

DECOLONIZING FEMINISM

The Home-Grown Roots of
Caribbean Women's Movements

LIZABETH PARAVISINI-GEBERT

IT IS COMMONPLACE, in these times of increased interest in Caribbean women—ideal canvases, it would appear, on which to theorize on the postfeminist, postcolonial, chaos-driven societies of the twentieth century—to speak of our history, our literature, the quality of our feminism or lack thereof, as if we constituted a homogeneous block, an undivided, unfragmented and unfragmentable entity—knowable, understandable, whole. Caribbean feminism is often discussed in much the same way, as something graspable, perceptible, complete—perhaps different from U.S. and European variables but nonetheless comprehensible, unequivocal. Reference is often made in these discussions to the race and class differences that separate women in Caribbean societies, most often in a perfunctory aside about not assuming that the discussion that has preceded it applies to all women in the region. But these denials can be rather elliptical, managing nonetheless to infer that one could after all continue to seek to understand all Caribbean women through what they share with other women *as women* if we only remind our audiences that the differences allow, like political polls, for plus or minus three percentage points of error.

Lest this sound like accusation or an attempt at polemics, I should avow my own guilt. There is a deceptive ease about generalizations; it is after all part and parcel of the academician's training to learn to draw general conclusions from the particular. Thus I mean it less as an accusation than as a cautionary note, a reminder that the realities we seek to understand as scholars are often much larger than the scholarship we pursue, and that the understanding we offer is at times just approximation, theory based on various fragments of a changing truth. This is not to say that the task of understanding Caribbean women's lives and cultures is futile, fated from the beginning to failure, but that, however

fragmentary, scholarship on Caribbean women needs to be rooted in true knowledge of the historical and material conditions responsible for women's choices and strategies in the region, and that the specificities of that process must be well accounted for if our conclusions are going to truly advance knowledge and understanding.

Recently, while preparing an annotated bibliography on Caribbean women novelists that required the reading and summarizing of several thousand items, I was struck foremost by how often explorations of women's movements and women's literatures in the Caribbean seemed rooted in U.S. and European theories developed to analyze different sociopolitical realities (Paravisini-Gebert and Torres-Seda). All too frequently, reliance on these approaches (whether postfeminist, postcolonial, deconstructivist) led to de-historicized interpretations that highlighted the "backwardness" of women's movements in the region, the "proto-feminist" quality of women's positions vis-à-vis power structures, while failing to see the specificities of what constitutes feminism for the women concerned. A frequent impression in that extensive review of the critical literature on Caribbean women's writing was that despite the often faultless internal logic of many of the essays I reviewed, the "external" logic—by which I mean the reliability of the assessments if measured against the sociohistorical reality of Caribbean women's lives—was frequently unsatisfactory when not entirely flawed. Unpopular as the thought may be in academic departments that have heavily invested in theory and the concomitant disconnection of the text from the historical materiality of real women's lives, I would posit that as scholars committed to studying Caribbean women we must anchor our work in a profound understanding of the societies we (they) inhabit. The evaluation of a differing reality from the theoretical standpoint of other women's praxes comes dangerously close in many cases to continued colonization. Caribbean feminism must be understood not in the light of other women's feminist histories and goals but in the light of their own experiences and practices. Feminism, if it is to lead to its goal of assuring women as full and multifaceted an existence as possible, must be responsive to the conditions in which that existence must unfold.

Scholarship on Caribbean societies, especially that stemming from current postcolonial and postmodernist approaches, more often than not seeks to relate these societies' attributes and idiosyncracies to past or present links to metropolitan centers. Historical and cultural practices are seen as stemming either from colonial influence or from a desire to shed colonial supremacy once and for all. As Carolyn Cooper has argued, Caribbean literatures and cultures

"can become appropriated by totalising literary theories that reduce all 'post-colonial' literatures to the common bond(age) of the great—however deconstructed—European tradition. There are endless interrogations of the text and the prisoner on the stand is always the native. The very idea of 'national' literatures is passé. That old fiction of literature as the product of an age, the ethos of a people, is subsumed in the new reductive fiction of literature as pathology—metastasis beyond remission" (Cooper, 15).

