

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Family Ties: Africa as Mother/Fatherland in Neo Slave Narratives

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/17b2j79h>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 28(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Holloran, VivianNun

Publication Date

2000

DOI

10.5070/F7281016582

Copyright Information

Copyright 2000 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Family Ties: Africa as Mother/Fatherland in Neo Slave Narratives

Vivian Nun Halloran

Three contemporary Caribbean novels about slavery, or neo-slave narratives, Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River*, Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, and André Schwarz-Bart's *A Woman Named Solitude*, trace the birth of Afro-Caribbean self-awareness through the New World slave characters' acceptance of their limited connection to Africa as manifested through their interpersonal relationship with their mothers or (adopted) fathers. All three texts feature nuclear family units shaped by the Middle Passage and composed of an African mother, a European father, a mixed blood child, and an adoptive African father figure. This particular configuration, when read metaphorically, portrays Africa as a gender-specific parental figure to the slaves of the New World.¹ The complex family dynamics in Phillips's, Condé's, and Schwarz-Bart's novels critique European imperialism and chronicle the genealogy for the Afro-Caribbean population. At the same time, *Crossing the River*, *I, Tituba*, and *A Woman Named Solitude* lay claim to a cultural continuity that still links Afro-Caribbean people to their African ancestors.

In these Caribbean neo-slave narratives written in the latter half of the twentieth century, Africa plays a double role as both original homeland and parental figure to the Afro-Caribbean population. Anne McClintock contends that "despite their myriad differences, nations are symbolically figured as domestic genealogies," and demonstrates how the family trope works in the context of nationalism:

The family offered an indispensable metaphoric figure by which national difference could be shaped into a single historical genesis narrative. Yet a curious paradox emerged. The family as a *metaphor* offered a single genesis narrative for national history while, at the same time, the family as an *institution* became void of history and excluded from national power. The family became, at one and the same time, both the *organizing figure* for national history and its *antithesis*.²

The national history these three novels re-tell is that of the Caribbean, not of Africa. Therefore, the genealogy they trace assigns this metaphoric parental role to the continent. Given the inherent instability of slave family units in the New World, and the many pregnancies that resulted from African women being raped during the Middle Passage, *Crossing the River*, *I, Tituba*, *Black Witch of Salem* and *A Woman Named Solitude* reimagine the nuclear family in such a way as to replace the absent white anonymous father with an adoptive African one.

McClintock notes that "All nationalisms are gendered; all are invented; and all are dangerous—dangerous not in Eric Hobsbawm's sense of having to be opposed but in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence."³ While they assign both male and female gender roles to Africa, these three novels' texts gender the emerging Caribbean nations as female. Although McClintock argues that "women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency,"⁴ Phillips, Condé, and Schwarz-Bart deviate from this pattern and expressly credit maternal resistance to oppression with shaping Caribbean identity, as I will show later.

To the people of the Caribbean, Africa is both a source of comfort and inspiration as well as an example for resisting oppression. Stuart Hall has pointed out the necessity of recognizing the important role that Africa has played in shaping the societies in the Caribbean region.

Everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background, must sooner or later come to terms with this African presence. . . . But whether it is, in this sense, an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense, return, is more open to doubt. The original "Africa" is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, "normalizes: and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the "primitive, unchanging past." Africa must at last be reckoned with, by Caribbean people. But it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered.⁵

Along with the French André Schwarz-Bart, Caribbean writers, Caryl Phillips and Maryse Condé reckon with the African presence in the islands by writing historical novels about slavery which avoid "normalizing" Africa.⁶ Instead of characterizing the continent simply as the monolithic source of Caribbean identity, these authors create a picture of Africa as multiple and contradictory in and of itself. *Crossing the River, I, Tituba*, and *A Woman Named Solitude* figure the root of the contemporary African presence in the Caribbean as a cultural tradition of resistance learned from rebellious African mothers as well as an oral tradition of story-telling passed on by African fathers, whether actual or adoptive.

In "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite proposes the category of "literature of reconnection" to describe those texts displaying "a recognition of the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as a root—living, creative, and still part of the main."⁷ *Crossing the River, I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, and *A Woman Named Solitude* seek to reconnect not with contemporary Africa, but rather with those cultural traditions that African slaves passed down to their Caribbean children as their only heritage. The genre of historical novel is particularly appropriate for both this "reconnection" and "reckoning" with Africa because, as Hall reminds us,

The past continues to speak to us. But it is no longer a simple, factual "past," since our relation to it is, like the child's relation to the mother, always-already "after the break." It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth.⁸

Since the past itself is no longer "simple," neither are these novels, and therefore Phillips, Condé and Schwarz-Bart incorporate elements of the fantastic and the mythical into their fictional narratives which disrupt any sense of verisimilitude in the texts.⁹ In representing history these authors avoid making the type of truth claims implied by historiographers but rather emphasize how any account of an event is shaped by artificial constraints such as chronology, order, and cause and effect.

