

ON THE THRESHOLD OF BECOMING CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS

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IN SETTING OUT TO STUDY the work of contemporary Caribbean women writers, it would be helpful to consider the critical framework that enters discussions of the writing of authors who are both women and Caribbean. The prevalent critical perspective on Caribbean literature demands that it shed Eurocentric views and stress self-determination. Thus, the main themes of Caribbean literature (rootlessness, the definition of a Caribbean aesthetic, race and color, decolonization of culture and language) are linked to the Caribbean writers' prescribed role of articulating the need for a change in direction. Likewise, the prevalent feminist perspective on women's writing demands that it shed male-centered views and stress female self-determination. Women's writing should show female characters in the process of emancipation from patriarchal institutions and values, and point the way towards similar emancipation outside of fiction.

The obvious difficulty arising from these criteria is that for the most part they require that literature look to the future at the expense of the present, whereas the reality of Caribbean literature, especially those works written by women, is that of standing on the threshold, between existing structures that tie us to the past and the need to define a different future. In the case of women in particular, that past includes their "double colonization" in a colonial situation that also imposed its patriarchal social order. The traditional feminist approaches to gender and class inequality are inadequate in a region of extreme class

polarization along racial lines and widespread political and economic exploitation; and the fact that independence has come to most Caribbean territories has not considerably altered these conditions.

As elsewhere in the world where "national" concerns require urgent attention, feminism in the Caribbean is often seen as a "personal" position taken at the expense of broader concerns. Although Caribbean women have always participated in the social development of the region, even the most radical political groups have been slow to give women's issues the attention they deserve. As a result of this situation an organized women's movement in the Caribbean has only begun to take shape in recent years. Not until the Eighties do we begin to see pan-Caribbean communication among Caribbean women and the beginnings of a unified perspective.¹ This does not, however, preclude the existence of "feminist" perspectives in the work of Caribbean women writers, perspectives developed from their own knowledge and observation of the lives of Caribbean women—and increasingly—through their contact with the international feminist movement. The "feminism" we find in these texts is based on the concrete social realities of Caribbean women, and emerges out of the need to bring to the foreground their capacity for struggle, survival and endurance. As such, it does not focus exclusively on the male/female dichotomy, but rather on the interaction of women with social environments in which colonial and racial relationships exacerbate an already oppressive, patriarchal situation.

This study examines prose narratives written by Caribbean women between 1968 and 1984. All the works studied (except for Rosario Ferré's *Papeles de Pandora*) are novels. They represent three of the principal languages spoken in the area (English, French and Spanish) and include: Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*, Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, Albaluía Angel's *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón*, Rosario Ferré's *Papeles de Pandora*, Nadine Magloire's *Le mal de vivre*, Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Telumée Miracle*, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Marie Chauvet's *Amour, colère et folie*.²

The novels can easily be divided into two groups: one centering on adolescent protagonists on the threshold of adulthood, and the other dealing with adult heroines. The former group of novels focuses on the process of becoming, which in these texts involves learning to cope with the vital race/class connections that dominate Caribbean societies

as well as with patriarchal views on sexuality; the latter explores the options available to women coping with patriarchal/colonial situations—the all too frequent recourse to self-destruction through madness or death, the possibilities of endurance, the rare transcendence of circumstances that points to a new beginning.

I

In the novels dealing with adolescence there is an obvious parallel between the young heroine's quest for independence and the need for self-determination on a national level. The turmoil of adolescence is generally attributed to the overwhelming task of *choosing* one's direction in life. For both male and female adolescents in the Caribbean, the transition from childhood is a period of painful discovery and crisis, in which they are faced with only limited options. Female adolescents, however, must not only come to terms with barriers of race, color and class but of gender as well. As they reach the threshold of maturity, conflicting social values threaten to undermine their achievement of a complete sense of womanhood.

In *Crick Crack Monkey* (Trinidad, 1970) by Merle Hodge, the process of becoming an adult is complicated by the pressures of assimilation in pre-Independence Trinidad. When young Tee's mother dies and her father emigrates to England, the women of her family assume responsibility for her upbringing. And it is in Tee's relationship to her female guardians that Hodge develops the theme of "double consciousness" so common in Caribbean literature. Tee is literally "torn between two worlds" when her Aunt Rosa and Aunt Beatrice compete for her guardianship.

Merle Hodge draws a sharp contrast between the two women, who represent conflicting female role models as well as the conflicting values of color and class endemic to the colonial legacy in the Caribbean. Tee spends her earliest years in the chaotic, "make-shift" world of her Aunt Rosa (Tantie), who is cast in the role of those often maligned black women bold enough to be themselves, regardless of what others think. Loud and aggressive, she defies all socially accepted notions of good taste and feminine propriety. Despite her brash exterior, however, she is warm, generous, loving, and above all honest. The "mannish" Tantie

tries to save Tee from the world of Aunt Beatrice, who is intent on indoctrinating her niece with the "ways of nice people".

As in other Caribbean novels of childhood and adolescence, the colonial school system plays a crucial role in the socialization process. Thus Tantie must also contend with a school system primarily designed to teach allegiance to the British Empire, where children learn a general contempt for blackness, tacit obedience to arbitrary authority, conformity and hypocrisy. At home Tantie admonishes Tee that she is going to school to "learn *book*" and not to let her teachers put any nonsense in her head. At first spirited young Tee seems to maintain a sense of her own self-worth despite her teachers, but it is precisely in *books* that she unconsciously learns her first lesson in duality and self-effacement.

In the wonderful world of books, Tee discovers another reality, which she accepts as superior to her own:

Books transported you always into the familiar solidity of chimneys and apple trees, the enviable normality of real Girls and Boys who went a-sleighing and built snowmen, ate potatoes, not rice, went about in socks and shoes from morning until night and called things by their proper names . . . Books transported you always into Reality and Rightness, which were to be found Abroad. (61)

In order to become a part of this "Rightness", Tee creates Helen, her double; but as the young narrator observes, Helen was more than her double:

She was the proper Me. And Me, I was her shadow hovering about in incompleteness. (62)

Thus Tee assimilates the values that Tantie had tried so hard to counteract and sees herself as lacking, inadequate, "incomplete"—not because she is a girl but because she is not the "right" kind of girl. Although Tee is said to have soon outgrown and "discarded" Helen, this experience foreshadows the process of self-estrangement that will take place when she wins a scholarship to attend secondary school and goes to live with her Aunt Beatrice.