It is not that the conclusions based on these theories lack any validity: colonialism did indeed leave an indelible imprint on Caribbean nations, and anti-colonial struggles have most clearly shaped the islands' political movements, particularly throughout the twentieth century. Caribbean societies, however, have managed to remain profoundly insular despite the colonial onslaught. By this I do not mean that they are unsophisticated, unworldly, or naive societies, but that they are driven as much, if not more, by internal, local concerns than they are by a persistent, continual, and continuous awareness of a colonial past. The peoples of the region have responded to their former colonization with myriad strategies for subverting the very history and identity imposed upon them by their metropolitan masters. It has long been a practice of Caribbean peoples to "carnivalize," at times to "cannibalize," the models imposed by officialdom. In the colonies, "the enthroning and dethroning of [colonial] ideologies was practiced with the greatest haste" (Rodríguez Monegal, 406).

This "enthroning and dethroning" of colonial models extended to patterns of gender relations. Caribbean societies—precisely because of their prolonged colonial status, the far-reaching impact of the institution of slavery on gender roles and family relations, the correlation of race and class imposed by slavery, the gender imbalances created by the overwhelmingly male migration of the first half of the twentieth century, and myriad other factors—developed patterns of gender relations markedly different from those of the colonial metropolis. The standards familiar to the metropolis may have been closely imitated by the small enclaves of Europeanized white or light-skinned middle and upper-middle classes, but were frequently transformed by the masses of the people who wove new configurations out of the fabric of colonial mores. Official culture may have insisted on continuing to represent Eurocentric models as characteristic of Caribbean societies, making them, for example, the prerequisite for social mobility; but the reality was much more complex, more fluid, much more *sui generis*. The image of the closely chaperoned, virginal, white or light-skinned *señorita* that has long since stood as archetypical for Spanish-Caribbean womanhood is as race-, class-, and stereotype-bound as that of the

happy-go-lucky unmarried black mother of the Jamaican or Trinidadian yard with her large brood.

Among the Haitian peasantry, to offer a striking example, conventional marriage patterns hold little weight. Legal marriage, Wade Davis concludes in *Passage of Darkness*, has been "beyond the reach or desire" of the overwhelming majority of rural Haitians. *Plaçage*, a "socially if not legally sanctioned relationship that brings with it a recognized set of obligations for both man and woman," is a more common arrangement. But *plaçage* is not necessarily a monogamous relationship. Approximately 75 percent of the Haitian peasantry practices polygyny:

A woman who shares a man's house is known as *femme caille*. A *maman petite* is a woman who has borne a man a child without living in his house. Depending on the nature of the bond, however, she may live in one of his second houses and cultivate a piece of land. A *femme placée* is a mistress who does not share the same house with her mate, and who has yet to give him any children. Finally, a *bien avec* is a woman with whom a man has frequent but not exclusive sexual contact. . . . Moreover, though on an individual basis there is often bitterness and conflict between rivals, Haitian peasant women fully recognize the rights of their men to have more than one mate, and occasionally two or more *placées* will share the same courtyard. (Davis, 41, 43).

Rural Haitian women, on the other hand, control the distribution of goods in the countryside and the marketplace, a role that guarantees them a strong voice and considerable power in the economic and social activities of the community, despite their apparent disadvantages in marital relations.

Likewise, in "Slackness Hiding from Culture: Erotic Play in the Dancehall," one of the chapters of *Noises in the Blood*, Carolyn Cooper uses the metaphor of Slackness/Culture to investigate the "high/low," metropolitan/insular divide emblematic of Jamaican society as reproduced "in the hierarchical relations of gender and sexuality that pervade the dancehall." Although the denigration of "slackness" that pervaded Jamaican colonial culture would appear to determine "the concomitant denigration of female sexuality" as manifested in the freedom of the dancehall, Cooper reads images of transgressive-woman-as-Slackness-personified as "an innocently transgressive celebration of freedom from sin and law."

