"Dey give me a house to *Mothers and Daughters*

BY CAROL B. DUNCAN

Cet article discute de la signification de la relation mère-fille dans la vie des immigrantes afro-antillaises qui sont membres de l'Eglise spirituelle baptiste.

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Growing up in England, Antigua, and Canada, I was mothered by a variety of women including my grandmother, cousins, aunties, teachers, and my mother. My experience mirrors that of many other African-Caribbean women who are mothered by "othermothers," who are friends or relatives in addition to, or instead of, their birth mothers or "bloodmothers" (Collins 119–123). This article grew out of my reflections on this experience of othermothering in my own life as I engaged in research on the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto. The larger project documents the history of the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto and explores themes of diasporic African identities forged in the context of migration. The historical and contemporary connections between the experiences of mothering in African diasporic religious traditions and wider black community life deserves critical attention because there is a power link to contemporary black feminist consciousness and empowerment.

Historically, in African-American communities, women known as "Mothers" have held powerful and influential roles in sacred and secular settings (Gilkes 1997). The lives of these women, however, have rarely received critical attention and examination is crucial in understanding black women's participation in community settings (Gilkes 1997). In this article, I discuss church mothering within a specific socio-historical context: the immigration of African-Caribbean women from the English-speaking Caribbean to post-Second World War Toronto whose paid work is primarily in domestic service in middle- and upper-middle-class Euro-Canadian households. Makeda Silvera's groundbreaking conversations with Caribbean domestic workers, documented in *Silenced*, presented a discussion of the conditions of domestic service by the women themselves in their own words. This article adds to this discussion through presenting an analysis of how some of the women who have worked in, or continue to work in, domestic service make sense of their everyday lives. A crucial part of this critique is a discussion of the ways in which the long history of domestic work stretching back to the colonial and slavery eras have impacted on contemporary African-Caribbean women's participation in the labour force and the ways in which these women have constructed meaning of their lives through subversive symbolic re-interpretation of icons of Christian femininity and mothering such as St. Ann.

It is a situation which is fraught with contradictory images and notions of mothering in the context of the women's work lives, their religious lives in the church, families left at home in the Caribbean, and new familial and interpersonal relations in Canada. A major tension is that on the one hand, mothering in the context of church-life is highly valued and respected while the mothering work performed for pay is largely devalued in the wider society. Another is the search for "home" in the face of immigration and obstacles such as isolation and discrimination based on gender, "race," and class. In a very real sense, the church in black communities became one of the "homeplaces" (hooks) where members could find a sense of fellowship and community and in which the church Mothers played a crucial role in the creation of this home.

This article discusses the context in which some African-Caribbean women, members of the Spiritual Baptist Church, who have emigrated to Canada and who work primarily as paid, domestic workers experience and negotiate meanings of motherhood and daughterhood in their everyday lives. Following an overview of the history of the Spiritual Baptist Church and the tradition of "mothers of the church," I present excerpts from conversational interviews I have had with Spiritual Baptist women which discuss some aspects of mothering including ancestral mothers and religious figures such as St. Ann, the process of becoming a "spiritual mother," and the significance of the church as a "home."

History of the Spiritual Baptist Church

The Spiritual Baptist Church is a syncretic African-Caribbean religion. It draws on Christianity, in particular Roman Catholicism, West African religious traditions as well as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and the Kabbalah. The Spiritual Baptist Church can be seen in a number of different, and I suggest, complementary rather than op-

gather in di chil'ren" *in the Spiritual Baptist Church*

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posing traditions and historical trajectories. First, as James Houk notes, it is a part of the "Orisha religion complex" in Trinidad (36). It is important to note, however, that there is a variation amongst Spiritual Baptist congregations and individual Spiritual Baptists regarding participation in, and the significance of, Orisha religion. Second, the Spiritual Baptist Church can be seen as a crucial component of a "Caribbean emancipatory theology" (Davis) which links spiritual liberation with socio-political transformation in Caribbean societies. Historically, the Spiritual Baptist church emerged in the context of enslaved Africans' and their descendants' reinterpretation of Christian doctrine and beliefs blended with West African religious traditions. This reinterpretation supported emancipatory ideals rather than an acceptance of the status quo regarding power relations under slavery and British colonial rule. Third, the Spiritual Baptist Church can be seen as a Caribbean-based variant of the Sanctified Church both in its ritual practices, organization, and patterns of membership. Gilkes notes that the term Sanctified Church is "... an indigenous term African-Americans use to refer to Holiness, Pentecostal, Independent, Community, Spiritual and Deliverance denominations and congregations collectively" (1993, 1005).

