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Mother Love

My Mother Excerpts from a Feminist Diary

In this work I write of mother love, of mothering, of a love of family and community, the nurturing of self-reliance, bold and enterprising spirits and pure hearts. I am presenting this work from a Black feminist or womanist, reflective standpoint even though I was cautioned as a child not to be too or so “womanish” in my behaviour. I was cautioned to not act as though I were older than I actually was; not to rush to grow up “before my time.” I am not conscious of rebelling, but from an early age emulated my mother’s strong will, her determination and her resourcefulness—her will to survive poverty and contest exploitation and oppression. Black folk who live in racist, ethnocentric, sexist and patriarchal societies where white and ‘light’ skin is privileged and given supremacy, need to tell their own stories—stories that resonate with love and laughter even as they may be poignant and heart wrenching. It is important that we put a human face to poverty and oppression, to let others who question our origins know that like all beings we come from some place and bring much of value with us to where we now stand!

In this work I write of mother love, of mothering, of a love of family and community, the nurturing of self-reliance, bold and enterprising spirits and pure hearts. I will speak of my mother and the sisters who mothered me—women who provided me with a vision of myself as belonging to the world, always embraced by their love and always knowing that I have a place to go home to—any place that they may be. This ‘knowing’ and sense of belonging has been the greatest gift and has allowed me to travel with confidence to the most unexpected places. I am presenting this work from a Black feminist or womanist, reflective standpoint even though I was cautioned as a child not to be too or so “womanish” in my behaviour. I was cautioned to not act as though

I were older than I actually was; not to rush to grow up “before my time.” I am not conscious of rebelling, but from an early age emulated my mother’s strong will, her determination and her resourcefulness—her will to survive poverty and contest exploitation and oppression. Upon her death I still lean on her strength, call and honor her name.

In this work I share what I recognize as “subjugated” knowledge, and because I recognize that I have never needed arms and legs to sing, I also share pride and love. Black folk who live in racist, ethnocentric, sexist and patriarchal societies where white and ‘light’ skin is privileged and given supremacy, need to tell their own stories—stories that resonate with love and laughter even as they may be poignant and heart wrenching. It is important that we put a human face to poverty and oppression, to let others who question our origins know that like all beings we come from some place and bring much of value with us to where we now stand.

Born in 1914, in what was “British” Guiana, (a country geographically located in South America with a Caribbean culture) my mother, a working class country woman, with middle class aspirations, yet proud of her connection to the land, immigrated in 1969 to Canada with the youngest of her children. Her life was a complicated and joyful song and I am able here to share a few ‘verses’ from a ‘feminist’ diary that I began to write in October, 2001.

October 25, 2001

Today I’m trying to get a better understanding of the concept of “Standpoint Feminism” and I decided I would look to my copy of Patricia Hill Collins’ work entitled, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. As I read Collins’ definitions and analysis of Black women’s lives I thought of my mother. So, as I write this I will try to weave some of her ‘story’ into my attempts to understand the concept of writing, as a Black woman, from a particular ‘standpoint’—“situated in a context of domination” (269). Virginia Woolf wrote that, a woman writing often thinks back through her mothers. What I share is subjugated knowledge coming out of a context of domination and I realize that as I look at my mother’s life, I see my own and my sisters’ lives. I realize too, that as I ‘look’ I am gaining a “partial perspective on domination” (Collins 269)—a perspective that speaks to the need for continued political activism. Collins writes of the “invisible dignity, quiet grace and unstated courage” of Black ‘womanist’ ethics. She talks of a legacy of struggle that may go unrecognized and notes that different patterns of experiential knowledge cause us to respond differently to various forms of oppression. She speaks of an inherent understanding by Black women of the various forms of oppression that affect the quality of their lives. She talks of the collective wisdom of Black women; their understanding of gender-specific

patterns of oppression and its accompanying economic penalties (Collins 25). She recognizes a Black feminist sensibility regarding being victimized by poverty, misogyny and racism—an awareness by the Black woman that she may be vulnerable to rape as a form of sexual violence (26). Family histories, she says, “have long been important social locations for manufacturing ideologies needed to maintain oppression” (284). For Black folk Collins notes that, “the trauma of subjugation has not led to total despair” but has produced instead what she sees as “an insistent interrogation and resistance” of and to oppression. (206). Like Audre Lorde, Collins sees that Black women cannot be content with merely nurturing their families and communities, because the welfare of those families and communities is profoundly affected by the injustices that characterize political, economic and social institutions.