The depictions of both strength and compassion in *Crossing the River, I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, and *A Woman Named*

Solitude challenge traditional notions of gender and parenting roles. Phillips, Condé, and Schwarz-Bart associate African mothers in their respective novels not with nurturing and tenderness but with violent action. Likewise, they characterize African father figures as the repositories of communal memory. These neo-slave narratives' depiction of Africa as mother/fatherland speaks more to the New World's desire to project its own vision of the Africa of old into contemporary Caribbean society than it does to any impetus to truly connect with contemporary Africa. By setting these texts during the time of slavery, Phillips, Condé and Schwarz-Bart acknowledge that any recognition of the African presence in the Caribbean is inherently one-sided. Hall contends that "to *this* 'Africa,' which is a necessary part of the Caribbean imaginary, we can't literally go home again."¹⁰ With the one exception of Phillips' unnamed Father Africa, who sells his children into slavery but himself remains in Africa, the African characters in these novels also know they are permanently stranded in this new world. Their respective (and gendered) reactions to that knowledge influence their children's sense of self as Caribbean, not connected to an Africa they have never seen.

The gender of the African parent determines whether or not a character develops feelings of affection towards his or her New World children. Instead of portraying the extended family units more common in Africa, these novels present a revisionist version of the European nuclear family made up of a father, mother and child. *Crossing the River, I, Tituba, and A Woman Named Solitude* challenge the gender roles usually assigned in the nuclear family by associating the fathers with caring and nurturing while the mother figures engage in violent acts of retribution against their oppressors. Instead of merely avoiding the patriarchal stereotypes about women that Western versions of the nuclear family unit perpetuate—such as the weak but loving mother who knows nothing of the world and serves as a refuge from it for her loved ones—the families envisioned by Phillips, Condé and Schwarz-Bart allow the male parent to entirely take over the maternal function. This process of male appropriation of the female gender role can be read as a performance of drag, according to Judith Butler:

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that "imitation" is at the heart of the *heterosexual* project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imi-

tation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. That it must repeat this imitation, that it sets up pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences in order to produce and consecrate its own claim on originality and propriety, suggests that heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome, that its effort to become its own idealizations can never be finally or fully achieved, and that it is consistently haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself.¹¹

Imitation in these novels is not one-sided. The female African characters, having been once victimized through rape during the Middle Passage, invest themselves with traditionally male attributes as a result. They challenge the authority of their white masters by either running away from the plantations or by resorting to violence to defend themselves from further sexual attacks. The pattern that emerges in these three texts' depiction of Africa as "origin" is not only of the continent as merely motherland or fatherland but rather as a *strong* mother and *gentle* father simultaneously.

Condé and Schwarz-Bart convey an image of Africa as an unwilling mother-figure to the Afro-Caribbean population by initially embodying the continent as feminine and therefore vulnerable. Both authors insist on the physical beauty of the African mothers, Abena and Bayangumay, prior to their enslavement and emphasize the bodily toll that life in the New World takes upon them. This idealized view of the past is necessarily partial—it downplays the role that some Africans themselves had in selling captives and prisoners of war to European slavers. Once the African characters have spent some time in the Caribbean, both men and women devise different strategies for rebelling against their enforced fate: slavery.

The Caribbean islands themselves also exact a heavy toll on the African mothers: together, the hot and humid climate, the heavy workload and the unwanted pregnancies weaken both Abena and Bayangumay. The protagonist of *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* says that upon arriving in Barbados, her mother, Abena, "could not have been more than sixteen years old at the time and was beautiful to behold with her jet black skin and high cheekbones subtly

marked with tribal scars" (1). Tituba's view of her mother as she might have been when setting foot on the island is an idealized reconstruction owing more to the daughter's pride in her mother's physical attributes than to any basis in fact, for Tituba the narrator never acknowledges how she learned of Abena's experience during the Middle Passage. In Schwarz-Bart's *A Woman Named Solitude*, Bayangumay's master, Monsieur Mortier, claims she "had never got used to her new life. In less than four years this young girl, hardly more than a child, had turned into one of those ghastly old hags, the plague of the plantations, who bring in little more than the cost of their daily mash" (73). By emphasizing the decrepitude that slavery has caused in Bayangumay, Schwarz-Bart implies that she must have once been a beautiful young girl. Both descriptions initially emphasize the African mother figure's youth and inexperience, thus conveying an infantilized view of Africa. The male African characters in all three novels, in contrast, are adults from the beginning, thus implying a narrative equation that associates the male gender with maturity but the female gender with impetuosity.

