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COMING TO African and African-American poetry after long exposure to European and Euro-American poetry, I was surprised that most poems about women (no matter what the author’s sex) are not about the beloved, but about mother. There is also a striking consistency in the aspects of mother which are described and in the tone taken towards her: a tone at the opposite pole from Euro-American “Momism.”

Although many anthologies include both African and African-American poetry (and sometimes Caribbean poetry as well), very little theoretical work has been done on comparative black literature (except studies of Négritude) since Jahn’s Neo-African Literature (1969) and The Militant Black Writer by Mercer Cook and Stephen Henderson (1969). (Lloyd Brown’s “The Black Aesthetic and Comparative Criticism” is the only recent work which examines the premises and prognosis for comparative black literary studies.) And despite the current interest in women’s studies, very little analysis has been done of black women characters in black poetry. Most of the work has concentrated on the genre of fiction or on women as authors. Since there is so little previous work in the area, I will be explicit about the premises and perimeters of this article:

a) It assumes a cultural continuum between African and African-American expectations and perceptions of women much like the cultural continua between African and African-American music, family structure, religion, and cuisine;
b) it does not assume direct influence from African to African-American poetry or vice versa;
c) it is confined to the genre of poetry and (though oral poetry is a rich source of images of women) to written poetry;
d) it does not include the poetry of Northern Africa or poetry written in indigenous African languages;
e) it includes works by both male and female poets because my emphasis is on poetic images and not on a poet’s gender;

f) it draws on my previous work on women characters in African and African-American poetry and on "The Black Woman in Afro-Caribbean Poetry";

    g) it concentrates on contemporary African-American poetry (with some references to the poetry which preceded it), but it encompasses both modern and contemporary African poetry because the history of written African poetry is briefer (Senghor, the grand old man of African poetry is still writing) and because stylistic, thematic, and tonal differences among African poems depend more on poets' indigenous and metropolitan literary heritages and political views than on adherence to modernist or post-modernist poetic conventions;

    h) it draws on The Great Mother for its grounding in archetypal theory—especially for ideas about earth mother, the relationship between fertility and sexuality, and the spiritual aspects of the feminine;

    i) it draws on Tanner's "Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans" for its cross-cultural basis and its ideas about the structural centrality of mother in African and African-American cultures.

There is a long tradition of African-American poems about mothers going back to Frances-Ellen Harper's "The Slave Auction" and including Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son" with its resonant staircase metaphor. Most of these poems present poor and pious women whose outstanding characteristics are self-sacrifice, hard work, and fierce maternal love. These images function as mascons (massive concentrations of black experiential energy) and are saturated (to use Henderson's language again) in the African-American experience. In the same way that Richard Wright called the Negro "America's metaphor," we can call these images metaphors for salient aspects of the African-American experience—especially suffering, faith, endurance, loyalty, and song.

Mothers continue to appear in more recent African-American poetry, though in somewhat altered form. Gwendolyn Brooks probably began


the realistic treatment of mothers. Her persona include Jessie Mitchell’s vindictive, light-skinned mother comforting herself with the contrast between her “exquisite yellow youth” and the heartaches she foresees for her dark-skinned daughter; the traumatized and passive mother of Emmett Till; the querulous speaker in “the mother” (the title seems ironic since we only know of her abortions); and the pathetic mother in “what shall I give my children who are poor?”

Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Shirley Williams, Carolyn Rodgers, and Audre Lorde have all, in their very different vocabularies and timbres, written poems about mothers. Clifton’s “Admonitions” is one of the few humorous treatments of the subject—perhaps because Clifton is writing about herself:

children
when they ask you
why is your mama so funny
say
she is a poet
she don’t have no sense* 9

When Clifton writes about her own mother (as she does often in her autobiographical An Ordinary Woman), both the diction and the tone are different:

i will be forty
my mother once was forty.

my mother died at forty four,
a woman of sad countenance
leaving behind a girl
awkward as a stork.
my mother was thick,
her hair was a jungle and
she was very wise
and beautiful and sad 10

