

Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature



Africana Women Writers

Performing Diaspora, Staging Healing

DeLinda Marzette

Africana Women Writers: Performing Diaspora, Staging Healing focuses on contemporary literary works, plays in particular, written after 1976 by Africana women writers. From a cross-cultural, transnational perspective, the author examines how these women writers—emanating from Cameroon (Nicole Werewere Liking), Britain (Winsome Pinnock), Guadeloupe (Maryse Condé and Simone Schwartz-Bart), Nigeria (Tess Onwueme), and the United States (Ntozake Shange)—move beyond static, conventional notions regarding blackness and being female and reconfigure newer identities and spaces to thrive. DeLinda Marzette explores the numerous ways these women writers create black female agency and vital, energizing communities. Contextually, she uses the term diaspora to refer to the mass dispersal of peoples from their homelands—herein Africa—to other global locations; objects of diasporic dispersal, these individuals then become a kind of migrant, physically and psychologically. Each author shares a diasporic heritage; hence, much of their subjects, settings, and themes express diaspora consciousness. Marzette explores who these women are, how they define themselves, how they convey and experience their worlds, how they broach, loosen, and explode the multiple yokes of race, class, and gender-based oppression and exploitation in their works. What is fostered, encouraged, shunned, ignored—the spoken, the unspoken and, perhaps, the unspeakable—are all issues of critical exploration. Ultimately, all the women of this study depend on female bonds for survival, enrichment, healing, and hope. The plays by these women are especially important in that they add a diverse dimension to the standard dramatic canon.



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General Editor

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In memory of my father
DeWitt Marzette
whose spiritual example continues to guide me,
and for my mother
Essie Drake Marzette
whose unconditional love amazes me.

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❧ Introduction

Performing Diaspora, Staging Healing

Africana women writers have embroidered a distinctive pattern in the literary tapestry of Africa, Britain, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Their works vary greatly and can be distinct and innovative or classically conventional, depending upon the author's artistic style, motivation, and worldview. Their dramatic plots sweep across many human conditions from slavery, colonization, lynching, miscegenation, and rape to underemployment, unscrupulous working conditions, all forms of domestic life, sexuality, and health concerns plaguing black communities. The subject matter of black women's works reflects the unique social, political, and philosophical milieu of the time period and geographical locale.

My book focuses on contemporary literary works, plays in particular, written after 1976 by Africana women writers. From a cross-cultural, trans-national perspective, I examine the ways in which these women writers—emanating from Cameroon, Britain, Guadeloupe, Nigeria, and the United States—move beyond static, conventional notions regarding blackness and womanbeing and reconfigure newer identities and spaces to thrive. I explore the numerous ways women playwrights create black female agency and vital, energizing communities. Contextually, I use the term diaspora to refer to the mass dispersal of peoples from their homelands—herein Africa—to other global locations; objects of diasporic dispersal, these individuals then become a kind of migrant. I also rely upon Homi Bhabha's concept of *interstices* and *diasporic aesthetic*, which accents features particular to those with migrant, diasporic heritages. I apply the term Africana to denote black persons of African origin, descent, or cultural identification. Merely for the sake of variety, I alternate between Africana and black throughout the book. Each author of my research as a black woman writer shares a diasporic heritage (Werewere Liking is not as

typical); hence, much of their subjects, setting, and themes express diaspora consciousness. I explore who these women are, how they define themselves, how they convey and experience their worlds, how they broach, loosen, and explode the multiple yokes of race, class, and gender-based oppression and exploitation in their works. What is fostered, encouraged, shunned, ignored—the spoken, the unspoken and, perhaps, the unspeakable—are all issues of critical exploration.

I am drawn to plays because of the urgency, intensity, and voice conjured by live bodies on stage, as well as the sense of creative immediacy and rebirth invoked with each new performance. I agree with Amiri Baraka who believes that “drama is one of the most ambitious art forms because it proposes to show us people in the act of life,” and according to Baraka, “it is drama then that can most realistically express the social/human motion, collectively or particularly” (226). Unfortunately, with the advent of reality television, video, and film, dramatic works seem to have taken a balcony seat in not only popular culture, but academic and critical realms as well. Theatrical works are significantly underrepresented when marketing efforts, production, viable venues, and funding resources for playwrights, plays, actors, directors, and related technical staff are realistically considered. This tendency is compounded for people of color. Leslie Catherine Sanders, in *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves*, echoes the notion that fundamental issues of infrastructure directly affect the advancement of black art, particularly in the theatre: “playwrights need productions, theaters need financial backers, and backing for plays by black playwrights has always been scarce” (14). Margaret Wilkerson candidly states that it is a “chilly” moment in history for black female playwrights because of a return to conservatism (xxiv). Moreover, Bernadine Evaristo in her essay “Black Women in Theatre” argues that the commitment to black theatre has increasingly diminished; black theatre has become a “priority in theory but not in practice” (14). Even in better days, according to Evaristo, “female roles were marginal, superficial and sometimes sexist” (14). Men virtually dominated all strata of the theatre from writing and publishing to directing and producing; women hardly held administrative positions of power or decision-making. These facts

might explain in part why there seems to be such a paucity of black women playwrights actually writing, producing, and publishing as a principal career today. I look forward to a resurgence in black women's drama on all levels: creative, critical, performance, and production. I hope that this research will grow into a project that will augment and further a movement in literary criticism that advances Africana women playwrights and their works from the margins to the center.