Although the narrator of the frame narrative in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* committed the grievous error of selling his children into slavery, he shows remarkable contrition and continues to worry about them long after the fact. Instead of betraying their kin as does Phillips's Father Africa, Condé's and Schwarz-Bart's male African characters rescue their wives/daughters by showing them affection which somewhat mitigates the horrors of life in bondage. Condé's and Schwarz-Bart's novels feature African father figures who have also lived through the Middle Passage, but the texts are silent about these character's personal trials during the voyage. Whereas the female characters in these texts are clearly identified as victims, the male characters' silence implies their heroic endurance. A suicidal Ashanti, Yao regains his will to live once he begins looking after Abena, who had been raped by a white sailor. His affection restores Abena's health and he loves Tituba as his own daughter. Thus, Yao's heroism ensures not only his own survival, but also that of Abena and her Caribbean daughter. Schwarz-Bart's *Solitude* features an older Mandingo maroon, Maimouni, who has not only personally escaped from slavery but also acts as lover and father figure to the protagonist, Solitude. Yao's and Maimouni's roles in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* and *A Woman Named Solitude* are more symbolic than actual since they

share no blood ties with Tituba and Solitude, the female protagonists whom they look after. While the men's gentleness towards the women allows them all to survive, the female African characters are the ones who steel themselves and take up arms to fight oppression.

Abena and Bayangumay suffer as displaced Africans, newly arrived in a foreign land, burdened with children they do not want and who can be sold away from them at any time. These African women do not want to establish a connection to the New World; they want desperately to re-connect to their own lost past. Each character misses her own "mother Africa," the specific geographic location from which she was taken. While they resent the loss of their freedom, Abena and Bayangumay suffer because they have permanently lost their homeland. Abena's and Bayangumay's rejection of or lack of affection towards their daughters is based upon their physical differences: Tituba and Solitude have lighter skin and eyes than their mothers, which serve as constant reminders of the humiliation the mothers endured at the hands of white sailors during the Middle Passage. Because neither woman had a choice about either conceiving the child or terminating her pregnancy, they both elect to remain emotionally distant from them, in spite of living side by side with the children they choose to ignore.

Yao and Maimouni experience the same separation from Africa as do Abena and Bayangumay, but unlike the women, these father figures love their adopted daughters and choose to pass down their love for and knowledge of the old country to them. Although overtly feminist in their outlook and portrayal of female mulatto Caribbean women, *I, Tituba* and *Solitude* also depict the male appropriation of maternity by featuring father figures who wholeheartedly embrace the nurturing of the young child or unborn fetus rejected by the mothers. By performing the maternal function, the father figures are subverting the heterosexual norm and therefore performing their gender in drag, as mentioned earlier. Condé and Schwarz-Bart thereby underscore the idealized nature of heterosexual gender roles. Yao and Maimouni reclaim the role of birth-giver by speaking their respective children into existence. Whereas Abena bore the child, Yao gives Tituba an invented name "to prove that I was the daughter of his will and imagination" (6). He even has to remind Abena to pay attention to her unwanted child, urging her to "Sit her on your lap. Kiss her! Fondle her!" (7). Once he finds out Solitude is pregnant, Maimouni decides to speak the child into be-

ing by narrating its bodily development:

At night, before giving her his seed, he bade her think of her child, compose an image of this or that precious organ or limb, so as to complete the formative action of the spirits. He attached special importance to the nails, the fingers, the harmonious mold of the torso, the ears, teeth, and lips, and perhaps most of all, to the roundness and firmness of the liver. But he was never able to say what sort of heart he wanted for the child. He could not wish it an African heart, which would be useless in a foreign country, and still less could he resign himself to a white, black or mulatto heart beating to the obscure rhythm of Guadeloupe (152-53).