Congregations in the Sanctified Church emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States with predominantly 90 per cent female membership (Gilkes 1993, 1005). Commonalities amongst the various congregations include an emphasis on "some aspect of sanctification and sharing ritual practices emphasizing the Holy Ghost (Spirit) and such activities as "shouting," the "holy dance," speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts" (Gilkes 1993, 1005). Though a thorough discussion is beyond the scope of this article, it is suffice to say that the inclusion of the Spiritual Baptist Church within the broader collective of the Sanctified Church points to disaporic connections in interpretations of Christianity by Africans in the Americas.

The Spiritual Baptish Church suffered repression under the British colonial regime in Trinidad including a banning under the Shouters Prohibition Ordinance from 1917 to 1951. The tradition survived these repressive conditions to emerge as a religion which is international in scope with congregations in Canada, the United States, and England following the post-World War II immigration patterns of Caribbean people.

The Mothers of the Church

The Mothers of the church occupy a crucial space in the history of diasporic African communities. These women, were, and continue to be, leaders valued and respected for their leadership and nurturance in both church-related and wider community matters. I suggest here that the Mothers of the church are linked to diasporic African women leadership roles in religion such as the mambo in Haitian vodun, and political leadership figures such as Nanny or Ni, leader of the Maroons in Jamaica. The link is the ancestral legacy of women in powerful and respected leadership roles in West African societies such as Ashanti Queen Mother Yaa Ansantewaa, who led a military and political struggle against British colonialism in what is now contemporary Ghana. In fact, the term "queen mother" which is West African in origin (Gilkes 1997), used to denote a woman leader, is used in the Spiritual Baptist Church in reference to the "mother of the home," the head mother of the church. Church work for black women "generally encompasses active membership in local churches, clubs, and religious auxiliaries, as well as teaching Sunday school" (Gilkes 1997, 369). This work could also include pastoring and the founding of churches and regional or national associations of church women. In the Spiritual Baptist Church, offices which include, but are not limited to Mother, Nurse, Warrior, Evangelist, Prophetess, and Deaconess are important leadership roles for women within the church community. These leadership roles are important ways in which church women nurture the "children" of their community.

An examination of family forms and mothering practices which diasporic African people developed during slavery and colonialism reveals some of the ways in which dominant cultural forms, institutional practices, ideologies, and discursive modes of representation were subverted. The prevailing hegemonic beliefs during and after slavery asserted that black family forms were either nonexistent or "deviant" because of the harshness of the slave

Nicole Peña, "Psalm," acrylic on canvas, 5' x 6', 1995.

and colonial regimes including the sale and subsequent separation of black families and/or inherent "bad" parenting, especially a purported "black matriarchy" and "sexual looseness" of black people. In actuality, black family forms emerged in innovative ways which drew on the West African traditions of extended families in negotiating the harsh economic and psychic realities of slavery and colonialism.

Experiences and representations of motherhood in North America are differentially shaped by images and practices based on "race," class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and other aspects of social difference. The image of the good wife and mother was a representation of the feminine ideal in Euro-American cultures in the nineteenth century. White, Christian, heterosexual, middle and upper-class women were idealized as "real" women. Enslaved black women, poor and working-class white women, lesbians and women of colour were represented as the foil of this image—effectively "non-women." Stereotypes such as the sub-human "breeder," with her ever-increasing fecundity, the closely-related contemporary image of the welfare mother, the emasculating black matriarch, the genial mammy, and the super-woman are distorted images of black women as mothers. Representations of motherhood which emerge from black women's experiences and which are self and community-defined and articulated simultaneously challenge these stereotypes as well as position black women as historically-located, critical, and analytical subjects.

As Patricia Hill Collins notes in *Black Feminist Thought*, through othermothering, which is the practice of women nurturing children along with or in some instances in place of their bloodmothers or birth mothers, individual black families and communities nurture and define themselves. The Mothers of the church in the Spiritual Baptist tradition, in addition to their powerful leadership roles, are an example of othermothers who bridge sacred and secular roles. The experience of mothering from a Spiritual Baptist world view is shaped by both "spiritual" and "carnal" circumstances. The "carnal" encompasses sexuality and the birthing process as well as the material circumstances such as the economic, political, and socio-cultural context of nurturance. The "spiritual" refers to both the individual person's relationship with Spirit as well as an ontological reality which co-exists with the material, tangible world. This distinction between the spiritual and the carnal is not a reiteration of dualism in the sense of opposing pairs but the positing of complex, interconnected sets of relationships which encompass the whole. Thus, the experience of mothering is informed by this interrelationship between the "carnal" and "spiritual" in a woman's life. A "spiritual child," for example, is someone with whom the Mother has a relationship in which they provide guidance and nurturing in both spiritual and often secular matters as well.