Although my mother was born in a society where many women married quite young, she unlike many of the women of her time, did not marry and begin to have her 13 children until her early twenties. She did not see her nine children who survived childbirth ‘sold off to slavery’ since it had already been abolished in “the colonies” approximately 90 years before her birth. However, she would often say that her most beautiful babies had died soon after childbirth—perhaps because of someone’s jealousy and as a result of someone “putting their bad eye” (evil eye) on them. Her superstitious beliefs were rooted in African traditional religious philosophies and practice and she would claim that to ward off evil her remaining babies had to be bathed in “blue” (in water dyed blue), but would talk of other African spiritual practices such as ‘Obeah’ or ‘Juju’ as something to be cautious of since their practice could backfire if used for evil. She was extremely proud of all of her children and as a result each one would claim to be her ‘favorite’ and argue that it was not possible to love each ‘equally’ as she claimed. It was with years of maturity that I came to understand that she recognized and embraced each of her children as unique individuals even though she expected us to bond and demonstrate familial loyalty and love.

A firm, assertive and sensitive woman, like many others before her time, she understood a reality of poverty, abuse and exploitation and carried within her the historical memory regarding strategies for survival. It never appeared to me that she expected to be “lifted over ditches” or “given the best place” but she certainly believed that the humanity in others could make it possible for her and her family to be given a “hand up” and not a hand out. In fact, as I reflect I believe that my mother, who with dignity, was able to survive much degradation in her lifetime, would have enjoyed reading about Sojourner Truth. She would have understood, because she was intelligent and resourceful with her “up to 6th standard education,” the reality of working “as much as any man” even as she assumed the role of ‘housewife’. My mother, was able to gain many of the things she needed to care for and feed the family as a result of her own

resourcefulness and on 'trust'. In Guyana her baked goods were the talk of the neighborhood and the resourcefulness she showed in engaging her children to go from door to door selling them, particularly her fudge, is the source of amusement and of angst for at least one sister who would happily leave the memory of voices crying, "Mammy de Fudge Girl Come" behind. In order to supplement the income that was made by my father, a tailor, my mother would sell her baked goods, her fudge, her custard 'ice blocks' and the hair oil she created with lanolin and coconut oil. She felt that the hair and a smooth clean skin, were a sign of beauty, and ours was always well oiled!

There were days that we watched her walk purposefully out the door, after helping to zip her into her corset so that she would don her most business like attire, her 'pearls' and one of the wide brimmed hats that she would wear slightly tilted to the side. Those were often days that she networked with childhood friends who had been able to attain professional positions of influence and asked their support in helping one of her children to gain a possible civil servant position and therefore a respectable and solid 'career'.

She made sure that each of her children were baptized in the Catholic church and that our 'God parents' were individuals who could, if necessary, help to take care of us in some way. One such individual worked in the dispensary at one of the local hospitals and I remember going with her when she needed medicine to cure an ailment but could not afford to pay for it.

I am the last of nine of her children who survived and for much of my childhood I knew that she worried about where our next meal would come from and I am sure that sometimes as she cried, "none but Jesus heard her." And she did cry and lament the fact that she was born at a time when birth control was not as freely available as today, because, in her own words to me during a moment of shared confidences and my persistent questioning, she "would never have had so many children" although she smiled when I said that I might have then been the first born. She appeared to understand that her worth was not measured by her ability to reproduce. Yet, despite her feelings about having given birth to so many children, our family of nine siblings often expanded to include cousins and other relatives (we thought) who moved from the countryside to live with us in town in order to be better educated or to access work. Many of us did not know, until after her death, that many of these 'relatives' who had lived with us were actually borders, perhaps the daughter or son of a friend or acquaintance, who was able to pay for their lodgings and their meals as they attended school in town. Perhaps once she decided to take in a 'border' they became part of our family and were indeed treated as such. Upon her death, one such individual reached out to our family after not having done so in years, and shared the fact that she was often eager to return to our home each day after school because my mother's cooking was so "sweet."

My mother's meals were always a culinary delight and after immigrating to Canada we would wonder and shake our heads at the ingredients she 'played' with and the dishes she concocted. She generously cooked (when she could afford, or gain access to other ingredients) the love she had for her husband, her children and the life she lived and dreamt of, into each and every meal, and each day was an unexpectedly flavored and wonderful surprise. We were often lucky to go home at lunch to something more than a "tennis' (bread) roll, cheese and milk, because of her ability to gain some food items on 'trust'. She was vulnerable, yet strong and from her I learned to ask without shame, for what I want with the knowledge that I may not get it. She truly believed that "pride goes before a fall" and was willing to set aside feelings of what she dubbed 'false pride' in order to take good care of her family. Yet she was cautious and this perhaps could be partly attributed to her superstitious nature and her lived experiences. So, for example, as children, she would caution us before visits to certain family members and friends and tell us that we should very politely decline any food offered to us—no matter how hungry we were (and we often were hungry). She told us if we were given any gifts of food to bring home we should take it, say, "thank you" very nicely, and then discretely throw it in the nearest garbage bin on the way home. We were also told specifically never to enter a car alone with particular family members who she did not trust. In fact, we were so obedient that when an uncle stopped to offer me a ride home I remember becoming so afraid and confused about what to do that I simply bolted. When I got home my uncle was waiting there for me and proceeded to berate me in front of my mom who appeared to be as upset as he was. The minute he walked out the door, however, I was told that I had done the right thing! In her desire to protect us, her children, she showed a certain sensibility—perhaps an unquestioned and unconscious sensibility to issues of "being taken advantage of."