Carolyn Rodgers’s long, colloquial “It is Deep” (which should be read with “Jesus was Crucified, or It Must be Deep”), Shirley Williams’s “Ruise,” and Audre Lorde’s “Black Mother Woman” are poems about the relationship between mother and daughter. All three poems owe something to the contemporary feminist focus on the mother-daughter relationship, but, as Mary Helen Washington indicates 11 the mother-daughter conflict is a thematic constant in fiction by and about black women. In these poems, daughters interpret their mothers through the lens of adulthood and, despite the mothers’ emotional reserve and anger and the daughters’ very different values and ex-

periences, the daughters honor their mothers unstintingly. The Rodgers poem is too long to quote in its entirety, but, after wittily setting forth the religious, political, and experiential distance between her and her mother, Rodgers ends:

> My mother, religious-negro, proud of having waded through a storm, is very obviously, a sturdy Black bridge that I crossed over, on

In the "Ruise" section of "I Sing This Song for Our Mothers" Williams writes:

> the long waisted body the long straight neck will soon disappear in folds of aging flesh but not age not added flesh not even death could wipe away what the strength of your love and anger trace in the still deepening earth tones of your face.

> I have no daughters to be the woman you are and your own is still becoming

And Lorde, in her complex, accurate, and masterful poem, writes:

> I cannot recall you gentle yet through your heavy love I have become an image of your once delicate flesh split with deceitful longings.

> When strangers come and compliment me your aged spirit takes a bow jingling with pride but once you hid that secret in the center of furies hanging me with deep breasts and wiry hair with your own split flesh and long suffering eyes buried in myths of little worth.

> But I have peeled away your anger down to the core of love and look mother I Am a dark temple where your true spirit rises beautiful

Lorde writes about herself as a mother in “Progress Report” and “As I Grow Up Again” and compares and contrasts mothering styles in “Dear Toni Instead of a Letter of Congratulation Upon Your Book and Your Daughter Whom You Say You Are Raising To Be a Correct Little Sister” (for Toni Cade Bambara). Several poems in Lorde’s latest volume also focus on mother. They are more dense than the earlier ones and often set in Africa like the cryptic, but haunting, “Coniagui Women” with its coded allusions to birth, intercourse and incest:

The Coniagui women
wear their flesh like war
bear children who have eight days
to choose their mothers
it is up to the children
who must decide to stay.

Boys burst from the raised loins
twisting and shouting
from the bush secret
they run
beating the other women
avoiding the sweet flesh
hidden
near their mother’s fire
but they must take her blood as a token
the wild trees have warned them
beat her and you will be free
on the third day
they creep up to her cooking pot
bubbling over the evening’s fire
and she feeds them
yam soup
and silence.

“Let us sleep in your bed” they whisper

but she has mothered before them.
She closes her door.

They become men.15

All the poems I’ve discussed are by women, and one would expect that poems about specifically female experiences like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, and menopause would be written by

women. So far African-American poetry has been silent on menstruation and menopause. Brooks's "The mother" is the only poem which addresses abortion. And most of the poems about pregnancy and childbirth have been written by masterpoet Michael Harper. Although, as Robert Stepto points out, Harper has written poems which celebrate his wife's archetypal role at the center of a cozy hearth-home and poems about the first flutters of pregnancy, his most powerful and disturbing poems about her depict the pain and anguish she endured when two of their sons died soon after birth. In "Nightmares Again" Shirl re-lives her first grief:

the uterus contracts,
squeezed walnut or prune;
the breasts ooze
useless milk
in ache of the lost child
out of her body
out of the world
in a fine powdered dust.
Birth wrecks in her teeth,
wavering each night
to its endless, gnashing conclusion. . . .

In "Deathwatch" we see a valiant Shirl after the death of her third son:

Twitching in the cactus
hospital gown, a loon
on hairpin wings,
she tells me how
her episiotomy
is perfectly sewn
and doesn't hurt
while she sits in a pile
of blood
which once cleaned
the placenta
my third son should be in. . . .