Liberated from the repressive respectability of a conservative gender ideology of female property and propriety, these women lay proper claim to the control of their own bodies. Further, the seemingly oppressive macho DJ ethic must

itself be problematised as a function of the oppressive class relations which produce what may be defined as a "diminished masculinity." (Cooper, 11)

I underscore these factors, and offer these examples, simply to illustrate the limited applicability of European or U.S. theories of feminism and gender relations to a reality that may have been influenced by European American cultural patterns but which developed in fairly *local* ways in response to a collision between autochthonous and foreign cultures. These *local*—i.e., *insular* or *creole*—responses to alien influences shaped the varieties of feminisms to be found in the Caribbean, feminisms that often clash with each other as women of different classes and races strive to achieve sometimes contradictory goals. The insular factors affecting the development of feminist movements in the region—the indivisibility of gender relations from race and class, the intricate connections between sexual mores, skin pigmentation, and class mobility, the poverty and political repression that have left women's bodies exposed to abuse and exploitation—seem alien to the concerns of European American feminist thought.

Take, for example, the vital relationship between women and their bodies, the focus of much theorizing and scholarship on women in recent years. Feminist critics have insistently voiced their concerns with inventing "both a new poetics and a new politics, based on women's reclaiming what had always been there but has been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it" (Suleiman, 7). Feminist theories on the body, however, insist on interpreting bodies as symbolic constructs with cultural significance, rather than as a flesh-and-blood entities. The body thus exists as a form of discourse, "fictive or historical or speculative," but "never free of interpretation, never innocent."

The experience of many Caribbean women, historical experience as well as experience translated into literary texts, denies the body's existence as mere symbolic construct. During the media buildup leading to the most recent U.S. intervention in Haiti, U.S. audiences heard, the majority for the first time, of the systematic use of rape by military forces as a means of political control. Haitian readers coming across the persistent and eventually murderous rape of Rose Normil in Marie Chauvet's *Colère* would reject feminist theorizing on the body's symbolism as superfluous, given the immediacy of the connection between women's rape and both historical and day-to-day reality in their country. Haiti's neighbors in the Dominican Republic likewise continue to be haunted by the story of the Mirabal sisters, the three gifted and courageous women murdered by Trujillo's henchmen because of their persistent efforts to

oust the dictator. The heartrending account of their lives and deaths offered by Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez in her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies*, draws its strength from its close connection to history. One could argue that the bodies of the Mirabal sisters are accessible to us through the symbolic discourse of texts such as Alvarez's. And this is indeed true, but only to a limited extent—for behind this discourse, however symbolic, stand the flesh-and-blood bodies of three vital young women, whose terror was real, whose bodies were torn apart, only to be used to inflict further torture—and through this torture a political lesson—on those to whom knowledge of their very real pain would bring immeasurable anguish and fear. In Dany Bébel-Gisler's testimonial text, *Léonora, l'histoire enfouie de la Guadeloupe*, Léonora brands her narrative with the many scars left on her body by her husband's abuse, scars that attest to the palpability of her experiences, her very flesh bearing testimony to history (see Romero, 1993).

The flesh-and-blood quality of women like Léonora, Rose Normil, and the Mirabal sisters must be remembered when reading how Caribbean women writers—and indeed most Third World women writers—"read" and "write" the female body. Their depictions of the "body-as-metaphor" must be seen in the context of political systems where women's bodies have been subject to abuse, rape, torture, and dismemberment precisely because this very treatment, through its interpretation as symbolic construct, has been an effective method of political control. Their reading of the body thus emerges from an ever-present threat to their own vulnerable flesh and blood, and the resulting symbolism is too close to the material body to allow for the comfort of seeing this danger merely as metaphor.