I concentrate on plays written by Werewere Liking (Cameroon), Winsome Pinnock (Britain), Tess Onwueme (Nigeria), Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe), and Ntozake Shange (The United States). The work of fiction I examine, *She Shall Be of Jasper and Coral* by Nicole Werewere Liking is a very experimental, post-modern novel that mixes elements of narrative, song and sound; these unconventional pieces are marked with the same stylistics, voice, and intent found in the dramatic works I consider by Werewere Liking. Though many of these women writers have created in other genres—Werewere Liking is a reputable textile artist, singer, and poet—all, however, are primarily playwrights. My first chapter is dedicated to a selection of Werewere Liking's works.

Werewere Liking's plays touch on a variety of themes that are significant to African communities, such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, political deception, community-wide inertia. Werewere Liking concerns herself with issues that affect women such as marriage, adultery, divorce, and widowhood. Overwhelmingly, women are protagonists and configure as the mouthpieces and restorers of the community; moreover, these women are vocal and are in no way marginalized, mute, or invisible. Werewere Liking's women characters clearly demonstrate the strong, able characteristics celebrated by feminists, even though Werewere Liking herself does not subscribe to feminism per se, which is a political leaning I notice in many African women writers and critics. Werewere Liking approaches and expresses the ills of Africa from the perspective of a healer; the negative effects are expressed as sicknesses that need creative therapy and treatment. Much of Africa's social dilemmas, for Werewere Liking, seem to stem from the debilitating effects of modernization. Her works are highly prescriptive in that she calls for a

return to the indigenous practices of Bassaland, Cameroon to counter or remedy the contemporary ills of African society. Interestingly, Werewere Liking is an initiated Bassaland priestess, and she weaves ritual stages into her plays. A close analysis of Werewere Liking's work reveals that the plays (and novels) reflect certain stages of indigenous rites of passage and purification in Bassaland, Cameroon. In addition to examining the iconoclastic roles of women in Werewere Liking's *The Power of Um* (1996), *The Widow Dylemma* (1988), *A New Earth* (1996), and *She Shall Be of Jasper and Coral* (2000), I also attempt to trace the ritual movements in her work and highlight those stages. I contend that her writing process is a creative rite and transforms us, the audience, as we undergo an initiation of sorts when we experience her plays. I heavily rely upon the critical works of Francophone scholar Irène Assiba d' Almeida as well as the late Cameroonian scholar and professor Siga Asanga's critical elucidation of Bassa lore to analyze Werewere Liking's ritual allusions.

Following my chapter on Nicole Werewere Liking, I then consider the plays of Winsome Pinnock. Black British playwright Winsome Pinnock has Afro-Caribbean roots and her plays move back and forth between the United Kingdom and Jamaica, which seems to mimic the destabilizing effects of migration. Her plays describe women living in the to and fro of migration and illustrate many of the elements that comprise Homi Bhabha's notion of diasporic aesthetic (301). In Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues* (1991), *A Hero's Welcome* (1993), and *Leave Taking* (1989) she intimately portrays characters that display splintered psyches and lives. Her characters seem displaced and fragmented geographically, emotionally, economically, and psychologically, and attempt to exist and operate in a mental and/or physical space that is often irreconcilable. I utilize and apply the concepts of alienation expressed by Fanon, DuBois, Brah, and Cixous to analyze Pinnock's plays. In two of Pinnock's plays, *Talking in Tongues* and *Leave Taking*, I look at Pinnock's subtle image of foot injury, which seems to function as a metaphor for obstructed mobility. Moreover, in Pinnock's *Talking in Tongues*, I examine the ways in which Pinnock's use of tongues functions as feminine language of the interstices. Her women characters—not the men—are able to wield a supernatural utterance that supersedes silence; they come to voice and find healing as they move

through interstitial spaces. Additionally, Pinnock's pivotal scene of women talking in tongues at the gulley evokes what Isobel Hoving calls the "trope of moisture" (59). Hoving insists that, frequently, sites of moisture represent the "liquid nature of the Black feminine . . . the threshold, the frontier . . . [the] intermediary areas between lost past, lost tongue, and alienated presence, wherein a new tongue is growing . . ." (59). Hoving observes:

This spatial figuration functions even more strongly as a woman's image, as it separates and links an inside—a home of sorts, traditionally a woman's domain—and an outside. . . . from the threshold, while never really leaving it, it undertakes its very specific journey and it negotiates the world by spreading, growing, and flowing. (58)

Water as imagined in literature is linked to the feminine and, emblematically, evokes images of cleansing and purgation as well as fluidity, fertility, and growth. Hoving's notion of moisture complements Pinnock's pivotal gully scene where the women talk in tongues and heal one another. After Winsome Pinnock, I consider the playwrights, Maryse Condé and Simone Schwarz-Bart. They, like Pinnock, share an Afro-Caribbean heritage, which figures heavily in their works.

The chapter on Caribbean writers focuses on the plays of Simone Schwarz-Bart (*Your Handsome Captain*, 1987) and Maryse Condé (*The Tropical Breeze Hotel*, 1995). The themes of migration and exile and the relation to black identity are ingrained in the fiction and poetry of contemporary Afro-Caribbean women writers and are characteristically reflected in the creative works of Joan Riley, Beryl Gilroy, Jamaica Kincaid; however, the sheer paucity of published and accessible plays by Afro-Caribbean women posed a challenge during my research. Condé and Schwarz-Bart are, perhaps, best known for their novels; consequently, very little scholarship exists on their plays.

Simone Schwarz-Bart was born in France, raised in Guadeloupe, and then migrated back to France and later back to the Caribbean. Her plots aptly bring to light rural settings and have been described as extended folk narratives. Because I focus on Marie-Ange's indigenous Afro-Caribbean traits, Henry Louis Gates's *Talk That Talk* (1989), which highlights the elements of indigenous African orality including drum-talk, proved invaluable. I also relied on the late Caribbean folk-