I can remember witnessing her feisty 'hot temper' on two occasions—once as she quarreled with our dad, then packed her bags for a stay in the countryside that allowed her to return with bags of food (we wished such quarrels would occur more frequently) and once as she confronted the owners of the house we were living in because they had refused to do anything about the ants that were creating nests in various corners. Her children and her home gave her pride and she created a beautiful home for her husband and children and would brag that you could "eat off of the floors" because as she would often say (sometimes in order to facilitate the saturday morning cleaning sessions) "cleanliness was next to Godliness." Our beautiful wooden floors were always well polished and I can recall, as a child, being placed on a piece of thick cloth and then dragged back and forth to ensure that they were. In fact my siblings (and I) could hardly contain our laughter as they fought for a turn at pulling me as I

held on to the sides of the cloth so that I would not fall off. They loved it when I would fall and I think I did too! She must have had a secret desire to be an interior decorator or perhaps she often became bored with the monotony of her life and yearned for something different, but we were never sure that when we returned home at the end of the day that the furniture would still be in the same place, for she would move them around “to improve the atmosphere” and then take delight in our surprise. Home was filled with special treats when our dad got paid for one of the suits he had tailored for someone. At those times in Guyana where goods from ‘abroad’ were scarce she would come home with beautiful red apples and their look and smell would cause us to gather around her as she peeled one— and gave us a nice thick piece with the skin to eat. I still love the smell and taste of those red delicious apples. When the fishing boats came in she would bring home crab and shrimp and when our dad did not get paid for the work he completed she would pull on her corset, dress and hat and go down to the corner to buy on ‘trust’, some tennis rolls and maybe some cheese. If she was unable to get what she needed we would come home from school for lunch to some sugared water and a piece of bread and told to walk back to school, hold our heads high and make sure that no-one knew that we didn’t have. When the milk and biscuits were being handed out at school we were never to rush and grab for any—regardless of how hungry we were, we were not to behave like “gluttons” and when we did have and enjoyed ‘the best’ we were taught to not ‘show off’, never to behave like a “never see, come fuh see”—not to behave as though we were “not accustomed.”

In her youth, my mother was a beautiful woman, aware of her sexuality, her sensuality. When we moved to Canada, after my father’s death, she would boast of compliments she’d received on various outings. Even her doctor, she’d say, remarked often on her soft, smooth skin and even as we teased her to “watch our for that doctor” we marveled at the way she took the admiration of her various suitors in stride. We would beg her to find a rich man and marry but she ignored all her suitors and would babysit in order to make money to supplement what my older siblings earned and it was often not enough. I remember that I was often not amused when I asked her for money and was told that the cheque from my dad (who had already passed many years before) had not come that month. I remember that I continued to have high hopes of her remarrying, even when the Fuller brush salesman came to call. But, he started calling, with his brushes, too often for my mother’s liking and soon we whispered, wondered, but dare not ask, where he was and why he wasn’t coming around any longer. One day I asked her why she didn’t seem to want to remarry and she shared the sentiment that my dad had been the best man, the most loving husband and father, and that she was not going to bring another man into her home to “interfere” with her daughters. She proudly told of how, after asking

her grandmother whether he could marry her, my dad walked proudly beside her, through her village, and no man “could point his finger” to say he knew her. My mother was proud at having been ‘watched’, of having been evaluated and viewed as ‘chaste’ and ‘gentile’. In fact, she was, to her children, exactly what she wanted to be, our example of the most virtuous, proud and elegant woman and her girl children would all grow up the way she wanted them to be—“good girls,” not “jezebels,” not “hoochie mamas” or “hos.”