A second common element in what I see as problematic assessments of Caribbean women's lives and writings is the insistence on crediting the emergence of feminism in the Caribbean to fairly recent U.S. and European influences, with the concomitant conclusion that the various feminist movements in the islands responded to the same concerns as their assumed models. That these models have been influential, particularly in recent decades, there is no denying. Contemporary middle-class feminist movements in the Caribbean, seeking increased access to education, property, and employment, owe much to U.S. examples, particularly as many young middle-class women from the region have attended universities in the United States or have found employment with U.S.-spawned multinational corporations operating in the Caribbean.¹ These experiences have shaped the nature of their perceptions of their role as women, clashing with and frequently superseding traditional notions of womanhood.

The history of Caribbean feminism, however, is a long and contradictory one with autochthonous roots that reveal the conflicting realities of Caribbean women, conflicts in evidence from the early days of colonial society. C. L. R. James writes in *The Black Jacobins* of the underlying friction between women of different races and classes that characterized the colony of Saint Domingue. "Passion," he writes, "was [the planters' daughters'] chief occupation, stimulated by over-feeding, idleness, and an undying jealousy of the black and Mulatto women who competed so successfully for the favours of their husbands and lovers" (James, 30). The tensions to which James alludes, tensions stemming from profound class and race differences, have played a continuous role in the emergence and evolution of feminism in the region. As a result we can only speak of women's *movements*, since feminist goals have often meant very different things to women of different races and classes. I find "blanket" statements about feminism in the Caribbean most problematic, as they often raise questions about whose feminism is being taken as the norm and how that group's feminism has worked to frustrate someone else's.

Take the early women's movement in Puerto Rico as a case in point. The issue of women's rights began to be debated in the island in the early 1890s, when local newspapers focused on women's right to work, to own property, and to vote and on women's role in the home and society at large. The debate was led by two distinct and frequently opposed groups. One group comprised working-class women who had been incorporated into the labor force, primarily in the tobacco and needlework industries, after the U.S. takeover. They sought union organization to fight economic exploitation. The second group comprised middle-class women just entering the labor force as teachers, secretaries, bookkeepers, and clerks. They sought an end to legal and social restrictions through a quest for the vote. The most glaring example of the split between the two feminist camps—one led by Luisa Capetillo, the other by Ana Roqué—was the support given by the majority of middle-class suffragists to a law that would extend the vote only to women who could read and write. Such a law took effect in 1929. Those who could not read or write—that is, most Puerto Rican women—had to wait until universal suffrage became law in 1935. Poet Clara Lair, writing under the pseudonym Hedda Gabbler in the newspaper *Juan Bobo*, defended the middle-class position from the vantage point of her own self-perceived intellectual superiority:

I am going to declare that if the United States Congress decided to deprive of the vote Puerto Rican men who do not know how to read and write, it is an

anomaly to request it for Puerto Rican women who, as a rule, don't know how to read and write either. . . . it is a logical deduction that a woman that doesn't know how to write is a woman that has not wanted to read. And a woman who has not wanted to read is a woman who has not been able to think. This humble and amiable type of woman known as "the Puerto Rican woman," an atavistic servant, servant to a larger or lesser degree, servant to her master or to her father, or to her brother, or to her husband, but always a servant, is not the type of woman who thinks for herself, who acts for herself. (Lair, 15)

It is not the type of statement, addressed as it is against the political claims of another avowedly feminist group, that allows us to speak of *one* feminism in the Caribbean.