This emphasis on both father figures' privileging of words as a means of asserting their paternity condemns them for their phallogocentrism even as both Solitude and Tituba fondly recall each man's loving dedication to them. These African male characters supercede the character flaws inherent in their gender in order to forge a positive relationship with their children. Their love alone is not enough to transform the Caribbean children into Africans. Their efforts to re-connect with Tituba and Solitude's children fail because Yao and Maimouni can only recount their own experiences of Africa—the children themselves will never know that land firsthand.

In contrast, Phillips's novel is the only one of the three which features an African parental figure who remains in Africa. The children in *Crossing the River* are born in Africa and sold into slavery by their father, who remains behind. The first-person account of a father who confesses: "A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember" (1), constitutes the frame narrative of Phillips's and each of the novel's sections supposedly addresses each child's experience in the New World.¹² Although he pleads guilty to committing the ultimate betrayal of his family—by voluntarily exchanging them for money—this African father also affirms the tie that still links him to his "two strong boys and a proud girl": memory. Whereas he has physically broken up his family by sending his children away to a life of slavery in the New World, this African father maintains an emotional connection to them that in

this novel transcends the limits of time. Both his remorse for his act and his continuing love for his children are apparent when he proclaims,

For two hundred and fifty years I have longed to tell them: Children, I am your father. I love you. But understand. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. To a land trampled by the muddy boots of others. To a people encouraged to war among themselves. To a father consumed with guilt. You are beyond. Broken off, like limbs from a tree. But not lost, for you carry within your bodies the seeds of new trees. Sinking your hopeful roots into difficult soil.

Crossing the River thus depicts Africa as a distant fatherland guilty of scattering its peoples but still interested in their continuing well being in the new lands they now inhabit. Phillips' father Africa is no mere villain, but a victim of circumstance—"A desperate foolishness. The crops failed." However, perhaps *because* he himself remains at home, this father figure has the luxury of thinking about his children's futures. Phillips inverts the dynamic we have seen so far in the other two novels—in his version, father Africa wants to reconnect with the children he sold away instead of the having the Caribbean children reclaim their African heritage.

Like Yao and Maimouni, this Father Africa also usurps the maternal function by naming the children. It is through his account that we first meet "My Nash. My Martha. My Travis" (1). The very person who brought about the children's enslavement in the New World also makes their speech possible by introducing and concluding the novel. Judith Butler exhorts us to:

Consider that the use of language is itself enabled by first having been *called a name*; the occupation or the name is that by which one is, quite without choice, situated within discourse. This "I," which is produced through the accumulation and convergence of such "calls," cannot extract itself from the historicity of that chain or raise itself up and confront that chain as if it were an object opposed to me, which is not me, but only what others have made of me.¹³

This Father has both the first and last word but his "children" cannot engage him in dialogue and reproach him for his actions. What guilt he feels is self-imposed. Unlike Tituba who narrates her own story and Solitude whose point of view narration occupies an equal part of the novel to her mother's, Nash, Martha and Travis never fully come into their own.

By characterizing the three children as the father's only victims, *Crossing the River* simultaneously implies the continent's innocence and naivete as well as its inability to fight against the aggression perpetrated upon it by the West: the slave trade. While Phillips's father character is separated from his children but still remembers them fondly, *Crossing the River* never mentions the children's mother—did she also remain in Africa? Or had the father sold her first? Does she, too, remember her children? The text does not address these questions, and therefore avoids portraying a feminized Africa violated by the economic and physical intercourse with Europeans in the slave trade. In fact, *Crossing the River* genders Africa only as masculine, thus adhering to the pattern noticed by Anne McClintock: "Not only are the needs of the nation typically identified with the frustrations and aspirations of men, but the representation of male national power depends on the prior construction of gender difference."¹⁴ Instead of heralding the emergence of a New World identity, Phillips's novel postulates Africa as a postmodern zone, in Brian McHale's term; as a textual construct it is a space which at once juxtaposes Liberia, Virginia, the American West, Britain and the entire Atlantic into one diasporic entity: a timeless Africa.

The Caribbean of *I, Tituba* and *A Woman Named Solitude* is not such a postmodern zone but is rather limited to specific islands: Barbados and Guadeloupe. Condé, and Schwarz-Bart write *this* Caribbean into a state of perennial infancy by presenting the main characters always as the children of the African characters instead of allowing them to become parents themselves. Tituba is hung while pregnant in Condé's novel and Solitude's fate is only a little better. As Schwarz-Bart quotes from Oruno Lara's *Histoire de la Guadeloupe* in the epigraph to his novel, "The mulatto woman Solitude was with child at the time of her arrest; she was executed on November 29, 1802, immediately after the delivery of her child." The future of this fragile Caribbean identity is uncertain at the novels' conclusions.