Tee's scholastic success is a major turning point in her development, but it is her Aunt Beatrice who plays the dominant role in shaping her

image of adult female behavior. Unlike warm, open-minded Tantie, Beatrice McNeil is a genteel "proper lady", prejudiced against all forms of ordinary "niggeryiness." In spite of her middle class airs, she pitifully fails to create the ideal family harmony to which she aspires. Since her own daughters have little respect for her, she needs Tee to compensate for her sense of frustration and inadequacy.

In the McNeil household, Tee is initiated into the world of the black middle class: the world of private school, dance lessons and garden parties. Scorned by her spoiled, pretentious cousins and stifled by her aunt's constant attention, she is made to feel ashamed of every aspect of her person: her "lower class" tastes, her clothes, her physical appearance. Tee perceives her aunt's vigilance over every detail of her life as a "perpetual assault" that leaves her "disarmed beyond all resistance in an uncomfortable, alien way" (84).

As a child, Tee was the favorite of her paternal grandmother, Ma Josephine, who recognized in that "bold face" little girl the spirit of her own grandmother, "a tall straight proud woman" (19). In the McNeil home, the legacy of her black foremother is replaced by that of the "White Ancestress", Elizabeth Helen Carter, whose photograph hangs high on the livingroom wall for all to see. Tee soon learns that her mother, Elizabeth Carter's namesake and likeness, gave up the family "birthright" (the privileged status of class and color) by marrying her father.

Overwhelmed by a sense of shame and guilt, Tee once again longs for a different, "proper" self:

I wanted to shrink, to disappear . . . I felt that the very sight of me was an affront to common decency. I wished that my body could shrivel up and fall away, that I could step out new and acceptable. (97)

The young adolescent spends her time sitting on the back steps of the McNeil's house, cut off from the world of Tantie and not really belonging to the world of Aunt Beatrice. Symbolically, Tee is situated on the threshold of a new consciousness. The steady erosion of her self-esteem leads to a rejection of her past life, but her acceptance of the distorted values of her Aunt Beatrice is one of painful resignation. Ultimately Tee leaves Trinidad to join her father in England, where we know she will face an even greater sense of alienation.

The socio-historical context of *Beka Lamb* (Belize, 1980) is similar to

that of colonial Trinidad in *Crick Crack Monkey*. The adolescent heroine comes of age in the politically turbulent years that gave rise to the Belize independence movement. The author, Zee Edgell, contributes a detailed social portrait of this neglected area of the Caribbean. Formerly British Honduras, Belize is noted for its extremely heterogeneous population of Blacks, Hispanics, Mayas, Caribs and Asians. Although English is the official language, Spanish, Maya and Carib are also spoken. This racial and linguistic variety, combined with the country's location on the Yucatan peninsula and Gautemalan territorial claims have produced a national "identity crisis" in Belize that rivals that of most other Caribbean societies.³

On the surface, Zee Edgell's treatment of the extreme ethnic diversity of Belize society is amazingly devoid of any urgent sense of conflict. Although the author tends to emphasize national pride and unity despite apparent group prejudices, there is an obvious discrepancy between the national ideal and reality; for Belize is a society always on the verge of "breaking down". Young Beka Lamb compares this situation to her own sense of emotional upheaval when she observes, "Sometimes I feel bruk down just like my own country . . . I start all right but then I can't seem to continue. Something gets in the way and then I drift for the longest while" (115).

Although the Lamb family reflects the underlying social tensions of Belize, here too Edgell emphasizes inner strength and unity—perhaps in an attempt to counter the stereotype of the unstable, matriarchal family structure of the predominantly black societies of the Caribbean. Thus Beka grows up in a supportive, middle class family. In most respects, her adolescence is surprisingly "normal", marked by small acts of rebellion, indifference to school, eagerness to break away from the family circle, and guilt about not living up to her family's expectations.

The adolescent crisis in the novel centers on the tragic death of Beka's childhood friend Toycie Qualos, and illustrates the potentially tragic consequences of race, class and gender prejudice in Belize. Seventeen year-old Toycie is a talented, pretty girl of mixed African and Asian blood, from an impoverished background. Abandoned by her father and mother, she is brought up by her Aunt Eila who through hard work and personal sacrifice manages to pay for Toycie's education at the prestigious convent school that Beka also attends. Both Toycie and Beka are considered fortunate since most creole girls must leave

school to work as sales clerks or domestic servants in order to help out at home. But Beka is "luckier" still; her family is intact, always there to guide her through the pitfalls of adolescence.

Unlike Toycie, Beka is taught *who she is* so that she won't forget *her place* in society. When her friend falls in love with a boy from another class and ethnic group—Emilio Villanueva, a Belize of Spanish descent—Beka knows that "panias scarcely ever marry creole." Her grandmother Ivy even accuses Toycie of "trying to raise her color" and predicts that she will "wind up with a baby instead of a diploma" (47). Confident in Emilio's love and her own promise as a student, Toycie dismisses Miss Ivy's warning. Her "blazing spirit" always seemed to transform the reality of her humble origins; but when she does indeed get pregnant and Emilio refuses to marry her, neither her intelligence nor her beauty save her from the prejudices and Victorian morality of Belize society. Betrayed by Emilio and expelled from school, Toycie is punished for not knowing her place, for not understanding that—"We women must learn to control our emotions" (120). Her future destroyed, Toycie withdraws into a severe depression, then madness and soon afterwards dies in one of the many hurricanes that ravage the Belize coast.