By the same token, in yet another example of the complexities of feminist thought in the region and of the profound autochthonous roots of local feminist thought and practice, working-class and peasant women witnessed the co-opting of the middle-class feminist movement in the Dominican Republic, born in 1931 with the founding of the Acción Feminista Dominicana (Dominican Feminist Action), into Trujillo's political agenda, a naive sell-out prompted by the dictator's promise of voting and other civil rights to literate women. Embraced by Trujillo and his movement, the leaders of the AFD spoke solemnly of the "cessation of mocking remarks" and of their pride in hearing people "speak of their ideal and their cause with respect" (Hernández, 114). In 1942 the AFD joined Trujillo's party and issued a proclamation entreating all Dominican women to give their support to the dictator. The movement's energies were channeled toward "feverish activity in favor of Trujillo's re-election: meetings, proclamations, formation of Pro-Reelection Committees, tributes and marches" (Hernández, 115). Trujillo's authoritarian regime would eventually absorb middle-class feminist organizations in the island, steering their activities toward philanthropy, consolidation of the family unit, glorification of motherhood, and exultation of women's capacity for sacrifice, setting these as standards for womanhood that effectively quashed the burgeoning working-class and peasant women's movements in the Dominican Republic for decades.

In Dominica, in sharp contrast, writer Phyllis Shand Allfrey, an avowed feminist and Fabian socialist who founded the Dominica Labour Party in 1955, urged party women to found the Women's Guild, a grassroots political and social organization whose aim was to use its influence to take "the winds out of the sails of [the conservatives'] ship."² It quickly became one of the most active arms of the labor movement in the island, an example of the broader definition

of feminism in grassroots movements in the Caribbean, concerned primarily with workers' access to power, land, and property. The Women's Guild came together politically and socially, and its activities (most of them still gender-bound) varied from cooking the banquet for the party's annual conference to singing Christmas carols—something which, as their energetic leader Mabel James (later to become a labor government minister) once described it, got the women "in a cheery merry mood" for the holidays. In January 1962 the women led their first public political activity, a "hell-fire counter demonstration" against the just-ousted conservative party, which was protesting taxes passed by the new Legislative Council dominated by Labour Party leaders. The women had prepared twelve placards, none of them centered on women's issues, but addressing the island's central political concerns, which they saw as their own: "Face the facts and pay the tax"; "Caesar Augustus made a decree that all the world should be taxed"; "And Mary and Joseph went to be taxed"; "Little man, let big man fight for himself"; "Taxes must be paid"; "Roads cannot be built without money"; "We want better homes, better schools, more roads"; "We want a better Dominica"; "Little man is paying, Big man must pay"; "Heaven help those who help themselves"; "Tax them, Brother, tax them"; "When you pay one cent Big Man pay dollar."

The interest in full participation in the region's political and economic activity evidenced by the Dominica Women's Guild's placards brings me to the last point I want to make on the subject of the misrepresentation of women's movements and women's literature that results from a too-determined theorizing of the Caribbean as postmodern, postcolonial, post-something-or-other. And it concerns women's roles in national movements centered on decolonization and autonomy—an area in which non-Caribbean feminist theory can lead to most serious misunderstandings.

A central feature of U.S. feminist theory is that of the emergence of a fully emancipated woman out of the mire of patriarchal culture. It is an image born of the myths of rugged individualism that have shaped the image of the United States at home and abroad. Woman as maverick, as we can see in recent biographies of women like Eleanor Roosevelt, who emerges from the brilliant pages of Blanche Wiesen Cook's recent biography as a symbol of U.S. feminist womanhood in all its mythologizing power: crushed by her husband's affair with her own private secretary following her six pregnancies in the early chapters, Eleanor rises like a modern phoenix to found a furniture factory, build her own house, engage in passionate friendships with lesbian women, run her own school for girls, learn to fly with Amelia Earhart, become First Lady on her own