As the children of this violent clash of two cultures, literally conceived from rapes aboard the Middle Passage, Tituba and Solitude must reconcile their African and European ancestries as well as establish ties of friendship and kinship to their fellow slaves. These two characters fulfill the destiny which Phillips's father Africa had foreseen for his own children—that is, they learn how to “sink [their] hopeful roots in difficult soil” (2). Through their love and acceptance, Yao and Maimouni present a kinder picture of Africa to their adopted children than Abena, Bayangumay, and Phillips' Father Africa ever do but one which the new generation of mulatto children cannot claim as its own.

Tituba and Solitude come to know themselves as Caribbean by participating in the struggle for the liberation of both their fellow slaves and their respective countries from the colonial yoke. In this course of action, these female characters follow the example of their African mothers who, while not given to nurturing, nevertheless stand up for themselves and resist oppression. Condé's Abena repudiates her master's sexual advances by stabbing him in the chest; for this she is hung. Schwarz-Bart's Bayangumay runs away to the hills, choosing the freedom of a maroon over the servitude of plantation life. Tituba and Solitude are also condemned to the gallows for their rebellious acts; the former for her involvement with a planned slave uprising in Barbados while the latter for being one of Louis Delgrès's followers who engaged in armed resistance to the reimposition of slavery in Guadeloupe. In actively opposing slavery and working to bring about its downfall, Tituba and Solitude emotionally re-connect with their rebellious African mothers.

In assigning gender roles to the continent of Africa as represented by specific characters, Phillips, Condé and Schwarz-Bart insert contemporary concerns into their fictional versions of the past. The focal point of each novel resides with the Caribbean or American characters, not with their African ancestors, but the latter do anchor each tale of emancipation and resistance to oppression. The African characters in these three novels, the unnamed father figure in *Crossing the River*, Abena and Yao in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, and Bayangumay and Maimouni in *A Woman Named Solitude*, take on their respective parental roles not only to their biological or adoptive children, but by extension to the peoples of the New World as a whole. While they are reluctant to admit of any family ties linking the Caribbean islands with Europe, *Crossing the*

River, I Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, and *A Woman Named Solitude* their African lineage. Because the ties with Africa were effectively broken by the Middle Passage, whereas African slaves and their descendants in the Caribbean continued living under the patriarchal rule of European rulers past emancipation and until they recently achieved independence, Europe and by extension the United States figure in the texts as a cold, distant and stern paternal authority figure.

By applying the family metaphor to the relationship between the New World and Africa, Phillips, Condé, and Schwarz-Bart highlight not only the closeness of the familial bond but also the separation necessary for the younger group to develop its own, separate and independent identity. Gendering Africa as both a feminine and masculine entity with its attendant parental roles of "mother" or "father" to Caribbean peoples characterizes the entire continent as simultaneously victimized by and even complicit in the slave trade.

Notes

¹ Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993) Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, trans. Richard Philcox (1986; New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) ; André Schwarz-Bart, *A Woman Named Solitude*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Atheneum, 1973) .

² Anne McClintock, "'No Longer in a Future Heaven': Gender, Race and Nationalism," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, & Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti & Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1998) 91.

³ McClintock, 89.

⁴ McClintock, 90.

⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindenberg (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) 217.

⁶ André Schwarz-Bart was born in France but is of Polish Jewish ancestry. *A Woman Named Solitude* is his second novel that deals

with the Caribbean. In 1967, he and his wife Simone published their jointly written *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes*. Caryl Phillips was born in St. Kitts but raised in England, while Maryse Condé was born and raised in Guadeloupe.

⁷ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Daedalus* 103 (1974) 99.

⁸ Hall, 213.

⁹ Father Africa in the framing narrative of *Crossing the River* has been regretting the sale of his children into slavery, "for two hundred and fifty years" (1). Tituba, the narrator of Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* not only practiced obeah and communicated with spirits while she herself was alive, but also narrates the novel from beyond the grave. Schwarz-Bart's *Solitude*, the title character of his novel, "was about eleven when she turned into a zombie" (88).

¹⁰ Hall, 217.

¹¹ Judith Butler, "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, & Postcolonial Perspectives*, 384.

¹² The novel is divided into four sections, one of which is dedicated to the journal of a slave trader. Phillips's Father Africa counts among his children a white, British, working-class woman from the twentieth century as well as the three African American characters that appear in each of the other sections.

¹³ Butler, 382.

¹⁴ McClintock, 89.