Toycie's misfortune is Beka's initiation into the adult world and serves as a harsh reminder of the constraints placed on female behavior. Although her friend's death motivates her to win first prize in an essay competition at school—changing her from "a flat rate Belize creole" into a young woman with "high mind" (1)—Beka vows never to fall in love and threatens to leave Belize when she graduates:

. . . if, as she was beginning to suspect, her nurture was such that her life would probably break down, maybe in Toycie's way, she wanted it to happen in a far away corner where she could pick up the pieces, glue them together and start all over again. (147)

By recalling the circumstances that led to Toycie's death, Beka mourns the loss of her friends as well as the loss of her own childhood innocence. She overcomes her grief for Toycie, but whether she will be able to achieve emotional maturity within the limitations imposed on her by Belize society remains questionable.

The "pairing of two girls" is also the focus of Michelle Cliff's treatment of the Caribbean adolescent's quest for adulthood in *Abeng*

(Jamaica, 1984). As in the previous novels, the adolescent heroine grows up in a colonial society divided by issues of race, color and class. The relationship between the legacy of colonialism and sexism, however, is much more explicit in this novel, which in many ways is a feminist parable that illustrates how race and class influence our notions of female empowerment and sisterhood. The title of Cliff's novel is the African word for the conch shell used by the Maroons to sound out calls of rebellion. Since the conch shell also suggests the shape of the womb, her title is symbolic of the synthesis of history, rebellion and the feminist perspective that she attempts in the narrative.

The adolescent heroine, twelve-year old Clare, is the oldest daughter of a Jamaican family that has lost its former wealth but that nevertheless clings to the delusion of status based on color. Her father, James Arthur Savage (Boy), is the descendant of an English official who came to Jamaica in the early nineteenth century. If nothing else, Boy Savage inherits his ancestor's arrogance. Since his main purpose in life is the "preservation of whiteness and obliteration of darkness" (129), he lays claim to his beautiful, fair-skinned daughter as the true heir of the Savage family's privileged past. He treats Clare as he would a son, which gives her the false impression that her sex has no boundaries.

Clare's mother, Kitty, is from a family of small farmers, poor by Savage standards and somewhat lower in the caste system based on color. Unlike her husband, she feels a strong connection to the land and people of Jamaica, but her marriage to Boy puts an end to her youthful dreams of building a school in the country where she would teach her people an appreciation of their own island. In what Cliff describes as a misguided act of defiance, Kitty retreats into *silence*. Her repressed love for the poor Black people of Jamaica and her refusal to share these feelings, or any form of intimacy for that matter, deprives Clare of an important alternative to her father's pretensions.

Through self-deception and denial, her parents obscure the true nature of their pasts. Young Clare is therefore faced with the task of sorting out the family "mythology". Since an understanding of her parents' "separate histories" is crucial to her development, the narrative is composed of contrasting segments of family and social history; her father is associated with the falsified glory of the colonizer and her mother with the "untold" history of Jamaica, the legacy of the maroon rebellions, especially as they relate to the role of women such as the

legendary Nanny.⁴ In order to become a responsible adult with a clear sense of who she is, Clare needs to know her connection to that history.

The episode that forces Clare to confront the reality of her situation as a middle class mulatto girl in a colonized society takes place in 1958 during a summer vacation in the country with her maternal grandmother. Like, many young girls, she experiences adolescence as a loss of freedom. Now that she has reached the age of puberty, she is no longer allowed to play with her male cousins or "wander alone" in the bush. Her only companion is Zoe, the daughter of a poor marketwoman who lives on her grandmother's property. Their friendship, of course, is only possible in the "wild countryside", in the world of their adolescent fantasies. Clare only vaguely perceives the differences of color and class that separate them, but Zoe is cautioned by her mother not to "get too close to buckra people" (102).

Despite Clare's confusion about color and class, she is the only adolescent protagonist in the novels we have discussed who deliberately sets out to challenge gender-biased notions that exclude girls from the activities of boys. In response to the "pain of exclusion", Clare decides to take her uncle's gun and go on a "hunt for the wild pig", a male ritual practice by the Maroons. Her friend Zoe reluctantly goes along with this new game; she knows that this is a dangerous, "forbidden act" for which she will be held responsible. Clare, however, feels the hunt is "her right—her property" (121). What she fails to understand is the role color and class play in the assertion of her rights: "She had no sense of the nuances of ownership—of the unevenness of possession . . . She did not realize that it was only *she* who moved across the lines of ownership—because she was Kitty's daughter and Miss Mattie's granddaughter. And Zoe, her darker friend, her friend whose mother was a market woman, was only allowed along" (121).

The more privileged adolescent sets her sights much higher, dares to act out her dream; but in setting out on the quest denied her because of her sex, she inadvertently participates in an expression of power that will very likely have a negative effect on someone like Zoe, who is unprotected by the privileges of class. Out of respect for Zoe, Clare gives up the hunt but a subsequent event serves as a painful lesson in the responsibilities of power. While the two girls lie naked under the warm sun after bathing in a nearby river, they are surprised by the appearance of a cane-cutter. With all the self-assurance of a young girl of her class, Clare responds by picking up the gun she had stolen for

the hunt and shooting at the intruder. Luckily, she misses the cane-cutter but she manages to kill her grandmother's bull. Zoe realizes that she will be blamed and she fears that her mother may even be forced to leave Miss Mattie's property "all because she had gotten too close to a *buckra* gal and had not kept to her distance and her own place" (132).