In sum, then, for Spiritual Baptist women in contemporary Canada, their experiences of the mother-daughter relationship are informed by the legacies of West African extended family traditions and leadership roles for women, the histories of colonialism and enslavement, contemporary Caribbean experiences, and immigration to Canada. Many of these women work in paid domestic service which involves providing child care for the children of other women. In many cases, these women have also been separated from their own children and mothers. This situation mirrors the experiences during the slavery and colonial periods of family separation due to the provision of labour. An examination of mothering in the lives of Spiritual Baptist women points to the contradiction of the high value placed on motherhood within the church in contrast to the devaluation of mothering in the paid work in which the women engage such as health care and domestic service.

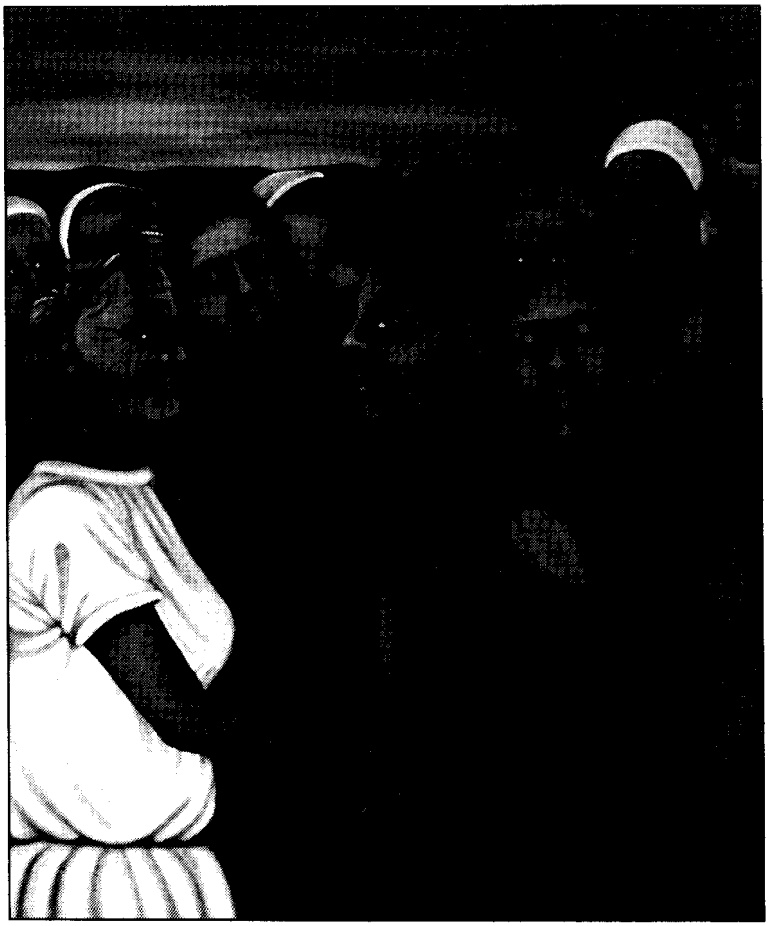
"If you don't come to me, I'm coming to you": ancestral mother

Conventional notions of linear time and space are challenged by some Spiritual Baptist women's experiences of being mothered by women who visit them in dreams and visions. Sometimes the identity of these women is revealed to be religious figures such as St. Ann, the grandmother of Jesus. St. Ann is especially significant given the importance of grandmothers as teachers, elders, and wise women in African-Caribbean cultures. It is

significant that this saint is associated with female deities in the Orisha religious traditions such as Yemanja, a mother goddess who is mistress of the seas.