Despite our poverty, none of my mother’s daughters succumbed to what is described as the common experiences of urban poverty by becoming for example, mothers quite young. We were all made to study extremely hard in order to pass the exams that would allow us to attend the best schools. Some of us were more successful at this than others, but all were given opportunities to learn a profession in order to live what our mother thought were ‘decent’ Catholic lives. My mother was a woman with great religious and spiritual faith (unlike our dad who professed to be atheist) and taught her children to stay close to home. We were cautioned not to behave like those from the “nigger yard” even though we once lived right next door to that poverty stricken, negatively stereotyped urban ‘ghetto’ and we did not realize, not my mother, nor her daughters that part of the objectification of all women lies in not only evaluating their ‘class’, their physical features, their sexuality and mental capabilities but their strength (s). Collins (2000) tells us that the sexual politics of Black womanhood reveals how important the controlling images applied to Black women’s sexuality have been to the effective operation of domination overall. This is evident in the historical “displaying” and rape of Black women’s bodies and ultimately, their minds. My sisters and I, all “good girls,” would all enter into subordinate, abusive relationships with men committed to patriarchy—men perversely proud yet resentful of their “goodness.”

Much has been said of the resourcefulness of women like my mom, “Third world’ and ‘poor’ who never resorted to stealing or begging on the streets but instead, often went without and never complained. The ‘worth’ of these women can rarely be measured by the type of job or career they had because they labored, many in menial positions, out of love. My mother’s cup never did “hold but a pint” but she never hesitated to share what she had with others and she has left a lot of laughter and love in her wake because she sure turned “many a world upside down” (Truth). I know that she had not read, as I did, that in order to ensure your latchkey child returns promptly from school each day, and to ensure that they did not become involved in any delinquent behavior on the streets, there should be a good meal waiting for her or his return. After I divorced and my daughter was old enough, she became that ‘latchkey’ child who was fed with love. My mom, however, whose work was done from within the home, was often at the gate waiting for our return. Even after we

immigrated to Canada, she did not quite understand the involvement in after school programs that brought us home after the sun had set and because she did not believe that to 'spare the rod' was to 'spoil the child' she would be waiting with a cane or belt, in her hand if we were late. Only the most daring of my sisters were ever late. I have no recollection of stories of a brother who defied her. But many stories have circulated within the family, of at least two sisters who dared, and those stories have been shared with lots of hooting, yelling and laughter! If after being hit by our mother, we felt, as bell hooks writes, "an extreme dislocation" or "that the world that we had come to intimately know had collapsed and that another had come into being that was filled with terrors" (86-87) those feelings must have been felt in the moment, because what is most talked of and appears to be most remembered, are her attempts to get our dad to beat us. Reportedly, he would take us into our rooms, hit the mattress with his belt and tell us to cry. My sisters tell hilarious tales that make us all laugh hysterically about his wielding the belt on the mattress and urging them to, "cry" or "cry louder" in order to satisfy my mother's desire for discipline! This was not actually the experience of all of us because I can not remember ever being beaten and in fact my sisters tell me that I never was. I don't agree, but honestly can't remember. I was my mother's baby. The last born. Jamaican friends tell me they refer to the last born as the "wash belly." Perhaps as hooks says, "many children who are hit have never known what it feels like to be cared for, loved without physical aggression or abusive pain" (hooks 86). But that has not been my reality. When my mother could not provide for us my sisters and brothers did. We all learned to provide for each other and ourselves, from an early age.

My eldest sister was a second mother to all of us and I called her "Mommy Elo" (Elo is a shortened form of her middle name) and for years she hated it, although now that we are both older, and she, in her 70s is still quite spectacular in her beauty, proudly tells of how I once called her 'mommy'. She (Elo) has shared with us, dispassionately, that during an assembly at her school in Guyana, she was asked to stand up with all the children whose parents were not able to pay school fees, and told to go home. Our mother, however, would not allow her to be barred from attending school and would have her return the next day and the next, still without the fees, and she could not disobey. My eldest sister was the first family member to immigrate to Canada, and before doing so, she had made headlines as "Guyana's leading actress" and had instilled in all of us a love for literature, theatre, in its varied forms, and theatrics. We all read voraciously and strutted around the house in our make shift costumes acting out all the parts of the various plays that she was in. One of our favorites was the radio broadcaster and poet, 1936-2008, Wordsworth McAndrew's version of the poem, "Ol Higue" that gave us all, including my mom, delight

in its performance. As I reflect I feel that the story, outlined in the poem, of the old woman, the “Ol Higue” with the wrinkled skin that sucked the blood out of children represented so many of the colonial and capitalist injustices and survival fears of Black folks, old and young alike, and as a consequence, it seemed that justice was done when we recited, “Whaxen! Whaxen! Whaxen! Plai! You gwine pay fo’ you sins befo’ you die.”