Threatening the life of a cane-cutter and killing her grandmother's bull was not the ritual Clare had intended but she is severely punished for it. As a consequence of her actions she loses her closest friend and is rejected by her grandmother who accuses her of being a wicked, misbegotten child—"A girl who seemed to think she was a boy. Or white" (134). Her parents are more dismayed by the *implications* of her actions than by the fact that she killed the bull, or that she might have caused harm to herself or anyone else:

She had stepped out of line, no matter what, in a society where the lines were unerringly drawn. She had been caught in rebellion. She was a girl. No one was impressed with her. (149-150)

Banished from her grandmother's affections, Clare is sent home; but since no ordinary punishment is enough to curb what her parents consider deviant tendencies, they decide to put Clare under the guardianship of Mrs. Beatrice Phillips, a wealthy white woman who is an old friend of the Savage family. Mrs. Phillips will teach Clare how "to take advantage" of who she is in the world, how to be a lady (150). Clare's apprenticeship with Mrs. Phillips is ludicrous since the old woman is an ignorant racist who lives in a dark old Kingston mansion with her thirteen dogs. She is incapable of teaching Clare anything except how "to live with narrow mindedness", her mother Kitty's euphemism for bigotry. As in the other novels we have discussed, the adolescent crisis in *Abeng* brings the female heroine painful recognition of the obstacles that lie ahead. Since her desires and aspirations are subordinate to those of her family, she is not permitted any autonomy apart from her future role as wife and mother, even if she is given opportunities that are out of reach for the young women of Zoe's class. Unlike male heroes in the traditional novel of development, the female heroine is not allowed to test her will against the established order, and she arrives at the threshold of maturity in a state of lonely alienation.

II

The crossing of the threshold into adulthood brings women in Caribbean societies face to face with the limited options open to them in patriarchal/colonial societies. The tales of adult women told by Caribbean women writers bring characters from the state of lonely alienation, typical of adolescence, to the despair brought about by their confrontation with the diminishing possibilities of transcending their situations. In the narratives written by Caribbean women, this despair is often presented through the themes of madness and suicide.

Madness and suicide have long been presented in literature as responses to powerlessness, hence the frequency with which they appear in works written by women in patriarchal societies. Patriarchal culture sets narrow limits on female self-realization; thus the acceptance of women's secondary position in society, the subordination of feminine desire to masculine needs, the absence of a legitimate position in the socioeconomic order, and the denial of a "voice". Women are expected to insert themselves in a patriarchal discourse that emphasizes female worthlessness. The conflicts created by the internalization of these values are often expressed in literature written by women through situations of "entrapment" between conflicting social and personal demands for which their female characters see no solution other than self-destruction through madness or suicide. E. Ann Kaplan, in an insightful essay about Garbo's *Camille*, points to women's need to elaborate a discourse of their own:

She has allowed the patriarchal definition of herself as worthless to become her own definition of herself, not having any other discourse within which to evaluate herself differently.⁵

Patriarchal discourse is akin to colonial discourse in its demands; both the literature of women and the literature of the colonized⁶ abound in madness and suicide. It is not surprising, then, to find them as solutions in the novels written by Caribbean women. It is possible, however, to read the presence of madness and suicide in these works as attempts to create a new discourse for the Caribbean woman.

The heroine of Nadine Magloire's *Le mal de vivre* (Haiti, 1967) is a case in point. The novel is the "interior monologue of (Dinou), an upper class woman who has dared to seek intellectual and erotic

freedom despite the elite's straight-faced puritanism".⁷ The text is punctuated by her rejection of Haitian society:

Haiti is a pretty unlucky little island. A speck of country no one, not even its inhabitants, gives a damn about . . . Most of my compatriots are bloated with pretensions, self-centered to the point of stupidity and morbidly susceptible and suspicious. They lie on principle; no one tells the truth here.⁸

Rootless in a bourgeois society which allows her no role, Dinou attempts to insert herself in romantic discourse by beginning a grand passion with a (very) married man. The affair is recorded in a diary—her attempt at her own discourse—which attests to the disastrous failure of her relationship and voids her own self assessment: "J'ai renoncé à me croire investie du don d'écrire" (7). The novel begins with the assertion that the creation of a text *can* be the means to transcend what Magloire's heroine calls "ce quotidien médiocre", "une existence insignifiante". But she chooses to insert herself into a discourse—the romantic discourse—which offers no possibility of transcendence because it depends almost exclusively on the loved one. The realization of her worth as creator of a text does not, however, rescue her from the worthlessness assigned to her in romantic/patriarchal discourse as one who has failed in love. As the text ends, so does her life:

Maintenant il ne m'est plus possible de reprendre ma vie comme avant de t'aimer. Hans, je sais que je serai toujours dans ton coeur. Tu te souviendras de ta folle Dinou qui ne veut plus vivre parce-qu'elle a perdu sa raison de vivre. (104)

While Magloire's heroine points to a strategy for transcending her situation—the creation of a text, the elaboration of a new discourse—she has chosen an oppressive, rather than a liberating discourse. Her choice only leads to suicide.

Such is not the case in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel about the insertion of women in patriarchal and colonial discourse where madness and death are paradoxically triumphant. The novel retells the story of Antoinette Cosway/Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Rhys has chosen as her heroine one of

the many "mad Creole heiresses . . . whose dowries were only an additional burden to them: products of an inbred, decadent, expatriate society, resented by the recently freed slaves whose superstitions they shared, they languished uneasily in the oppressive beauty of their tropical surroundings, ripe for exploitation".⁹

Such is the wife chosen by Jane Eyre's Rochester, the Caribbean woman who embodies the phantoms that haunt the English woman's subconscious. Rhys' accomplishment is that of giving a voice to this Caribbean woman forced into silence in *Jane Eyre*, a text not her own. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* she is allowed to tell her tale in her own words. The resulting tale contradicts Brontë's depiction of the "madwoman" in her classic novel, where Bertha is presented as the stereotypical creole woman in all her "Otherness": dark, passionate, violent and mad.

Through this tale, Rhys subverts patriarchal/colonial discourse in three ways: by laying bare the polarization of English and Creole women in a "feminist" text like Brontë's,¹⁰ thereby exposing its basic feminist contradiction; by giving the "mad" Antoinette Cosway a voice (and a name) to create a Caribbean and female discourse with which to deny the truth of Rochester's tale; by "using" her madness to burn the archetypal symbol of patriarchal/colonial power, the English squire's country manor.

Antoinette's assertion before getting out to burn the manor is relevant in our context: "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (155). As readers of *Jane Eyre*, we know that her death ensues, but the statement is one of purpose, and this sense of purpose transforms madness and death into means and achievement. Madness and death are thus presented in the text as her only means of vindicating her female and colonized self.