The following account points to experiences of mothering in which West African notions of cyclical time are invoked. These ancestral mothers, who cross barriers of time and space, appear at moments of crisis, to give guidance. They frequently issue the summons for the woman to enter another phase of her spiritual life either through baptism or to become a mother herself. They are akin to great-aunt Cuney, Avey Johnson's ancestor in Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, whose appearance in a vivid dream precipitated the events which led to Avey's acceptance of her role as a spiritual reincarnation of her elder othermother Cuney. In the following, Sister Maria, while holding her infant granddaughter, recounts an experience of meeting St. Ann which heralded her baptism, the initiatory rite of passage of becoming a Spiritual Baptist:

And as it goes on, I used to get verses from the bible and I didn't even know. Just in my dreams. Just in dreams. And I believe in dreams because I've seen things happen outright in dreams. And, one day, I had—I wasn't sleeping but I was lying on my bed reading that same bible and with my son and daughter and this woman came up to me, her house was like on hill and you have to walk down from the main part of the hill. And I saw this woman in my dream coming up and she's walking so brisk and she's coming up and she came right up—we had glass door like this. And in my dream, the drapes weren't long enough to reach to the bottom. And I can see this woman out there. But she found me crying, okay? I never forget the position that I was in, I was like this. She found me like this. And she called me and I said to her, "Um, wait I'm praying." And she called me again. I said, "Wait! Can't you see that I'm praying!" And she called me the third time and she said, "If you don't come to me, I'm coming to you." And I could see her from out there. She's dressed. Everything was brown. Brown head-tie. Her dress was brown. Her sandals were brown. She had the bible in her hand. She had the bell in her hand. Okay? And she came in and she give me the bible in my left hand and the bell in my right hand and she shake. She said to me, "Continue to pray"... And I find well, this was strange, you know? So I went back to the country and I told my grandmother. And she said to me that you have to be baptized. And I said to her, "But Mommy, I baptize, already." You know? Baptism which mean I've been dedicated as a baby. Because we call it baptism, back home, but it's not really baptism. So she said to me, I have to baptize. I said, "But I baptize already." Eh man, you can't and you know and stuff like that.



Nicole Peña, "Herstory," acrylic on canvas, 4' x 5', 1995.

And then I came here. That was like maybe a year after or the year and a half after I came here.... And I used to go all the way to Albion and Martingrove with a friend of mine to church. And I still didn't feel ... I felt something was wrong, was missing, spiritually. And I start going to the Anglican church down on St. Clair. And still I felt, it wasn't right. 'Cause I'm accustomed hearing the words from the bible, not how it takes and history and those stuff right? And I still feel that it wasn't right. And um, then I start going to um, Cross Cultural—Domestic Cross Cultures of Canada on Spadina Hall. It's a community centre. And I start finding myself there, going and listening to their problem. Babysitter, a lot of babysitter. And I meet more women. A lot of them sit there and they tell you, you know. And then I joined the organization, I became a member. I wrote newsletters and stuff like that. And then one day I met [a friend] and she invited me to church. I felt really good in church. At that time church was a packed church. It was a full church. Winging. And, you know, I used to work from Steele and Don Mills babysitting and then I used to come down on weekends at my cousin's and then go the meeting at Cecil [Community Centre] and then from Cecil I got to church and doing the whole circle around.

And, I was a—Monday morning I got up, you know, doing my vacuum and stuff like that and girl, one piece of manifestation took me! I had to drop the vacuum, go to my room and pray ... I'm so glad that these people weren't home, eh? 'Cause they might have said that I was

crazy. 'Cause they're Canadian. And I called Uncle. I remember I called him and I spoke to him. I call my aunt and I talk to her. And she said to me, "... don't you see the Lord wants you for his own." "Mmmmhmmmm! Yes...." But then, as I baptize, and this woman keep coming to me all the time. She keep—he never leaves. She keep coming to me and then later on ... I discover this woman is St. Ann's, the mother of Mary ... and she's the woman, the brown, and the brown represent Mother's Earth. I never knew that! I didn't even know that there was a mother St. Ann's. I know there was Mary and Mary brought Jesus but who was Mother St. Ann's? I never knew that.

"Dey give me a house to gather in di chil'ren": spiritual mother/carnal mother

In the above, Sister Maria relates her experience of being mothered by an ancestral mother who issued a spiritual call. In the following conversation with myself, Mother Ruby, a Queen Mother in Trinidad, relates her experience of becoming a spiritual mother. She notes that the identity of spiritual mother was one which was intimately linked to her capacity as an othermother in her community:

R: All right, I grow up. Ah come woman too, no chil'ren. Ah come and adopt chil'ren and dey grown big man and ooman. Dey gone on dey own now. When dey ready, dey come and look for me and dat's dat. Ah come here, I used to mind chil'ren. In those days was two dollars a week ... to mind chil'ren.

