of language. For example, after deliberately silencing herself for the first four years of her life, the first words Xuela says are within "a language [she] had never heard anyone speak" (Kincaid 7). Although people have spoken to her in French patois, Xuela chooses not to speak in this language.

With this choice, readers quickly realize Xuela already understands hierarchies within language. Speaking within French patois would "associate [her] with the made-up language of people regarded as not real—the shadow people, forever humiliated, the forever low" (Kincaid 30-31). Xuela's comments indicate the real hierarchy of language: to speak patois is to be nonexistent. English, the language of the oppressor, helps people become visible. As Carole Boyce Davies states in her book, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, "Speech, then, is as much an issue of audience receptivity, the fundamentals of listening, as it is articulation" (21). Xuela knows she will gain only a limited audience using patois, and to speak within the dominant language is to reap the power it controls.

Finally, several portrayals of extended maternal relations within these texts help proffer the idea of continuous circles of ancestral women. Specifically, these texts portray amazing genealogical connections of women that surpass traditional boundaries of life and death. Their reinforced female ancestry helps them understand their own possibilities and negate limitations placed upon them by others.

Hodge's Ma introduces Tee to her maternal ancestry by comparing the girl favorably with Ma's grandmother.

Ma said that [Tee] was her grandmother come back again. She said her grandmother was a tall straight proud woman who lived to an old old age and her eyes were still bright like water and her back straight like bamboo, for all the heavy-load she had carried on her head all her life. (19)

Like Ma, Tee's great, great grandmother is related to natural images such as water, bamboo, and later, a horse. She too, though burdened by a life of labor, successfully survived and surpassed a racist society. The fact that Tee reminds Ma of this strong woman indicates the potential for Tee's future successes. Ma relates the connections between Tee and her great, great grandmother, stating that Ma

couldn't remember her grandmother's true-true name. But Tee was growing into her grandmother again, her spirit was in [Tee]. (Hodge 19)

These statements reinforce the idea that Tee can be a powerful black woman too, like others within her ancestry such as her grandmother, Ma, and now Ma's grandmother.

Similarly, as Xuela finishes narrating her story, her final point is that she speaks for multiple generations:

This account of my life has been an account of my mother's life

as much as it has been an account of mine, and even so, again it is an account of the life of the children I did not have, as it is their account of me. (227)

Her words imply she understands the beliefs of her mother and the beliefs of her unborn children without actually having learned them in any traditional way. As well, they have an understanding of her. These methods of relating within an extinguished maternal ancestry are crucial to the point of self-mothering as Xuela revels in her heritage, without a mother, grandmother, or children present.

Finally, Danticat explores numerous techniques of re-connecting lost ancestry by braiding previous and current generations together inconspicuously. For example, Josephine's daughter Marie connects with her female ancestry when she most needs them. After suffering multiple miscarriages, Marie "called out all the names [she] wanted to give [her unborn daughters]: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdelène, Célianne" (92). In this story, Danticat sews the names of characters from several other short stories into a colorful and complex tapestry.² Positioned in the middle of the text, this quote offers subtle ancestral connections which create a written community of mothers and daughters, linking almost all of the female characters in the entire montage that until then have appeared to be isolated. In doing so, Danticat restores this nurturing community to itself and creates the opportunity to see additional mothering connections.

Within these forms of alternative mothering, the motherless daughters locate important links to independence and culture by understanding the natural world and their own ancestry as well as the wisdom that comes with both. The daughters learn that women from their communities can help maintain essential connections to them, and by nurturing them in their mothers' absence, help to fill a deep void. As well, these daughters

also learn that in time of great need, they can mother themselves. Through communal mothering and self-mothering, the daughters learn they are part of a natural plan and connected to an amazing legacy of women, which shares tremendous wisdom with them in a variety of ways.

Having lost access to the women who typically would share important knowledge of the world with them, these daughters make up for their losses by employing new methodologies to mother. These texts share an option that is crucial to know within and across the Caribbean diaspora. Showing young black women succeeding even when the single most important woman in their lives is removed reflects a special sense of power and hope for any Caribbean woman. Taking advantage of surrogates or inner resources, the motherless daughters follow new pathways to maternal wisdom previously denied, but which now sustain them as well as the women who follow them.

The texts by Hodge, Danticat, and Kincaid are just a small selection of a great many which portray this recurring maternal loss pattern within black female diaspora literature. As such, this pattern begs for more critical elucidation as the continual surfacing of additional examples begins to suggest a new (or perhaps newly discovered) genre of black diasporic writing.

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For more reading on the self-empowerment of Danticat's female characters through storytelling in *Krik? Krak?*

Krik!, please see my article entitled "Braiding Memories: Resistant Storytelling within Mother-Daughter Communities in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*"

²Specifically, Eveline is the mother of Défilé from "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," while Josephine is Marie's mother. Like Josephine and Défilé, Jacqueline is another daughter of the Massacre River as her mother was killed there. Hermine is the mother in "Caroline's Wedding" and also an aunt in "New York Day Women"—two other stories within this montage. Marie Magdelène is the name that Lamort assumes in "The Missing Peace" (and thus the name of her dead mother) while Célianne is the name of a 15-year-old mother in "Children of the Sea"—the first story in the montage. For more explicit information on the braiding of family members with *Krik? Krak!*, please review the article mentioned in the first footnote.

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karen (miranda) augustine, "Beyond Dis/Credit: Divine Brown," 2003, mixed media: decoupage, acrylic, feathers & photocopies on canvas, 5' x 4'.



karen (miranda) augustine, "Contragun," mixed media: photographs, wood, nails, feathers, twine, acrylic & oil sticks on wood, 36" x 58". 2004. Yoruba translation: I saw fire covering your body like cloth; mysterious, commendable force whose upliftment strengthens me. Wild nine, sit down calmly — honour is entering your house.