In a similar way, the heroines of Rosario Ferré's short stories, collected in *Papeles de Pandora* (Puerto Rico, 1976), channel the rage provoked by patriarchal limitations into "eclosions of fury" which destroy themselves but which also bring down the patriarchal order:

Pandora rejoices in violence in order to give way to the rage accumulated by women facing the trap of the roles that sexism imposed on them for centuries. It does not preach the advantages of equality, but rather exalts the ignominy of subordination and announces its apocalyptic destruction.¹¹

Ferré's stories are filled with self-willed, often cataclysmic deaths: Marina, in "Marina y el león," brings down her home-prison in a tumultuous and adulterous coitus with her brother-in-law; "Amalia" ends with a "phantasmagorical conga of death"¹² where servants and prostitutes long oppressed by a military man proceed to bring down his house. Her story "La bella durmiente" is perhaps the one that presents Ferré's antipatriarchal argument most eloquently, and it does so by the heroine's careful staging of her own death. A pampered daughter of the bourgeoisie, María de los Angeles only wishes to dance, a shocking choice to family, nuns and friends. She accepts her family's wishes for a "dynastic" marriage only on condition that she will be allowed to dance, only to find herself practically raped and pregnant. Her response is typical of Ferré's view of the struggle against patriarchal domination: in anonymous letters to her husband, María de los Angeles invents promiscuous affairs in seedy hotels which she uses to lure him to a hotel room, where he kills her while she dances. Her death is rescued from meaninglessness or defeat by its insertion into a feminist discourse whose purpose it is to lay bare the workings of the patriarchal system. Death, which appears as a negative solution in most contexts, has been incorporated into feminist literature as a "positive" solution since it represents a refusal to submit to an unjust power (in the same way as it appears in Greek tragedy—cf. *Antigone*—or in the works of feminist authors discussed by Ferré in *Sitio a Eros*). In this respect, the story has much in common with Rhys' challenge to patriarchy in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Perhaps the most adept handling of the madness/suicide theme can be found in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, where we find an ironic inversion of the success/defeat expectations. *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is a complex novel, rich in varied characters and situations. The locale is a small village in a Caribbean island, peopled by an indomitable albeit poor group whose strength to deal with their misfortunes is rooted in their belonging to the landscape and its history. Merle, the protagonist, appears paradoxically as both the embodiment of this strength and a deeply vulnerable woman, unhappy with her past and regretful of having lost contact with her daughter, now in Africa with her father. Her personal story, although not the center of the plot, is representative of the elements around which the narration revolves. The plot follows the development of an American foundation's research and aid plan for the village, which

brings three strangers into the community: a Jewish scholar, his wealthy wife, and a young research assistant. While the plot is too complex for an adequate summary in so short a space, a look at the two main female characters reveals interesting aspects of the use of the madness and suicide themes in the subversion of colonial/patriarchal views.

The two characters—Merle and the patrician American wife of the Jewish scholar—seem destined to literary fates similar to those of Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway. On the one hand, we have a black woman who has already broken the binds of sexual convention in London, losing her daughter and husband in the process, and stands on the brink of a mental breakdown; on the other hand there is an intelligent, cultured, rich, well-meaning white woman, accustomed to emotional and financial control. Their confrontation in the text moves the central issue away from the male/female polarization to the race/class dichotomy that characterizes both foreign interventions in Caribbean affairs and the ensuing relationship between foreign and Caribbean women.

As female representatives of the forces confronting each other in American/Caribbean relations, Merle and Harriet invert the results expected of such confrontations. As Merle, initially on the brink of madness (and perhaps suicide), moves purposefully towards control and the transcendence of her shattered past, Harriet moves from strength and power to a suicide brought about by the realization that some things are beyond her control. The reversal is ironic in that Harriet's power—once removed from its source in the American landscape—becomes ineffectual and self-destructive; whereas in the case of Merle, her contact with her past—the reaffirmation of her connection to the landscape—offers the power to transcend her circumstances.

Initially, they were “two women who had long been assailed by the sense of their uselessness, who had never found anything truly their own to do . . . and so had always had to look outside themselves to the person of the lover for definition . . . and for the chance . . . to exercise some small measure of power” (437); the end rewards the one who has transcended this need. The victor, however, is not Harriet—who has drowned herself after losing Saul—but Merle—who is on her way to Africa to demand her right to see her daughter. The political corollary, given the characters' status as representatives of their natural landscapes, emphasizes Caribbean self-sufficiency. Once more, a Caribbean author presents the Caribbean woman (Antoinette Cosway/Merle) as

triumphant over the foreign interveners (Rochester/Harriet) and the presentation is achieved through manipulation of the madness/suicide theme.

III

In contrast to these self-destructive acts of rebellion, Simone Schwarz-Bart celebrates the capacity for endurance of the peasant women of Guadeloupe in *Pluie et vent sur Telumée Miracle (The Bridge of Beyond, 1972)*. Subject to extreme poverty, these women struggle through life in anonymity with “no status and no ornament in this world”.¹³ Their greatest wealth is the ability to survive with their spirits intact, unbroken. They achieve their stature as women, not in the sense of middle class notions of accomplishment or rebellion but through their courage to go on in the face of overwhelming deprivation and abuse. Schwarz-Bart's treatment of the plight of these women, however, is not an idealization of poverty or even perseverance as such, since theirs is a hard-won struggle and triumph is by no means certain.¹⁴ Yet within the context of traditional peasant values and the harsh reality of their material circumstances, women like Telumée Lougandor rise above fatalism and resignation, bitterness and degradation to forge their own image of themselves—the unadorned beauty of self-reliance and dignity.

Telumée's story is told from the perspective of old age; the narrator stands in her “old woman's garden” at peace with herself after years of relentless struggle against defeat. Her own growth as a woman is like the garden she cultivates, a constant effort to control the terms of her own existence.¹⁵ She is inspired by the indomitable spirit of her grandmother Toussine, who was called Queen Without a Name because “she had not made a habit of sorrow” (14) in spite of great misfortune and despair. Telumée's own mother, Victory, is a woman who chases after the dream of love in one man after another, and finally abandons her two young daughters to pursue her passion for a seductive Carib from another part of the island. Telumée looks back on this as a disguised “blessing” since that is how she came to live with her grandmother Toussine in the village of Fond-Zombi, on the other side of the Bridge of Beyond. Under the protection of Queen Without a Name, she grows up with great love and self-respect.

