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Womb to Tomb: Mothers' Bodies and Colonial Traumas in Select Afro-Hispanic
Caribbean Feminist Poetry

The black female body is a useful body because it is both a labouring, sexual and reproducing body... The use of violence was therefore necessary to break them in, to fragment them, to destabilize them and to make them cease to be subjects, to transform them into 'docile bodies' that became bodies that labour.

—Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, "The Economy of Violence"

(Hoy es mi cuerpo, al cabo de unos años)

—Georgina Herrera, "Segunda vez ante un espejo"

The racial and patriarchal violence of colonialism has historically been foundational to the social perceptions and political treatment of the Black female body in the Hispanic Caribbean. As a member of the slave labor force in the Caribbean plantation economy, an assumed sexual subject of her masters (Busby xxxvi; Hill Collins 81; Branche 152), and in some cases a means of slave reproduction to augment the importation of Africans to the New World (Bakare-Yusuf 318), the Afro-Hispanic Caribbean female body is the site of colonial traumas against Black womanhood. Of particular interest to the study of colonial memories and reclamation of identity in these scarred Afro-Caribbean women's bodies, is the role of motherhood in the context of



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violence against Black women. This essay studies Afro-Caribbean women's poetry as revelatory voices of the types of violence sustained by enslaved women's bodies and in their descendants' collective memories, and examines the unique relationship between Black mothers and their children in the colonial and postcolonial cycle of violence against their bodies. In particular, "On Maternity" (2004) by Puerto Rican poet Lourdes Vázquez, "Elegía segunda" (1967) by Dominican poet Aída Cartagena Portalatín, "Elogio para las viejas negras de antes" (2015) by Cuban poet Georgina Herrera unearth the silenced agony of mothers who mourn the discriminated and abused bodies of their offspring, and in so doing reclaim their trauma and recover their bodies in a postcolonial and collective formation of Afro-Hispanic Caribbean female identity.

The rationale behind this order and particular selection of poems for comparison is to view motherhood in stages: the mother's experience of childbirth; the mother's mourning for an abused or deceased child; and the daughter's recollection of her (grand)mothers to reclaim her culture and body as an Afro-Caribbean woman. The poems selected are productive when read together, since many of them reflect the multiplicity of perspective of a protagonist who is both mother and daughter, and because the division of stages of motherhood among them resonates at a theoretical as



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well as literal level for the discourse set forth in this essay. Through these diverse points of view, the above-named poets argue that the pain of Afro-Caribbean motherhood is unique and cyclical to her Black identity and is inherited by new generations of female descendants as they, too, face the struggle of reclaiming their selfhood while suffering racism and loss as new mothers themselves.



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Pain, Motherhood, and Memory

In the context of colonialism, violence can be read through the Afro-Caribbean woman's body as a means of exacting power over her mentally and somatically. Johan Galtung's assertion that "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (168) and Walter Benjamin's exposition on violence as both means and end of power (277) support the argument that the Afro-Caribbean woman is historically entangled in a complex network of power. This network of power and sexual subjugation is what Saidiya Hartman names the "discourse of seduction," or the obfuscation between "consent and coercion, feeling and submission, intimacy and domination, and violence and reciprocity" (81). In light of these theoretical approaches to the violence on a Black woman's body, I assert that the female protagonists of the poems selected in this paper describe their bodies as embedded with psychological and sexual violence, a legacy of colonial trauma. It is therefore fundamental to parse the concept of pain for the purpose of this study, and to consider the institution of motherhood both in isolation and in the context of Blackness and feminism, and finally



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to read these conceptualizations against the passage of memory from body to body and from generation to generation.

What forms of daily violence might Afro-Hispanic Caribbean women have undergone while enslaved, that would give rise to the themes of traumatized motherhood in our poetic selection? In addition to sexual service and slave reproduction, Black women also suffered in the fields under a multi-layered oppression based on race, gender, and class. While women did not generally comprise the majority of the labor force in the sugar and tobacco plantations of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, they made up between a third and a half of the lower-ranking slaves in rough field work in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean in the 17th to 19th centuries (Bush 33, 36). Part and parcel to their responsibilities were 10- to 12-hour workdays in the fields during harvesting season, including prepubescent girls and expectant mothers (Bush 37; Reddock 65). Evidence from log books recovered from plantations from the 17th to 19th centuries suggests that the physical demands of plantation labor not only resulted in premature life expectancies for all genders, but was also linked to female health disorders such as menorrhagia (hemorrhaging in the reproductive system), miscarriages, or infertility (Reddock 65; Weinbaum 5; Bakare-Yusuf 315). In



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addition to these inhumane work conditions, basic healthcare was often denied to enslaved African women due to their social status without rights.

