

Hard Labour Religion, Sexuality and the Pregnant Body in the African Diaspora

With specific reference to selected works of authors, Nalo Hopkinson (1998), Octavia E. Butler (1993) and filmmaker, Julie Dash (1991), this paper discusses images of pregnancy in African diasporic S/F (speculative fact and fiction) narratives in film and literature. Contravening popular stereotypes of black female pregnant bodies as overly fecund, wild and animalistic, pregnancy and pregnant, black women as portrayed by these Hopkinson, Butler and Dash instead symbolize transformative hope in their families and communities.

“She nah have no ambition. She nah have no ambition at all, at all, at all.” This phrase is a short form in the anglo-Caribbean communities with which I am familiar for speaking of a particular type of shame. “She nah have no ambition. Insteada’ study school, she-a study man.” For on the one hand, the roundedness of the school girl’s belly is a visible, tangible sign of her sexual and moral agency, transgression and/or victimization. On the other hand, however, children, parenting and motherhood, in particular, are traditionally highly valued within African and African-Caribbean societies and are the occasions for religious-based individual and familial celebrations. In societies where time is cyclical and circular and ancestorship of one form or the other has influenced communitarian values, interpretations of Christianity and the development of New World African religions such as *santería* and *vodun*, children are seen as the link between the present generation, the ancestors and the future. As Nana Peazant, the elder in Julie Dash’s (1991) film, *Daughters of the Dust*, noted to a disillusioned great-grandson: “The ancestor and the womb, they one.” Therefore, the juxtaposition of the devalued pregnant black female body as a sign of “shame” and sexual transgression rooted in experiences of sexual exploitation or willful choices that contravene community norms against the high value of

parenthood is a highly contested terrain.

In this paper, I will explore this contradictory positioning of black women in relation to pregnancy as represented by writers, Octavia E. Butler and Nalo Hopkinson and film-maker Julie Dash. I have focused on these artists in their works which contain key characters who are young, pregnant black women because the narratives redeem the experiences of pregnant, black women, especially those who are located in marginalized social, economic and political contexts. The economic, political and psychic crises that the characters undergo and resolve are reflective of the larger family structure or community in which they reside. In their redemption and crisis resolution, the women speak ancestral wisdom and serve as channels, though reluctantly, for African-based deities. They are cast in the role of sage and founder of a religion in the case of Butler's Lauren Oya Olamina in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), healer and warrior in the instance of Ti-Jeanne, the reluctant adversary of a drug lord in a post-apocalyptic Toronto in Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), and redemptive mother, Eula-Yemaya, in Julie Dash's groundbreaking film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

Stereotypes of black women and pregnancy

Mothering and motherhood for black women in the Americas has been fraught with contradictions. While continental African and African diasporic cultures are overwhelmingly child-centric and value parenthood, the legacy of chattel slavery created a social context in which pregnancy and child-rearing meant not only reproduction but also profit. Enslaved black women of child-bearing age thus occupied a unique role as property which could reproduce itself thus adding to the economic value of the individual woman. As scholars such as cultural critic and activist Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class* (1983) and historian Barbara Bush in her study of slave women in the Caribbean (1990) have noted, enslaved black women were victimized in ways that were particular to their gender in slaveholding societies. The narratives of women such as Harriet Jacobs (who wrote under the pseudonym Linda Brent) (2001 [1861]) who was enslaved in the United States, and Mary Prince (1993) enslaved in the Caribbean and England in the nineteenth century, attest to black women's sexual exploitation.

This exploitation and torture was so endemic that in a peculiar twist under an otherwise deeply patriarchal system, the status of children born in slave societies was determined not by the father but by the mother. In this way, children born to enslaved women whose fathers were free, in some cases, they were the owners of these women, would automatically inherit the enslaved status of the mother thus maintaining the status quo.

"Welfare queen," drawing unearned and unwisely spent money of "tax-payers," "unwed mother" and "crack ho" or other substance-addicted mother, are just a few of the latest North American-based incarnations of images of black women as "unfit," "maladjusted" and otherwise dangerous, bad mothers.

These contemporary stereotypes of bad, black mothers draw on older nineteenth-century images of black motherhood and black women's sexuality, in particular, such as the Sapphire (an angry, scheming, conniving, bitchy woman) and Jezebel (sexual siren and tempter of white men to their moral doom) which have their roots in American Old South racial iconography (Jewel, 1993).