Telumée's upbringing is based on the traditional folk wisdom of the peasants of Guadeloupe, passed on to her by her grandmother. The use of proverbs, folktales and popular songs is therefore fundamental to the structure of the narrative. As Bridget Jones points out, the author uses these traditional folk elements to project an authentic vision of peasant reality.¹⁶ Yet since most proverbs and folktales convey a characteristically fatalistic view of life, the use of this framework threatens to negate the validity of resistance and struggle. The wisdom of Telumée's grandmother is based on the austere reality of a people for whom suffering is a fact of life, but again as Jones notes, every expression of fatalism is balanced by an "affirmation of endurance".¹⁷

Her grandmother's characteristic attitude toward life is one of "veiled irony, the object of which was to convey to me that certain words were null and void, all very well to listen to but better forgotten" (30). Thus while the text indeed demonstrates the truth of much folk wisdom,¹⁸ it also contradicts the validity of some commonly held notions, especially those that express a negative view of the role of woman. The following exchange between Telumée and her future husband Elie is a case in point:

... it seemed to me the balance was in favor of the men, and that even in their fall there was still something of victory. They broke bones and wombs, then they left their own flesh and blood in misery as a crab leaves his pincers between your fingers. At this point in my reflections Elie would always say gravely:

'Man has strength, woman has cunning, but however cunning she may be her womb is there to betray her. It is her ruin.' (44-45)

Telumée's own life illustrates that although women often wear "garments woven of desertion and want" (95), they also show strength while men frequently fall by the wayside, lost in bitterness and confusion.¹⁹

Telumée discovers "what it is to be a woman" (109) when she marries Elie. Her grandmother warns her that when the bad times come she will have to find her "woman's walk and change to a valiant step" (80). During the early period of her marriage, she believes that she has found "her right place in life" (85), but her sense of fulfillment crumbles when the village of Fond-Zombi is hit by a bad winter and drought,

followed by unemployment. When Elie is no longer able to earn a living, he turns his bitterness and anger against Telumée; he begins to stay away from home and worse still starts to beat her. Toussine urges her to leave him, but Telumée holds on to the hope of recapturing their past happiness. She waits far too long, however, because in the end Elie brings another woman into their home and forces her to leave.

Grief-stricken, Telumée withdraws into a depression that lasts for several weeks, but with the help of her grandmother and neighbors she is able to begin a new life. Most importantly, she discovers the source of the strength that she will need in the difficult process of becoming a woman:

What really cured me were all the visits, all the attentions and little gifts people honoured me with when my mind came back from wherever it had been. Madness is contagious, and so my cure was everyone's, and my victory the proof that a Negro has seven spleens and doesn't give up just like that at the first sign of trouble. (115)

Able to see that her plight is not hers alone but related to that of all her people, she remains open to the possibilities of life in spite of the inevitable disappointments, losses and betrayals. In the years ahead, Telumée's life follows a pattern of fulfillment, pain and renewed strength. After each period of suffering and loss, she resumes her "woman's walk" with pride and determination. The failure of her marriage is followed by the death of her grandmother but this is also the beginning of her life as a "free woman". Telumée joins the "Brotherhood of the Displaced" in the mountain village of La Folie, where only the most destitute people of the island live—in solitude, "rejected" but "irreducible" (128). Penniless and alone, Telumée is forced into the "malediction" of the canefields, but she becomes "a person who had seen service—a woman, not a girl" (143). Her labor in the canefields proves that she is the equal of any man, so that when she finally decides to remarry she prefers to have her new husband come to her, to live in her own place under her own roof (143).

This time Telumée enters marriage prepared for the uncertainties and injustices that await her; when her husband Amboise is killed during a strike against the owners of the sugar cane factory, she becomes like her grandmother Toussine, a woman "with two hearts". In her old age, she is given the name Telumée Miracle (the Miracle

Woman) because, like her grandmother, she has risen above the endless wave of sorrow in order to show other people how to live, not through self-abnegation but through the example of her own endurance and struggle. At the end of her life she wanders through the marketplace of La Ramée looking for the face of her ancestor:

And all the faces are the same, and all are mine, and I go searching, and I keep walking around them till they are sold, bleeding, racked, alone. I shine my lamp into every dark corner, I go all over this strange market, and I see that heaven's gift to us is that we should have our heads thrust into, held down in, the murky water of scorn, cruelty, pettiness and treachery. But I also see that we are not drowned in it. We have struggled to be born and we have struggled to born again, and we have called the finest tree in our forests "resolute"—the strongest, the most sought after, the one that is cut down the most often. (169–170)

Telumée believes that through our struggle to live we achieve our highest measure; and her life is relevant to the struggle of all women, all people, since it shows that heroism and self-determination are possible even in the most limited circumstances.

IV

Telumée's tale of endurance, however, takes place outside of history as traditionally defined, and only indirectly reflects the role of historical events in shaping the adverse circumstances against which she must fight throughout her life.²⁰ The absence of concrete historical reference in Schwarz-Bart's novel sets her apart from authors such as Marie Chauvet and Albalucía Angel, for whom female destiny is intimately linked to Caribbean political history.

Marie Chauvet's *Amour, colère et folie* (Haiti, 1968) is an eloquent illustration of the role of sexuality as a "political force". The work is a trilogy of narrations disconnected in plot but connected by the theme of political repression seen for the most part through sexuality.

"Amour" is the story of Claire, a virgin spinster in love with her brother-in-law, plotting webs of domestic intrigue in the household she runs for her two sisters. Beyond this household there is a world of repressive terror conducted by Calédu, a sadistic militia officer who

revels in the sexual torture of women. It is a world that forces itself on Claire's at every moment, and places her and Calédu on an unavoidable confrontation course. When the confrontation comes—during a street revolt which coincides with Claire's attempted suicide—she kills him with the knife intended for herself.