terms. Dizzying stuff. But you can scan your memories in vain for similar images in the Caribbean and conclude that we lag behind the United States when it comes to heroic feminine material. To do so would be to judge heroism by standards that would never apply to the Caribbean region, where heroism, especially female heroism, has been sought in the subsuming of individual aspirations and desires into the struggle for the betterment of the community, and where women have followed a tradition, in history as in literature, of grassroots activism, courageous resistance, and, at times, even martyrdom. More characteristic of the Caribbean historical process are the careers of women like Allfrey, credited with almost singlehandedly bringing democracy to Dominica. In her attempt to wrest control of the Dominican political system from the hands of the landed and merchant elite, Allfrey had repeatedly crisscrossed the island on foot, traveling to near and remote villages and explaining in patois to gatherings of illiterate and semiliterate peasants the manifest advantages of allying themselves with a political party committed to furthering the workers' socio-economic agenda. The notion, in all its newness, soon took hold among them. A young supporter remembers her campaign to found the Labour Party as the island's "political awakening," a watershed moment in the island's history whose significance may have been lost on the upper and middle classes but not on the peasantry and working class. While the upper class concentrated its fire on questioning Allfrey's political sincerity and accusing her of being a communist, the supported observed, the poor were happy, "drunk" with the feeling she had helped instill in them that "the day of the underprivileged was at hand" (quoted in Paravisini-Gebert, 1996).

Allfrey's career, tied as it was to the Caribbean's embryonic thrust toward political and cultural independence, also illustrates one significant aspect of women's progress toward fuller participation in all aspects of society: the impact of interregional and international migration on developing feminist consciousness and spearheading feminist activity. As a West Indian in London before the growth of a migrant community in the early 1950s, Allfrey had mastered grassroots politics with the leftist branch of the Labour Party, working on campaigns led by birth-control proponents and feminists like Marie Stopes, Edith Summerskill, and Naomi Mitchison. Later she made women's issues the focus of political activity in Dominica, pressing for the dissemination of birth-control information, the availability of safe abortions, and the procuring of adequate medical care for women. As vice-president of the Caribbean Women's Association from the late 1950s to the early 1960s and minister of labour and social affairs during the West Indies Federation, she fostered interre-

gional communication between women in the English- and French-speaking islands of the Lesser Antilles, working tirelessly, for example, to secure a small vessel to facilitate interisland huckster trade. Her activities were representative of a process of transisland cross-pollination that has nourished women's movements in the region. Very often the process of migration, by forcing women into unfamiliar situations, experiences, and struggles, has resulted in a radicalization of political and social perspectives, leading women to assume roles not readily open to them in their home societies. Such is the case, for example, of Dominican women in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, who have taken leadership roles in the domestic and community spheres which would have been disallowed in the Dominican Republic. The organizational skills and leadership abilities nourished by these experiences have been invaluable, both to their fledgling communities in the United States and to the home communities to which many of these women eventually returned. Feminist leaders like Dominican poet and essayist Chiqui Vicioso, brought up and educated in the United States, have played central roles in grassroots feminist ventures in the Dominican Republic as they have brought back with them often remarkable experiences in feminist activism and the profound knowledge of their home societies to adapt those experiences to Caribbean needs and mores. Vicioso, returning to her home island as a UNESCO officer, organized peasant women into cultural cooperatives that fostered literary and artistic creativity as a means of empowering women to assume a greater level of control over their physical surroundings and economic activities.

Interregional migration has in numerous instances provided similar opportunities for politization and militancy. A number of Cuban prostitutes, prized for their light skins in Haitian brothels in the forties and fifties, returned home to join the anti-Batista movement, leading the effort to combat the exploitation of women, particularly young girls, in the infamous Cuban brothels of that dictator's reign. Dominican women arriving in Puerto Rico to fill the lowest of jobs, often working for middle- and upper-class Puerto Rican women, have been forced to confront the unexpected "otherness" described by Luisa Hernández Angueira in this collection (chapter 5), a process akin to that they have undergone in other islands where Dominicans have migrated in meaningful numbers, such as St. Marteen and Curaçao. More positively, recent interregional efforts to encourage communication and dialogue have resulted in networks of communication that have proven invaluable in disseminating information and pinpointing successful strategies for community action and grassroots initiatives, countering the negative impact of free-zone develop-

ment, securing information on health care and AIDS, developing ecological protection programs, limiting the alienating aspects of industrial work, and addressing such women-centered issues as abortion rights, child care, restrictions in access to education and jobs, battering, and child abuse.