Harper insists on Shirl's vulnerability. These poems don't have the ironic distance of Brooks's realistic poetic images of mother nor do they ascribe to her the piety and resilience early African-American poetic images associated with mother. In vivid language, matter-of-fact diction, and staccato lines Harper creates his version of African-American mother suffering. He has also written poems about his mother-in-law who, like his wife, has endured hospital pain. In "After the Operations" he praises her and reminds us of the praise poems of Rodgers, Williams, Jordan, and Lorde:

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If I credit
her I credit you
with workmanship
all your own—
nerve endings
you’ve passed on:
in those scars
are foottracks of our love.19

The only contemporary African-American poem in which mother is
criticized is Mari Evans’s “To Mother and Steve.” The speaker is a drug
addict trying to kick the habit and “All I wanted/was your/love”20 is
the muted reproach in its irregularly repeated refrain. Although the
African-American drama of the 1960’s often subjected mothers to scald­
ing criticism as emasculators of their husbands and sons, wig-wearing
victims of white notions of female beauty, and foolishly pious obstacles
to black political and cultural revolution, the poetic images of mother
remained overwhelmingly positive. Don L. Lee’s “Big Momma” (a
term of affection and respect) is an excellent example in its tribute to a
retired domestic’s folk insight into the canyon between nationalist
rhetoric and ghetto practice:

at sixty-eight
she moves freely, is often right
and when there is food
eats joyously with her own
real teeth.21

One of the most noticeable differences between African and African-
American ideas of mother is that aspects of nature are often person­
ified as female in African cosmologies. In “The Echoes” the South
African poet, Mazisi Kunene, mentions “maternal sun.”22 The Sene­
galese poet, Leopold Senghor, writes of night “draped in her long gown
of milk.”23 Christopher Okigbo, a Nigerian poet, begins “Heavens­
gate”:

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand;
before your watery presence,
a prodigal
leaning on an oil bean
lost in your legend24

stream; the oil bean, or palm tree, is one of the totems of her worship.
Another distinction is the identification between mother and Africa—especially for poets in exile or at war. The Angolan poet, Viriato da Cruz, personifies Africa as a woman in “Black Mother” and considers himself (and all black people whether in Africa or the diaspora) children of the same mother. Nigerian poet Francesca Pereira’s “Mother Dark” begins “Mother Land” which makes the identification explicit and, after capsulizing colonialism and neo-colonialism into seven brief stanzas, ends with “Mother Dark” crying as some of her children oppress others. Senghor’s “You Held the Black Face” is more subtle: a flesh and blood woman merges, imperceptibly, with an African landscape:

You held the black face of the warrior between your hands
Which seemed with fateful twilight luminous
From the hill I watched the sunset in the bays of your eyes.
When shall I see my land again, the pure horizon of your face?
When shall I sit at the table of your dark breasts?

The Yoruba proverb says, “mother is gold.” Most of the images of mother in contemporary African poetry derive their emotional intensity from traditional culture’s reverence for mother: a reverence cemented by two or three years of breast feeding, mothers carrying infants very close to their bodies, the emotional centrality of mother in a polygamous home, mother’s agricultural role as producer of the food her children eat, no demands to “cut the apron strings” in order to achieve adult status, and fertility as an honored attribute. These ideas are brilliantly exemplified in Birago Diop’s classic poem “Viaticum” where the traditional rural mother uses sacrificial animal blood to invoke the ancestors’ power on her Europe-bound son. Notice that the mother has spiritual powers attributed to her and that the educated persona is not ashamed of or smugly superior to his illiterate mother’s actions:

Since then I go
I follow the pathways
the pathways and roads
beyond the sea and even farther,
beyond the sea and beyond the beyond;
And whenever I approach the wicked,
the Men with black hearts,
whenever I approach the envious,
the Men with black hearts
before me moves the Breath of the Ancestors.

“For My Mother,” by Senegalese poet David Diop, pays tribute to her care during his recurrent bouts with tuberculosis:

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When drifting days come back to me,  
Ragged days with a narcotic taste;  
When the word becomes aristocrat  
To overcome the emptiness  
Behind closed blinds;  
Then Mother I think of you,  
Of your beautiful eyelids burned by the years,  
Of your smile on my hospital nights,  
Your smile that told of old and vanquished miseries.  

The Angolan poet, Agostinho Neto, begins "farewell at the hour of parting" by directly addressing his mother, but the parenthesis which follows alerts us to the nexus between his mother and others and, perhaps, between her and Africa itself:

My Mother  
(all black mothers  
whose sons have gone)  
you taught me to wait and hope  
as you hoped in difficult hours  
But life killed in me that mystic hope  
.................  
We are going in search of light  
your children Mother  
(all black mothers  
whose sons have gone)  
They go in search of life.