"Colère" continues the political repression/sexuality theme in a story of a family dispossessed of its land and property by a Calédu-like figure who demands (and gets) the young daughter's body for his sadistic pleasure in return for the family's property and livelihood. The murder of the tyrant, arranged by the young woman's father, comes too late to save her or most of her family.

"Folie" repeats the theme in a Giradoux-like farce where several "mad" writers hide in terror from the "devils" that pursue them. Their seeming disconnection from reality—their inability, for example, to recognize the "devils" as the repressive Haitian militia—is used by Chauvet to paint a poignant picture of the impossibility of fighting the all-pervasive terror of such a society. Their arrest and execution for "political activities"—and the arrest and rape of two women incidentally connected with them—is presented in this context as too natural to be worthy of protest:

—Commandant, dit Marcia, je ne veux pas vous ennuyer et vous non plus, chef, mais hier au soir, des hommes sont venues dans notre cellule et ils nous ont violées.

—Oublie ce que tu as vu, entendu ou vécu en prison si tu ne veux pas que je t'arrache la langue, lui répondit froidement le commandant. (428)

The representation of the historical process in this text emphasizes individual helplessness before institutionalized terrorism. It could be said that the three parts of the text represents a movement away from the possibility of meaningful individual action (Claire's assassination of Calédu), through meaningless individual action (the assassination of the "gorilla" in "Colère"), to despair victimization, and surrender (the poets in "Folie").

Chauvet's main achievement in the text is that of personalizing the effects of terror on the individual; thus the importance of sexual violation as a constant theme in the trilogy. The historical process in *Amour, colère et folie* is viewed from within the psyches of individuals

who fear the repressive forces which constantly threaten to invade their inner world. In this context rape appears as the ultimate invasion, becoming the symbol of the violation of the most personal aspects of Haitian life. Claire's psyche is constantly being invaded by the cries of the people being tortured in a nearby prison. When her friend Dora is arrested and brutally violated by Calédu she no longer feels immune from the effects of terror; if rape is unavoidable and conducted by government forces (if there can be no redress through justice for this most intimate of violations) then no aspect of life is inviolable. The graphic description of Rose's submission to rape in "Colère" and the nonchalant announcement of the rape of Claire and Marcia in "Folie" reinforce the use of sexual violation as the metaphor for the rape of an entire nation by repressive forces.

The use of sexual violation as a metaphor for a repressive and exploitative historical process is made more poignant here by Chauvet's implicit comparison of the traditional helplessness of women in patriarchal societies to the helplessness of a population (male and female) which has lost the illusion of the inviolability of the individual. What Chauvet accomplishes through the stories of these characters prone to rape and senseless murder is the depiction of an irrational historical process, where the individuals resemble marionettes and rebellion seems futile.

We find a similar depiction of the historical process in Albalucía Angel's *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón*, a narration set during the "Violencia" period in Colombia. As seen through the eyes of Ana, a young girl whose adolescence coincides with this violent period, Colombian history emerges as an irrational wave which sweeps away the lives of young and old, innocent and guilty.

Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón is a novel in which history, filtered through Ana's consciousness, pervades the text. Ana's consciousness can be said not to exist apart from Colombia's violent civil wars in the 1950's. From the age of six, when the murder of Gaitán shocks her comfortable bourgeois childhood—because of the assassination of the political leader the tooth fairy doesn't come—until the arrest and murder of her friend Valeria in her young adulthood, Ana's consciousness cannot escape history and its consequences:

Hasta los niños tendrán que luchar como en el tiempo de las cruzadas.
Envuelta en la bandera tricolor, al pie de la muralla. Haciendo frente a

las ametralladoras y pondrán una placa en la Plaza de Bolívar: aquí ofrendó su sangre por la Patria y es la tercera y última vez que te digo que te vayas a cambiar el uniforme: ¡Ana!, si, señora, y salió desterrada de la cocina mientras Sabina y su mamá continuaba y tú Príncipe de la milicia celestial . . . (37)

The perspective of history in this text is very similar to that of Chauvet's *Amour, colère et folie*. In both texts, the individual's psyche is invaded by a political terrorism that marks even the most commonplace of daily activities:

La silla con la camisa siguió en el mismo sitio. Nada indicó el terror. El sudor frío que desató el comienzo de la visión definitiva: aquel derrumbe de esas cosas cotidianas como el ir por el pan o el cáminar del brazo por el parque . . . la felicidad y el árbol de guayaba son nada más que un espejismo . . . (224-227)

And it is not surprising then, that this terrorism is expressed in the text by senseless killing in general and violent rape in particular—the ultimate violations of the individual's integrity:

La policía política inicia su intervención con vejámenes, golpes e insultos. Después roba, incendia y asesina; a la postre viola, estrupa, y remata en actos nefandos . . . Más adelante se registra el caso monstruoso de violaciones colectivas cuando una sola mujer es arrojada a la tropa, con abierta incitación al delito por algunos oficiales . . . Las mujeres en miles y miles de casos deben pagar con el honor la cuota que le cobra la violencia, al extremo de que apenas se verifica asalto o comisión que las deje ilesas . . . (188-189)

For Angel, as for Chauvet, the relationship between the individual and the historical process is one determined primarily by gender, by the essential vulnerability of women to rape and torture under political terrorism. Thus, their depictions of the historical process emphasize the metaphor of the rape of the nation and the need for the destruction of the rapist as the first step towards a new beginning.

In Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* we find a systematic analysis of a historical experience different from this terrorism that characterizes those of Angel and Chauvet. The small village of Bournehills, where the novel is set, "might have been selected as the

repository of the history which reached beyond it to include the hemisphere north and south" (402). Like Merle, who seems to stand as representative of the landscape, it is a place despoiled, its substance taken, but a place whose "vital center remained intact", impressing the visitor with a "sense of life persisting amid that nameless and irrevocable loss" (5).