According to Catalina Florescu, motherhood itself, regardless of race, is an institution intrinsically linked to expectation (xi). In this word 'expectation' I locate immediate connections between maternity and the female body. The phrase 'expectant mother' plays on the idea of a new life born from the womb, sheltered by the mother's body for a time, and then released through birth into a world where it then expects to meet its death. Maternal expectations also reference a societal pressure on a woman to fulfill her femininity through performing able-bodied tasks: nursing the infant, raising the child with a diligent and moral upbringing, disciplining the child when he or she goes astray, providing for his or her education and economic survival, and the like. For Florescu, this step into new duties is "a major physical and/or psychical traumatic incident, and, as a consequence, their [women's] minds and bodies have been drastically changed" (x). She further argues that this trauma is the inability or unfulfilled desire to "regress to a phase where [women] face the challenge of revealing who they are qua persons before accepting or motivating themselves as mothers" (x). Thus, regardless of whether her pregnancy may be planned or not, a woman's



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realization of the new burdens she takes up through and after childbirth is an irreversible moment of growth, pain, and ultimately, identity change. While maternity brings with it certain joys, such as witnessing the inception of life and forging new, often lifelong relationships with children, my arguments are concerned with how the reorientation of a mother's life toward supporting and protecting her child, especially for a Black woman in colonial or postcolonial settings, can contribute to the violence and trauma her body already sustains from birth to death.

Simone A. James Alexander furthers a complex understanding of Caribbean maternity. In *Mother Images in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*, she points to the paradox of pain and nurturing in the word 'mother' in colonial narratives, which cast the colonizer, such as Spain, as the "mother country" that purportedly protects, raises, improves, and disciplines the Caribbean colony as a maternal figure would (4). On the other hand, Alexander distinguishes "motherland" for the Afro-Caribbean population as the distant African continent from which they were snatched in the Transatlantic slave trade, and toward which they are drawn to rediscover their identity and so achieve spiritual and cultural "completeness" (4, 25). Alexander underscores the "entrapment" of the Afro-Caribbean body by the colonizing mother country, by which



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members of the African diaspora must accept the colonized Caribbean space as a new and other 'mother' to them, one that they remember with violence and trauma. So, too, does the Afro-Caribbean mother in the selected poems characterize the loss of her children to another cruel world outside her own as a suffering akin to the agony of a child exiting her womb through childbirth.

While maternity is broached in various discourses of feminist tradition, specifically those centered on women's rights over their bodies and the concretization of binary gender roles, motherhood still demands attention in the discussion of Afro-Hispanic Caribbean female bodies. In the first place, mainstream feminist theory on the discursive significance of material bodies, while helpful in analyzing women's roles in modernity, may tend to assume readership by and relevance to an undeniably more privileged class of women who are not enslaved. Therefore, a formerly enslaved Afro-Caribbean mother such as those depicted in some of the poems here represents a unique maternal struggle of expecting the death or abuse of a child on the basis of their color. In the second place, studies on maternity that do link motherhood with female bodies and violence, do not often read that violence as a trauma that can be shared with or reflected in the child's body. And thirdly, this notion of trauma that is embedded in the



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identity of an Afro-Caribbean mother is similarly fundamental to the recovery of Black female bodies and reclamation of Black female identity as a whole, and thus Afro-Caribbean motherhood in all its pain is key to understanding the postcolonial Afro-Caribbean woman of today.

I therefore consider bodily recovery through memory under two lenses: first, as the vehicle by which the voices of daughters in the selected poems can access their mothers; and second, as a two-sided coin of both trauma and rebirth. That is, memory for the Afro-Caribbean *cimarrona* (runaway) and mother is not only the remembrance of pain and the loss of power, but also the recollection of her ancestral religious strength that shapes their femininity. Kaela Stage underscores this phenomenon of recalling African (grand)motherhood as ‘feminine immortalization,’ or the restructuring of “Yoruba Orisha power dynamics” to recover the power and identity of one’s Black body in the present day (1-2), as she argues in relation to Georgina Herrera’s poetry. In this way, memory is more than examining trauma and loss of power; it is also evoking power to reclaim ownership of trauma and body. The poems examined in this essay approach this trauma from the perspective of either a mother giving birth, an unnamed child, a bereaved mother, or an outsider reflecting on maternity. While many of them



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share a tone of mourning, especially around the thematic of death or discrimination, the texts offer varying paths to reclamation of the identity of the suffering Afro-Caribbean mother. Thus, the texts presently examined can be characterized as “poetry as illumination” (Lorde 44) or poetry that makes activist contributions to the discourse on Afro-Hispanic Caribbean womanhood, motherhood, and their bodies.