In this interregional effort we find women writers playing a leading role, as it has been in literature and the arts that interisland communication developed with greater ease and cooperation (perhaps because they were seen as realms less threatening than political or economic collaborations). Like Allfrey, many Caribbean women writers have taken very active roles in feminist and political struggles. Marie Chauvet braved the Duvaliers in denouncing the Tonton Macoutes in *Amour, Colère, et Folie* (1968) and *Les rapaces* (1986). Jacqueline Manicom, known primarily as the author of *Mon examen de blanc* and *La Graine*, was co-founder of the feminist group Choisir and led a movement to make abortion legal in Guadeloupe (it is still rumored, such is the power of myth, that her fatal automobile accident in 1976 was the Silkwood-like result of these activities). Aída Cartagena Portalatín's founding of Brigadas Dominicanas to publish literary works banned under Trujillo placed her in constant danger. In Ada Quayle's *The Mistress*, Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor*, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, Elizabeth Nuñez-Harrell's *When Rocks Dance*, and Phyllis Allfrey's *The Orchid House*, among many others, we find the salient elements of an emerging female and feminist historiography that seeks to examine the parameters of Caribbean feminism from a vantage point that is truly Caribbean and appears to owe little to foreign concepts of women's power.

These texts are part of an extraordinarily large body of novels (some fifty texts) written by Caribbean women centering on the plantation, revolving around plantation mistresses or women seeking empowerment in a plantation-bred social system, and focusing on women's roles in the destruction of the patriarchal/colonial power represented by the Caribbean plantation and its legacy. They depict women's struggle to become leading actors in the destruction of the multileveled power of the patriarchal plantation as the metaphor for the struggles of Caribbean peoples to unshackle themselves from the colonial power represented by the plantation and its remnants.

Their depiction of women as the destroyers of the plantation takes two primary forms: the planter-heroines are portrayed as self-immolating/self-destructive heroines that bring the plantation order crashing down (avenging angels like Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Gloria in Ferré's *Maldito amor*, and Clare in Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*) or as mediators that

make possible the return of the land to the people (as in Allfrey's heavily autobiographical *The Orchid House*, Chauvet's *Fonds-des-nègres*, and Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*). Both types of portrayals, however, stress women's roles in returning the land, and the power it represents, to the formerly dispossessed, sometimes themselves (as in Nuñez-Harrell's *When Rocks Dance*) but most often to the exploited peasantry (as in *No Telephone to Heaven*).

In "History and the Novel: Plot and Plantation," Silvia Wynter suggested looking at Caribbean history as the unfolding of the tensions between the structures of the plantation (imposed by the colonial powers) and the autochthonous structures of the plot system. In these novels, the planter-heroines are portrayed as the vehicles for the return of the land to the plot system of agriculture, thus redressing the imbalance of power created by the hegemony of the plantation system. This transfer of land and power is often stressed in terms of a shift (not always voluntary but nonetheless unstoppable) from white ownership to black or mulatto control. This change is invariably presented as feminist, a feminism that incorporates as a primary element an assessment of the racial differences and conflicting class interests that separate Caribbean women. A not surprising number of the plots of these novels revolve around woman versus woman conflicts, as these writers bring to the fore of their texts their understanding of plantation societies as the least likely settings for the development of relationships of sisterhood between white, black, and colored women. More often than not, black, white, and mulatto women "were bound to each other in the [plantation] household, not in sisterhood, but by their specific and different relations to its master" (Fox-Genovese, 100). Hence the depictions of relationships between women in the plantation underscore the authors' understanding that "class and racial struggles assumed priority over the gender struggle, even though class and racial struggles might have been experienced in gender-specific, and indeed sex-specific ways" (Fox-Genovese, 95). The depictions point to a greater complexity in the alliances and misalliances that make up the complex web of historical relations between race and class groups in the Caribbean than we are likely to glean from a cursory attempt at applying traditional feminist and postcolonial theories to the study of Caribbean women's lives, cultures, and literatures.