The strength of Bournehills comes, not surprisingly, from its connection to history. It had once been the setting of the only bit of history worth mentioning in Bourne Island: a slave rebellion under the leadership of Cuffee Ned, which managed to drive back the government forces in a fierce battle. As a result of this confrontation the former slaves lived for two years "as a nation apart, behind the high wall, independent, free" (102).

The story of Cuffee Ned becomes the symbol of Bournehills' pride; it sets the villagers apart from the rest of the inhabitants of Bourne Island as people solidly rooted in their proud past. Each year, they re-enact the revolt in the Bournehills masque during carnival, a quasi-ritual re-enactment whose purpose is to keep the spirit of the revolt alive, their duty as a people waiting, believing that "only an act on the scale of Cuffee's could redeem them" (402).

Their deep sense of history explains their endurance amid poverty and stagnation; and it is this sense of history which provides the strength that makes possible Merle's return from her breakdown and her renewed determination to carve her future out of the remnants of her past. At the end, she had learned the lesson of history that Saul had outlined during carnival:

Use history as your guide . . . Because many times, what one needs to know for the present—the action that must be taken if a people are to win their right to live, the methods to be used: some of them unpalatable, true, but again, there's usually no other way—has been spelled out in past events. That it's all there is only they would look . . . (315)

For Merle, understanding the lessons of history is the starting point of a new life in which she re-elaborates her goals and turns from passivity to action; thus, we find her at the end about to embark on a voyage to Africa to reclaim her daughter, promising to return and possibly run for political office.

V

The sense of history—and personal fate—as incomplete, unfinished, marks the stories discussed in this study. Thus it is significant that many of these tales leave their heroines literally standing on the threshold of change: Antoinette Cosway about to leap into the void; Tee and Merle boarding the airplanes that will take them to confront their fates in London and Africa, respectively; Claire sitting on the steps of Mrs. Phillips' house, trying to take in her new sense of womanhood; Claire, covered with Caledu's blood, looking out the window at her awakening town. Lack of closure is perhaps the only suitable ending for these lives poised on the threshold of becoming.

For these women, crossing the symbolic threshold between the past and future must involve a conscious decision to move beyond prescribed roles and define their own place in the history and culture of the Caribbean. Their stories represent a variety of responses to the challenges that confront Caribbean women, but they share a common emphasis on the relationships within the family that tend to perpetuate the prejudices of class, race and gender associated with the colonial past. This focus on the need for inner changes that can make outer (social) changes possible adds an important dimension to the problem of replacing our colonial/patriarchal past with an independent present.

The emphasis of Caribbean women writers on the need for inner change is accompanied by the quest for a redefinition of power, one that rejects all forms of domination. For the process of decolonization is not complete unless it includes a struggle against sexism as well as racism and class exploitation. In their literature, they question the traditional roles of women, and the efforts of their female heroines to gain control over their own lives is the first step towards an integration of women in the process of social transformation and cultural expression in the Caribbean.

NOTES

1. In the 1980's several initiatives point to the efforts at changing the conditions of women in the Caribbean. The Sistern Movement is an excellent example, as was the Seminar on "Women and Social Production in the Caribbean" sponsored jointly by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, England, and the Centro

de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña (CEREP) in 1980. See their volume *Women and Social Production in the Caribbean* (Rio Piedras: CEREP, 1980).

2. See complete bibliography of works cited following endnotes. All page references to the narratives by Caribbean women writers discussed in this essay will appear in parentheses following citations.

3. See Gordon K. Lewis, "The Latin Enclave", in *The Growth of the Modern West Indies* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 289-307.

4. See Richard Price (ed), *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Baltimore and New York: Johns Hopkins University, 1979), 262.

5. E. Ann Kaplan, "Patriarchy and the Male Gaze in Cuckor's *Camille*" and *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York and London: Methuen, 1983), 47.

6. The literature of Puerto Rico is a case in point. Multiple examples can be found in the works of Pedro Juan Soto, Luis Rafael Sánchez, René Marqués, and others.

7. Léon-Francois Hoffman, *Essays on Haitian Literature* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1984), 18.

8. Ibid.

9. Francis Wyndham, "Introduction" to *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 1968), 10-11.

10. Traditional feminist criticism emphasizes sisterhood (the common oppression of women regardless of class and race—the theme of Rosario Ferré's "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres"—). In the Caribbean, differences of race and class have made such sisterhood difficult since exploitation of women by women has been a common occurrence.

11. María M. Solá, "Habla femenina e ideología feminista en *Papeles de Pandora* de Rosario Ferré" in *Subversión de cánones: la escritora puertorriqueña ante la crítica*, L. Paravisini (ed.) (New York: Peninsula, forthcoming), p. 153.

12. Ibid.

13. See the English translation by Barbara Bray, *The Bridge of Beyond*.

14. Merle Hodge addresses the criticism of Schwarz-Bart's treatment of peasant life in "Social Conscience or Exoticism? Two Novels from Guadeloupe", *Revista Interamericana*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (Fall 1974), 391-401.

15. Gardening as an expression of women's power and creativity (especially for those women who have no other means of artistic expression) is dealt with in the title essay of Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 231-243, and Michelle Cliff's *Claiming An Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Watertown, Mass.: s.n., 1980), 52-57.

16. "Introduction", *The Bridge of Beyond*, xiii-xiv.

17. Jones, op. cit., xiv.

18. Ibid, xiii.

19. The subtle but pervasive irony of the text is not just limited to male/female relations but is evident throughout, and is undoubtedly related to the strategies Blacks have often used: "The Negro's ingenuity in forging happiness in spite of everything . . . all the more ingenious through doing all these magic tricks, dancing and drumming simultaneously, at once both wind and sail", *The Bridge of Beyond*, (73).

20. Some critics consider Schwarz-Bart's novel "a-historical", yet Telumée's struggle is clearly related to the collective history of her people, as her search for the "face of

the ancestor" suggests. Accordingly, Merle Hodge points out that Telumée's story "draws upon the West Indian tradition of black resistance", cf. *Revista Interamericana* (Fall 1974), 395.

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