Oswald Mtshali's "The Abandoned Bundle" is in sharp contrast to these praise poems about mother. In it a woman puts her newborn in the garbage heap and the speaker, too far away and shocked to help, sees dogs tearing at the infant's body and marvels at the mother's "innocent" face and "pure" heart. Mtshali is not merely concerned with limning a dramatically aberrant case. He is using it to symbolize the chasm between traditional African ideals and the decadence he sees in urban South Africa where the old, life-affirming, family-centered cultural patterns survive in attenuated form—if at all.

The African emphasis on fertility adds an extra dimension of poignancy to the poems (all by men) on childlessness, miscarriage, and stillbirth. Wole Soyinka's "A Cry in the Night" is a sympathetic poem in this category:

As who would break  
Earth, grief  
In savage pounding, moulds  
Her forehead where she kneels.

Such tender stalk is earthed
In haste. A stricken snake, she drags
Across the gulf, re-enters to the retch
Of grieving wombs. Night harshly folds her
Broken as her after birth.32

Kitobbe’s “To the Childless,” which begins, “You are the cold nests / In which the migrant bird lays no eggs,”33 is an amazingly harsh one.

There are also two poems about mothers and abikus (children born over and over to the same mother only to die in early childhood); both are by Nigerian authors. John Pepper Clark’s “Abiku” is an entreaty to the child to stay this time:

Then step in, step in and stay
For her body is tired,
Tired her milk going sour
Where many more mouths gladden the heart34

Wole Soyinka’s “Abiku” speaks in the voice of a naughty and willful child, impervious to the mother’s anguish:

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time35

There are few African poems which portray a woman’s rage and none which reveals her subconscious as deftly as “Rhythm of the Pestle” by the Ugandan poet, Nichard Ntiru. Notice how he reverses the archetypal image of mother as nourisher: this woman imagines murder as she pounds grain:

During the aerial suspension
Of the pendant pestle
the twice-asked, twice-disappointed girl
thinks of the suitor that didn’t come
          . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
of her bridal bed
that vanished with the ephemeral dream,
of her twin firstlings
that will never be born
and her weltering hands
grip, grip rivet hard
and downright down
comes the vengeance pestle
          . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Now the grain jumps, reluctantly,
each time lower and lower,
smiling the half-white smile
of the teething baby glad to be crushed. . .36

There are only three African women poets: Noemia de Sousa, Marina Gashe, and Frances Pereira (though Ama Aidoo has also written occasional poetry). None of them is prolific; none of them is autobiographical. Their poems about mothers ignore the archetypal copula between mother and the land and the mystical overtones of mother’s love and concentrate instead on the rigorous physical labor rural African women perform. In “The Village,” the Kenyan Marina Gashe, describes:

Young wives like donkeys
From cock crow to setting sun
Go about their timeless duties
Their scraggy figures like bows set in a row
Plod up and down the rolling village farms
With loads on their backs
And babies tied to their bellies

Stirring up the soil with hands and knives
Like chickens looking for worms. 37

And Noemia de Sousa, an engaged Mozambican poet, sketches her “forest sister” in “Appeal.” 38 The woman, “leashed with children and submission . . . / One child on her back, another in her womb / —always, always, always!” makes daily treks to the city to sell charcoal. The speaker mourns losing the “comrade” she calls her “heroic sister” (her death has been foreshadowed by an ominous purple bloom on the seringa plant), but takes comfort in her burial in the soil of mother Africa.

Since Africans esteem mothers, it is not surprising to find poems to grandmothers. One example of this kind of poem celebrates the way a grandmother indulges her spoiled grandson. “To the Anxious Mother” by the Mozambican poet, Valente Malangatana, is more striking. It describes the grandmother’s pivotal role at childbirth and, in colloquial language, makes her spiritual aspect explicit, too:

But when I emerged
From the place where you sheltered me so long

the first kiss was my grandmother’s.
And she took me at once to the place
where they kept me, hidden away
everyone was forbidden to enter my room
because everyone smelt bad

But grandmother, who seemed like a madwoman,
always looking and looking again
because the flies came at me
and the mosquitoes harried me
God who also watched over me
was my old granny’s friend. 39
(By using “friend” rather than “worshipper” or “disciple” Malangatana suggests a parity between God and his grandmother.)