As ‘actors’ we were trained by my eldest sister to walk erect, back and forth, from one end of our house to the next with several books on our heads. As our ‘second mother’ she vowed that she would never marry because she had helped to raise us all and told of how annoyed she would become each time she was told that she would soon have another sister or brother. When my mother immigrated to Canada I and two siblings before me came with her to join the eldest and our four other siblings that she had managed to ‘sponsor’ before us. Our father, who had never wanted to leave Guyana, had died the year before. My eldest sister, apart from acting in Guyana, had done secretarial work. In Canada she did not pursue an acting career, although she had had opportunities to do so instead she committed to managing a legal office where we, the younger ones, would have an opportunity to learn some office skills—typing and filing. Over the years even nieces and nephews would gain some work experience and pocket money in this way. It is evident to me that my mother had firmly established a framework of love, based on sacrifice and loyalty that her children have adhered to and embraced... and I am not sure that this has always enriched our lives although it has kept us ‘grounded’ in many ways. I am one of two of my mother’s children to have attained an undergraduate degree and the only one to have completed a Masters and Ph.D. I remember as a child sitting down or laying down beside my dad and planning my future. I would be a lawyer, teachers had told me that that’s what I should become because I looked at them with my “big eyes” wide open, listened intently to what they said and argued with them fiercely if I disagreed. I remember that my dad and I talked about the fact that I would become a lawyer and that I would have an office with a plaque on the door with my name on it. I would keep my maiden name, even if I married and this sounded perfect to me, even then. Years later as I studied late into the night, typing my own essays and the ones that would bring me the money needed to help pay my university tuition, my mother would periodically get up out of her bed, bring me cups of hot milk, tea, or hot chocolate, maybe a toast or other treat and sit quietly and watch me before going back to her own bed. She had not learned to write but read every newspaper and magazine we brought into the house and she was proud that I would become her “daughter the teacher.”

Amongst my mother’s children, few resentments are ever voiced and when these surface they are quickly swept away by those memorable moments that



Adelaide Aletha (nee Hawker 1914-2007).

told us that we must be grateful, because my mother did her very best, lifting nine children out of poverty, with a belt pulled tightly around her own waistline to stave off hunger so that her children could be fed. We sing our mother's praises and hold tight to the memory of her love, including that for her husband who would sing, "Darling, I am growing old" in response to her, "I wish I had someone to love me." It is through our mother that we, all her children, have experienced 'love' as an important force and a source of empowerment. This force has enabled me to walk away from oppressive circumstances that conflicted with the values that I'd been taught and with my family pride. It has not allowed the violence of sexism, shadism, classism and the everyday racism evident in Canadian and American societies to erode my self-esteem and my confidence in my abilities as a Black woman.

Perhaps I thought to write about my mother, on that day in 2001, because she was rarely out of my mind as she slowly succumbed to a brain tumor that she had been diagnosed with in her early seventies. At that time, given the choice between having an operation and living for another possible five years she chose the latter after declaring that she had already lived a wonderful life, had had the most loving husband, had travelled to various parts of the world while vacationing with her children, and had seen her children achieve more than she had thought possible. She said she'd already seen her children accomplish more than she ever thought they would despite her high hopes,

high ideals and what people in Guyana would call her “big zast” manner that some thought signified a superior, better than the rest attitude. She was ready at any time she said, for the “Good Lord to take her.” She lived to 92 years of age and when she passed on in body and was much less than half of her approximately 200 lbs, her stature never diminished in the eyes of each one of her children, who if asked, would say that she or he was my mother’s favorite child. The week before she died, my brother Stephen, the youngest of her 3 sons, and the one that she made sure watched over me, escorted me on dates, and protected me all my life—ensuring that I grew with the deeply profound knowledge and confidence that I was of and from a family with a sibling (siblings) who ‘watched my back’, told us, as he bent over her feet and washed them, that he had read somewhere that to show deep love and honor for his mother he should do so.

October 25, 2001

During my early years, growing up in Guyana, I followed behind my mother everywhere she went. I remember her anger and upset at always finding me trailing behind her. In her youth she was a tall, brown-skinned beauty with long legs and a quick stride and I was her short fat baby girl who had a hard time keeping up with her—but I was as determined as she was. She couldn’t shake me and she no doubt had to respect my determination because although I can well imagine her saying, “hurry up and move your fat legs,” and although I can still see her upset and frustration and hear her refusal to lift me up, she never left me behind. She kept going and I would keep going right behind her. Audre Lorde said “we don’t have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present” (139). I survived along with five sisters and three brothers and I acknowledge that “survival is the greatest gift possible” even though tenderness sometimes appeared to get lost on the way (150).

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