These images stand in stark contrast to the asexual, subservient mammy whose maternal role is devoted sacrifice to the family who owns her. Usually desexed, mammy's enlarged breasts could be interpreted as symbols of wet-nursing prevalent during the antebellum U.S. south. These images represent pregnancy not as a valued maternal state but rather as a signifier of defilement, sexual promiscuity and individual and communal shame for the woman, her family and the black community at large. Continuing in this vein, the baby that is subsequently birthed is not a symbol of rebirth, continuity and the next generation but of the reproduction of a social problem. Thus, black children from this perspective are marked as social problem for which the society will pay in monetary, psychic and other terms.

Given the pervasiveness of this type of stereotyping, it is not surprising, then, that for many black girls growing up in North America and elsewhere in the African Diaspora, one of the most deeply entrenched messages concerning sexuality and the body is shame associated with pregnancy at an early age, especially compounded with the absence of a committed partner and/or marriage. Aside from the economic, social and emotional challenges that parenting a child at an early age present, overwhelmingly, the pregnancy itself becomes a symbol of individual shame for the girl, her family and the larger black community.

No longer "ruint": the redemption of the black female pregnant body

In their works, Butler (1993), Hopkinson (1998) and Dash (1991) proclaim a redemptive moment by saying: "hail the pregnant, suffering, female black body" for the perspective of the "least of these" (to use a phrase from Black Church talk) holds important lessons for the black community, at large, and potentially the wider society. This is especially the case in Dash's film when the character Eula, a young newly-wed and heavily pregnant woman who has been "forced" (that's the term used in the film) by a white man experiences rejection from her husband Eli and faces a life of being "ruint." As a "ruint" woman, she is socially and morally outcast and a perpetual victim blamed for her own victimization within the eyes not only of the larger white society but within her own family. In a pivotal scene Eula's husband Eli confronts his great-grandmother, Nana Peazant, who at over 100 years old in 1902 is a witness of the nineteenth century, slavery, its ending and the beginning of a new century of hope for her family. Nana tries to teach Eli that all children are sent by the ancestors and that the ancestors "wouldn't send no baby that wasn't your own."

All three artists work in speculative genres of fiction in literature and film. That is to say that through invention and a conscious incorporation of the speculative and fantastical—events and characters that decidedly outside of the normal and every day—they explore both historical and contemporary social realities of black people in the African Diaspora. To borrow Starhawk's (1988) term, they dare to “dream the dark” of contemporary and historical black realities in their narratives. That “dark” encompasses the existential predicament of enslaved people which is the quest for freedom and the full expression of humanity. The dark is the contradictory bind of being both human yet classified as property. The description of this predicament is one of the central themes of the New World African American literature that began with the slave narratives. The “dark” are also those places of sanctuary in black community life described by bell hooks in her essay, “Dreaming Ourselves Dark and Lovely” (1993) as reservoirs of knowledge based on African-American folkways and folk knowledge.

Butler (1993) and Hopkinson (1998) tap into those reservoirs through the subgenre of apocalyptic science fiction. The hallmark of this genre are stories in which contemporary North American societies are depicted as either being on the brink of, or shortly after events which have the potential for complete destruction and yet which hold the promise of renewal and rebirth. Theologian Emilie Townes in her book, *In a Blaze of Glory* (1995), describes this as the eschatological dimension of apocalypse that is radically hopeful and evident in black religious experiences of Christianity.

Toronto-based writer, Nalo Hopkinson (1998), for instance, refers to her work as “fabulist fiction”—that is to say that her works utilize the characters, fables, and folklore of African-Caribbean culture refracted through the narrative conventions of apocalyptic science fiction. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Hopkinson tells the tale of Ti-Jeanne, a young woman, in her 20s living in a post-apocalyptic early twenty-first century Toronto. She is the mother of an unnamed infant baby boy and the reluctant heir to a spiritual legacy passed on from her grandmother, Gros-Jeanne. Weaving elements from Yoruban *orisha*, Haitian *vodun* and Jamaican *pocomania* together, Hopkinson creates a Caribbean diasporic religion uniquely responsive to the life situations of migratory Caribbean peoples in Toronto. Through the course of the novel, Ti-Jeanne discovers that she is a child of the powerful Haitian vodun *lwa*, Baron Samedi, the *lwa* of the cemetery and lord of the gateway between life and death. She draws on his power and that of Yoruban *orisha* and her ancestors to confront evil represented by her own father a powerful drug dealer, Rudy. In a stroke of genius, the CN tower becomes the centre pole through which these ancestral spirits and gods are channeled in the novel's final showdown.