Lourdes Vázquez and the Trauma of Childbirth

“On Maternity” from Lourdes Vázquez’s anthology *Bestiario* (2004) reflects a feminist perspective on maternity that is markedly contemporary in its self-awareness of the levels of trauma entrenched in childbirth. The poem describes the speaker’s fear of her child predeceasing her, particularly as a result of racial violence, a theme that also appears in Aída Cartagena Portalatín’s “Elegía segunda.” From the first stanza of “On Maternity,” alienation or of the depersonalization of the female body appears as a coping mechanism for the woman speaking when she describes pregnancy. “[C]uando eres, te transformas o vas en camino,” she says, “Y las criaturas se crean y la barriga crece y llora el recién llegado” (ll. 2-3). Through the strategic use of passive voice, the protagonist describes the fetus as creating itself—rather than the mother breathing life



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into the fetus—and the belly growing of its own accord, and the newborn giving its first cry into the world of its own will. The closest that the speaker comes to laying claim over her body is in the simple acknowledgment that pregnancy transforms her. The voice in “On Maternity” forcibly separates herself from the wonder of bearing another human in her womb, for reasons that will become apparent in the succeeding stanzas.

The second stanza, which begins with the same phrase “teniendo en cuenta” that anaphorically opens all three of the first stanzas, goes on to warn the reader that after bearing a child, the day will be celebrated every year for many years to come. The first warning—that any woman entering pregnancy will undergo a difficult transformation—initially seems to be more warranted than the second. But upon closer scrutiny, the speaker states that the child’s birthday “es festejado anualmente desde San Antonio / hasta el Atlántico” (ll. 5-6), implying a distance or departure. While there is not yet any academic analysis of “On Maternity” specifically, or any interview with the writer which might shed light on the meaning of San Antonio, it can be reasonably assumed to stand for a barrio in Puerto Rico. Meanwhile, the Atlantic can represent anything from the literal coast of Puerto Rico, to the great unknown when the child seeks his fortune. Still, the heavier warning of the second stanza is contained in the



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succeeding lines, that for the new mother, “de su hombro izquierdo / prende un clavel una orquídea” (ll. 6-7). Often the carnation, particularly when red, symbolizes love and affection; the orchid bears a similar meaning. However, white carnations and white orchids also appear at funerals as symbols of everlasting devotion to the deceased. If we consider the first meaning for the flowers, then the lyrical voice can be said to be lamenting the burden of being recognized as mother—devoted wife, matriarch, and caretaker—over being recognized as herself in her individuality. The second and double meaning of the flowers implies that the child is now dead, and the mother is in mourning. I argue that this second interpretation of the flowers is better supported by the grave tone of the poem as a whole, and moreover leads seamlessly into the warning in the third stanza.

In the succeeding and final stanzas, the lyrical voice climaxes in the following lament:

Teniendo en cuenta que la muerte acompaña a todo
nacido vivo que palpita,
nos trepamos en aquella azotea y gritamos,
concretamente,

¿Quién lo ha visto de cuerpo presente?



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O es una fuente de plaza aprisionada de admiración
un pedazo de lágrima y piedra
un corazón llorando,
un montón de ira líquida
mineral helado sin remedio. (ll. 8-17)

Despite the depersonalized recounting of her pregnancy, the voice of “On Maternity” makes no pretense about the agony that motherhood and mourning together have caused her. In reality, she has established some level of intimacy with her baby, another form living inside her body, that now suffers the irrevocable wound of the child’s passing. Now facing the loss of that intimate relationship, Vázquez’s poetic voice demands that the universe produce the body of her dead child. The phrases “concretamente” and “cuerpo presente” drive home the point that the separation between the mother’s body and her child’s is what has triggered this deep spiritual unraveling. Notably, Rosa Alcalá’s English translation of this latter line from *Bestiario* rewords “cuerpo presente” as “laid out body,” yet another example of double meanings and wordplay as in the case of the carnations and orchids, to directly transmit the image of a motionless corpse at a funeral.



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Deprived of the palpable touch of her offspring, the lyrical voice of “On Maternity” now refers to her own corporality through the feeling of being entrapped by her emptiness. It can be argued that even though the speaker of “On Maternity” has tried with all her might from the first stanza to detach her own identity from that of the child she carried in her womb, the last stanza is the most revealing of the true depths of the intimacy between her body and her child’s—and hence, the intimacy between their souls—that the bereavement has resulted in such trauma. In rawness and rage, the final series of images challenges the ‘admiration’ (l. 13) that is expected of every mother even in the most painful of situations. That is, the poetic voice rejects the saintly trope of *marianismo*, or the all-suffering mother who must weep quietly and simply eulogize her lost offspring like “un pedazo de lágrima y piedra” (14). The image of this line evokes the stone sculpture of the Virgin Mary grasping the body of her crucified Christ child in Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. Instead, the speaker embraces her fury as “un montón de ira líquida / mineral helado sin remedio” (ll. 16-17), and so declares that while her emptiness may render her body frozen, the ire inside her will remain.