Motherhood and sexuality are sometimes linked in African poetry: a connection that may seem strange to one socialized to strict separation of those two ideas. Romantic love is a new-ish idea in Africa where marriages traditionally join families (not individuals), and where children are the reason for marriage (not love, companionship, or sex). Emphasis on a woman’s breasts and hips, erotic as it may appear to a Western reader of David Diop’s “Rama Kam,” for example, draws attention to her child-bearing potential. What is being celebrated is woman’s closeness to the earth (the repository of the ancestral spirits); her biological connection with and personification of the rhythms of birth, growth, and death; and her embodiment of traditional African culture in a world increasingly besieged by Western mores. The South African poet, Dennis Brutus, imagines a beloved in maternal terms— without neurotic overtones—in this expert, exquisite poem:

Kneeling before you for a moment
Slipped quite unthinkingly into this stance
—for heart, head and spirit in a single movement
responded thus to some stray facet
of prismatic luminous self
as one responds with total rhythm in the dance—
I knelt

and answering, you pressed my face against your womb
and drew me to a safe and still oblivion,
shut out the knives and teeth; boots, bayonets and knuckles;
so, for the instant posed, we froze to an eternal image
became unpersoned and unageing symbols
of humbled and vulnerable wonder
enfolded by a bayed and resolute maternalness.  

Madonna and child, lady and knight, and Pietà are among the “un-ageing symbols” which echo in this extraordinary poem.

AFTER READING The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype, I hoped Neumann’s cross-cultural study could provide the key to the similarities I sensed in African and African-American poems about mother—similarities which were hard to describe because they depend not on syntax, structure, imagery, or diction but on how frequent poems about mother are, and how often the mothers are praised. Neumann’s work is useful. Applying his ideas about the “positive elementary character” of the feminine archetype to modern and contemporary African poetry deepens and clarifies one’s reading of the two most effective African


41. Neumann, p. 120.
poems about mother—Birago Diop’s “Viaticum” and Dennis Brutus’s “Kneeling before you . . .,” and I now see that they derive as much of their power from their archetypal resonance as from the technical mastery of Diop and Brutus. However, poems about the “instinctual mystical” of “birth, menstruation, conception, pregnancy, sexuality, climacteric, and death” are not frequent in Africa; and only Michael Harper writes extensively about birth, conception, and pregnancy in African-American poetry. Neither African nor African-American poetry makes extensive use of “the central symbols which constellate female domination inside the family”: bed, house, and table (or hearth). Harper provides a counter-example, again, as we see from this dedication to his wife, Shirl:

the hearth of this house
is this woman, the strength of the bread
in her hands, the meat in her marrow
and of her blood.

Surprisingly, neither African nor African-American poetry makes extensive use of symbols like milk, moon, blood, and water which Neumann associates with the archetypal great mother. Poets seem to prefer direct statement or their private patterns of imagery.

Neumann’s work is grounded in depth psychology which makes it heady reading to the uninitiated. A less esoteric anthropological essay, “Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and Among Black Americans,” helps one interpret the frequency with which mothers occur in African and African-American poetry, the emphasis on mothers’ moral and emotional strength, and the timbre in which mothers are described. Tanner directs our attention to the high esteem for mothers in these societies, the “initiative, assertiveness, autonomy, and devisiveness” expected of them, and the expectation that adult heterosexual love will be “less affectively intense” than the mother-child bond.

We can then see all the poems to mother as a cultural elaboration of this structurally central figure. Tanner’s article is also useful because it juxtaposes African and African-American ideas about mother and gives support to my contention about a continuum of African values.

One of the most noticeable differences between African and African-American poetic presentations of mother is that while both depict her as wise, the Africans are usually tender and affectionate and the African-Americans often cloak their love in stern reserve. If poetry were only realistic, we could ascribe the difference to facts like chattel slavery, egal segregation, and un-equal opportunity. But poetry also reveals the
archetype, the wish, and the dream. Lee has written about the prevalence of the wicked step-mother in folktales from sub-Saharan Francophone Africa and my knowledge of African-American gospel music reveals a gallery of tender mothers there. Perhaps the next step is a comparative study of folklore about African women.

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