Feminist critics outside the Caribbean, after all, lionized Jean Rhys's heroines as representative of the Caribbean woman as victim of patriarchal oppression—in sharp contrast to most Caribbean readings of Rhys's texts, which find heroism in her characters' self-destruction—creating a series of tropes that resonate through the critical literature on Caribbean women's writings. Rhys's

heroines, however, are *sui generis* heroines, typical of a vision of Caribbean womanhood shared by few other Caribbean writers. Schwarz-Bart's *Télumée Miracle*, Allfrey's fictional alter ego Joan, and Dany Bébel-Gisler's *Léonora*, on the other hand, are emblematic of Caribbean women's rejection of victimization and insistence on their power to endure whatever the cost. I see in this oft-repeated trope in Caribbean women's writings the repository of a Caribbean-bound feminism still waiting to be explored. Rhys has given us the rootless and community-deprived Antoinette Cosway's final plunge into the void; Ramabai Espinet, in "Barred: Trinidad 1987," offers a counterpoint. One of the multiple female voices in her beautifully rendered story, beaten and abused by her husband, kills him and flees with her child into the night. Waking up in a bleak savanna at dawn, she sets out in hope of joining the community that will sustain her through what is yet to come. She has, after all, "lived through the long night."

NOTES

1. Some of these industries—the pharmaceutical industry in Puerto Rico and the electronic- and computer-equipment industries in other islands, for example—have favored the hiring of women over men, claiming as their rationale women's dexterity with their hands, their docility, and their reluctance to join labor unions. Women's access to highly paid employment in multinational corporations in the Caribbean has sent many women into the labor force and into the ranks of women's movements in the region, as they seek to defend and preserve their newly acquired rights and opportunities. It has also had serious repercussions on gender relations, as the power vested in women in the household by their economic power has upset traditional gender roles. As a result, some scholars would argue, the rates of wife and child abuse, male alcoholism, and divorce have risen.

2. Letter to Phyllis Shand Allfrey from Mabel James, May 17, 1961, in Allfrey's Literary Executor's Archive. Quotations are from this document.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alvarez, Julia. *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1994.
- Chauvet, Marie. *Amour, Colère, et Folie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.
- Cook, Blanche Wiesen. *Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One 1884–1933*. New York: Viking, 1992.

- Cooper, Carolyn. *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. London: Macmillan, 1993.
- Davis, Wade. *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Espinete, Ramabai. "Barred: Trinidad 1987." In *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women*, ed. Carmen C. Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991, pp. 80–85.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 100.
- Hernández, Angela. *Emergencia del silencio: La mujer dominicana en la educación formal*. Santo Domingo: Editora Universitaria de la UASD, 1986.
- James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Vintage, 1963.
- Lair, Clara. "Que no voten las puertorriqueñas," *Juan Bobo*, June 17, 1916, p. 15.
- Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. "Esquema biográfico de Ana Roqué," in *Luz y sombra*, ed. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1991, pp. 151–159.
- . *Phyllis Shand Allfrey: A Caribbean Life*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- , and Olga Torres-Seda. *Caribbean Women Novelists: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*. Westport: Greenwood, 1993.
- Rodríguez Monegal, Emir. "Carnaval/Antropofagia/Parodia." *Revista Iberoamericana* 45 (1979): 405–409.
- Romero, Ivette. "The Voice Recaptured: Fiction by Dany Bébel-Gisler and Ana Lydia Vega," *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 8, no. 3 (1991–1992): 159–165.
- . "Women's Testimonial Narrative in the French and Spanish Caribbean." Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1993.
- Suleiman, Susan Rubin. "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism." In *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Valle, Norma. "La organización de las mujeres en Puerto Rico," *En Rojo* (San Juan, P.R.), June 1–7 1977, p. 10.
- . "Viva controversia entre las vertientes del movimiento feminista," *En Rojo*, June 24–30, 1977, pp. 8–9.
- Wynter, Silvia. "History and the Novel: Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (June 1971).