Agustoni de A. Pereira notes that Vázquez’s anthology *Bestiario* as a whole is an “ícono de un personaje vacío” (137), and that emptiness as a corporal and emotional



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thematic is explored in various forms throughout the poems, including “On Maternity.” Pereira also reads “liberación del cuerpo [femenino]” (137) between the lines of disjointed pain and ire in Vázquez’s anthology. Applying the same overtly feminist interpretation of bodily liberation to “On Maternity” would seem to lack the nuance that the poet employs in her approach to motherhood here. Although the birth and subsequent passing of her child trigger an irony of weeping, ‘liquid fury’ and crystallized ice inside her, the speaker in “On Maternity” does not appear to argue against motherhood as an institution or condemn it as futile. In fact, the poem reads as a snapshot of turbulent emotions rather than a politically coherent exhortation to change or action, in contrast, for example, to Cartagena Portalatín’s “Elegía segunda” as I argue later in this essay. Vázquez’s piece is a candid snapshot of a mother processing trauma, death, and even violence to her child and her own spirit. Where the succeeding poetic texts on maternity concretely eulogize women—mothers—who reclaimed their trauma as integral to their resilient identity as Afro-Caribbean women, Vázquez’s piece feels more intimate, fraught and, above all, open-ended.

The emotional fragmentation at the end of “On Maternity,” while arguably reflective of the ‘poetic archipelago’ (Pereira 147) seen in diasporic Caribbean writings



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due to a complex sense of belonging, does not preclude the possibility of reading reclamation through trauma in Vázquez's poem. In other words, though the poetic voice is pulled in different directions by the intensity of her mourning, she may yet recover a sense of identity through and in spite of her traumatic experience of motherhood. An examination of punctuation is once again key to an understanding of the last stanza. While this last section begins with the rhetorical question, "¿Quién lo ha visto de cuerpo presente?" (l. 12) in reference to the lost child, the lyrical response "O es una fuente de plaza aprisionada..." (l. 13) is phrased as an answer punctuated with a period, instead of as a follow-up question. Thus the speaker places more weight on her final conclusions about motherhood as a complex amalgamation of joy, fury, sorrow, and crystallized memories, as opposed to her initial speculation on maternity as a fleeting and futile endeavor. By reaching deeper into the spirit of the final stanza, then, I contend that the lyrical voice hints at taking the first steps toward confronting her trauma, grasping the violence done to her and her womb as a bereft mother, and embedding—reclaiming—this pain into her new identity. From a young woman her identity first shifted into mother with somber responsibilities and expectations; and



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now it has shifted once more into something dynamic still to be explored, into a former mother but also *always* mother, grounded in the future in the affliction of the past.

Aída Cartagena Portalatín and Defying Mourning

It is apparent from the above close reading of Vázquez's "On Maternity" that to clearly demarcate between the stages of motherhood, especially in the context of the Afro-Hispanic Caribbean woman protagonist, is a difficult undertaking. The mere consideration of childbirth is closed off in a circular model by the concomitant threat of death. For this reason, my poetic reading moves to Aída Cartagena Portalatín's "Elegía segunda" (1967), which considers mourning from the perspectives of both mother and child. True to its title, the poem eulogizes the life and charity of the speaker's mother. Opening in the bold capital letters characteristic of Cartagena Portalatín's style, the lyrical voice asserts, "MI MADRE FUE UNA DE LAS GRANDES MAMÁ del mundo" (ll. 1-2). The poetic voice goes on to narrate how "De su vientre nacieron siete hijos / que serían en Dallas, Memphis y Birmingham un problema racial. / (Ni blancos ni negros)" (ll. 3-5). While the poetic voice demonstrates clear admiration for a mother who gave birth to and raised seven children, she appears to direct the reader's attention toward



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the true test of the mother's fortitude: bearing children in a world where they are neither Black nor white, but of mixed race. Here the mother's Afro-Dominican background and her references to cities in the U.S. South help us better understand the setting of racial violence in which the mother is raising her children.