Octavia E. Butler's *oeuvre* explores African-American historical and contemporary experiences through the lens of speculative fiction. Evident in her short stories and novels such as *Wildseed* (1980) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) is a preoccupation with genetics, family structure and reproduction. In

her three well-known series: the xenogenesis series, the parable novels and the patternist series, these themes are explored in ways which both explicitly and implicitly reference “race,” reproduction, family structure and colonialism in the United States. In *Wildseed*, for example, we meet Anyanwu, a shapeshifting woman whose real body is young and teenaged while she is three centuries old. The mother of generations of transplanted Africans in the Americas, Anyanwu serves as a witness to an African past, the Middle Passage voyage across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas and the building of communities in the Americas. Together with Doro, a masculine spirit force who uses the bodies of human hosts, she is a nation mother, ancestor and goddess to her people.

Lauren Oya Olamina is the 15 year old protagonist of *Parable of the Sower*. Her age echoes Harriet Jacobs’ age of awakening to sexed and gendered realities within the household of the family who owned her as a young girl. After fleeing her walled city in a post-apocalyptic early twenty-first century United States, she heads north seeking freedom. Echoing the historic treks of the Underground Railroad, Lauren’s journey north is told through a first person narrative in her journal. She becomes the creator of a new religion, Earthseed, which in its “Everything Changes” echoes some of the tenets of contemporary earth-based religions. Lauren bears the name of the Yoruba orisha of change, Oya, a goddess associated with rainstorms, fast moving water and wind. She is the daughter of a drug-addicted woman whose drug use produced hyperempathy in Lauren. She is able to experience on a physical and emotional level the experiences of animals and humans simply by witnessing. In this way, Octavia E. Butler’s story finds value in the parallel of our own time, crack-addicted babies. What is to become of these children as they grow up? Butler’s story points to the “gifts” of babies born to drug-addicted mothers as potent mirrors.

Julie Dash’s acclaimed film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), is fabulist in the way that Hopkinson uses the term through its use of Gullah language, culture and religion in exploring themes of African-American women’s identities, family histories and the making of the African Diaspora itself. The film shifts backwards and forwards in time from the antebellum slavery period through to story’s current day, the year 1902. Narrated by Eula’s unborn child, the film is both backward and forward-looking at the Peasant family’s history encompassing in the telling of that one family’s story, the story of the creation of the African Diaspora. Eula is a young, pregnant black woman whose dilemma embodies the “ruin” of black women: Eula was “forced” by a white man shortly after her marriage to Eli. The event and her refusing to tell the identity of her rapist to her husband threatens the stability of their marriage. Eula is pregnant and her husband is unsure of the paternity of the child. She refuses to disclose the identity of her rapist for doing so would mean that her husband would have a target at which to exact revenge resulting ultimately in his own retaliatory death. Eula shares the matriarch Nana Peasant’s view that “the ancestors and the womb are one.” Eli, however, is unsure. The Unborn Child of Eula’s pregnancy serves as the film’s narrator. She is the first of the last generation and

her special bond is her connection to her great-great-grandmother, the last of the first generation, the 100-year-old Nana Peazant.

In a pivotal scene, Eula confronts her family about their refusal to accept a long-absent, visiting member, Yellow Mary because they deem her “ruint.” She confronts the shame, fear and loathing that form the basis of the judgment of being a “ruint” woman, a woman whose sin and shame forever ban her from full community membership. In her countenance and style of address, Eula’s lament serves as intercessory prayer and plea for not only herself and Yellow Mary but for all black women “ruint” by poverty, sexism and racism. Her body doubles over with what appears to be an experience of spirit possession. The physical setting of the seaside and the issues with which she deals suggests that Yemaya, the ocean mother of the orisha religion, manifested in Eula and spoke to her family.

Conclusion

In the works of writers Nalo Hopkinson (1998) and Octavia E. Butler (1993) and film-maker, Julie Dash (1991), the dignity and humanity of black women as moral and sexual subjects is redeemed through placing the experiences of the “ruint” represented by a young pregnant woman at the centre of the story. Like the works of writers Toni Morrison (1987) and Alice Walker (1982), the works of these black women writers and filmmaker take up the confessional and testimonial aspect of slave narratives, the first texts in the African-American literary tradition. Like other speculative texts in the African Diasporic literary and cinematic traditions (cf. Charles Burnett’s *To Sleep With Anger* [1990]), these texts take up the Middle Passage, the trans-Atlantic crossing from Africa to the Americas, as a cultural moment which continues to resonate in contemporary black women’s life experiences.

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