C: Dey didn't sleep or anything?

R: Some a'dem used to sleep, yes. Because some a' di parents workin' ... Ah does tell dem, "Well you see afta six o' clock? Don' come in my house at-all. Leave di chil'ren and all-yuh could do wha' all-yuh want." So dat is how you see, I come and dey-so everybody is Mother Ruby, Mother Ruby. All di chil'ren and dem dey come big and some a'dem dey still remember me! You see? So when I—when I baptize and mourn ... I didn't realize really what was my ... position.

C: Yeah.

R: Dat is after years. Dey give me a—ah used to make med'cine. Cure people. Right? Well, dat was good enough for me. But after everybody was ... when di people started to get good and dey wanted to settle demselves themselves somewhere to hear di word of God ... is so dey come and dey give me di church. So ... dey give me a house to gather in di chil'ren. So ah mus' be a Mother.

C: Mmmmm.

R: You understan'?

C: Mmmmhmmm.

R: Right? And from dere, how much years, ah still gatherin'. Dey comin', dey baptizing, dey mournin', dey stop in and dey ... who gone away, gone away. But yet still dey don' forget you.

C: I see.

R: But it isn't a easy situation.

C: Mmmhmmm.

R: It ain't a situation—it isn't easy, for sometimes chil'ren come, dey ain' have nuttin. Da' is where di mother part is, you know?

C: Yeah.

R: Dey have not nutting. And dey come to me. You can't turn dem down. Why? Because my deceased Leader always tell me, when you could refuse somebody from mourning them, you cannot some—refuse nobody when dey come to baptize. Dey must do dat. 'Cor dat is di—dat is important in dey life. Well, God is good, man. I does survive. You see?

"It makes you feel like home": spiritual daughter

For women who are spiritual daughters, spiritual mothers provide guidance in many facets of both sacred and secular life. In the following interview excerpt, a young woman in her late 20s, Sister Asha, who is separated from her own mother through immigration reflects on the role of the church and elders in her life. For Sister Asha, church provides a feeling of being at "home":

And when I came to Canada, I realize it was the closest thing to home. It make you feel like—you're in Canada, but you're back in Trinidad because of how they worship in the Baptist. It's similar in most ways but you know, you find, you know, one or two things different, you know. Yeah.

I asked Sister Asha if she could elaborate:

The singing', the people, you know. Because, ahm, you know, the Baptist that, you know, that I am going to right now, you know, it's the only place that I see besides Caribana, a lot of black people, you know, associating all at once together. You know, and there I find myself at home. Because they were talkin' my language. You know, like, you know, the church where I go to there it's a mix-up of Trinidadians, Vincentians, Jamaicans, you know. And you get to meet people not necessarily from your same area but, you know, from the same country. And, you know, you could talk about the good old days, you know, like back in Trinidad. And it makes you feel like home. Yeah, it does.

Sister Asha goes on to describe the church setting as a "school" in which she is taught by her elders and in which she wrestles with self-definition in the face of community-defined expectations:

But when as I say, I'm a babe, I'm growin' up, right? In the church. I see the church as a school, right? And I'm there to be taught, right? And if the elders not setting the right example, not doin' the right things, how could I do it, right?

Conclusion

The Mothers of the church are a living bridge between an African-Caribbean past and an African-Canadian present and future in the lives of Spiritual Baptist Church women. Church mothers encompass spiritual figures like Mother St. Ann as well as ancestral figures in a series of relationships which move backwards and forwards in time and space encompassing dreams and family separation and reunification through migration. The experiences recounted here point to one of the ways in which meaning is constructed in the context of a history in which motherhood though fraught with contradictory tensions has been the fulcrum of self-defined personal and community-based identities and relationships.

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DELORES J. LALONDE

Love

Dedicated to Eunice

Her beauty did not
cover the pain in her eyes

Her laughter and smiles
did not cover her insecurities
you could see it in her shyness

Her anger spit out like fire
unintentionally burning
the hearts around her

Doing the best she knew how
truly unsure if it was wrong or right

Her love always there
but not knowing how to express it

Her heart began to heal
Her eyes showed only
love and understanding

Her smiles and laughter
were from pure joy
and her anger
no longer burns

Growing stronger and stronger
through life's experiences
and past mistakes

Expressing her love with
everything she is
with everyone she meets

She is gentle, she is kind
she is to me love
she is my Mother

Delores J. Lalonde is an Aboriginal woman from Sagamok First Nation.