The history of Blackness and race in the Dominican Republic is fraught with violence, erasure and denial. National sentiments of Negrophobia were born of tensions with the neighboring Francophone Haiti, which represented in the early nineteenth century the first Black republic in the New World and a threat to the plantation economy of the Dominican Republic run by Caribbean-born, white-skinned *criollos* (Candelario 37). This resentment of Blackness eventually manifested as a denial by the elite Dominican class of its own African heritage, particularly during the revival of Negrophobic culture under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo from 1930 to 1961 and the presidency of his successor, Joaquín Balaguer. The Parsley Massacre of 1937, ordered by Trujillo, resulted in the death of around 20,000 Haitian immigrants and Dominican-born Haitians on the central border of Hispaniola, thereby cementing any fear of or rancor toward Blackness and identifying as Black (Sagás 103; Moreno 172; García-Peña 152). In keeping with the tendency to claim *indio* or indigenous descent as an alternative



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heritage, Dominicans became “Black behind the ears” and sought to alter and press their hair as a physical marker of social status and of good, or ‘whitened,’ race (Candelario 223). Such was the climate of psychological recolonization (Alexander and Mohanty xxiii) and denial of Blackness in the Dominican Republic, under the rule of Balaguer and the legacy of Trujillo, at the time that Cartagena Portalatín published “Elegía segunda.” The poem is therefore revolutionary in its own right for acknowledging the very racial dilemma in the lives of the poetic voice and her mother and siblings which was so often erased from the national narrative around them.

Even more important to note is that the 1960s were a key decade in the sociopolitical powder keg that was the U.S. South, embroiled in demonstrations against Jim Crow laws of segregation, threats of lynchings that had proliferated in previous decades with impunity, and police clashes and brutality (Bagwell et al.). The fact that the voice of “Elegía segunda” calls herself and her siblings “un problema racial” in Dallas and Memphis—landmark cities in the Civil Rights Movement of the U.S. South—is a testament to the poet’s awareness of the distinctive approaches to race in the United States as opposed to the Dominican Republic. Where the color of one’s skin would not be the determining factor in the racial tag a Dominican might use (for example, the use



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of the *indio* category to refer to Afro-descendant Dominicans, or the classification of light-skinned Dominicans as white), color was in fact the basis of a strict racial binary in the U.S. South during the poet's time and continues to be even today. Significantly, the poet's underscoring of her and her sibling's "problema racial" being "(ni blancos ni negros)" acknowledges their Blackness (Back 50) and in so doing transgresses the boundaries of the taboo in Dominican conversations on race. The parenthetical clarification artistically illustrates as well the liminality of the poetic voice, her mother, and their family, as Afro-Caribbeans who are not treated exclusively according to the "Afro-" in their physiognomy in the Caribbean, but could and would likely encounter a deadly violence for it in the United States.

Indeed, the poetic voice reminisces about her mother's nature of embracing all regardless of race and creed, a notion that is at odds with the violent climate of racism against which she contextualizes the poem. "Mamá ignoraba las Teorías Políticas. (Encíclicas y a Marx)," says the lyrical voice (l. 9). Cartagena Portalatín's employment of parenthetical phrases in the poem up to this point is, beyond a mere stylistic choice, her mode of underscoring heavy themes on which the reader is to pause and ponder. In the above line, the "Encyclicals" within parentheses refer to papal letters shared among the



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bishops of the Catholic Church, in which the Pope often exhorted his addressees to renew their efforts at living virtuously or combatting a social problem of the time. For example, *Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of Labor* (1891) by Pope Leo XIII was one of the first encyclicals published, and therein the pope condemned the greed of the capitalist world system while simultaneously he chastised dissenters who disrupted class harmony (Leo XIII n.p.). Cartagena Portalatín's use of "Marx," meanwhile, evokes the very same socialist ideologies named in *Rerum Novarum* that also marked the turn of the twentieth century. In this way, parenthetically but with intentionality, the speaker of "Elegía segunda" criticizes both religious and political ideologies for their inefficacy in comparison to her mother's active practice of charity. In the proceeding lines, she describes how her mother would charitably extend assistance to all in need, and how "sólo entendía que el pobre sufre hambre, reclama pan y necesita abrigo" (l. 10). The poetic voice also notes that such acts of generosity should not be lauded as heroism, but recognized as "deber de amor... / Deber del hombre por todos los HOMBRES" (ll. 16-17). This debt of love, or rather a debt owed by mankind to all of humanity, encapsulates the poet's elegy for a mother who lived as a surrogate mother to all,



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looking neither to race nor to nationality nor to ideology as a measure of who was deserving of her love.

Maternal love stands not only as the antithesis to, but also as the sister of, violence and pain in this poem. This theme is most apparent in the first stanza quoted and analyzed above, wherein the speaker and her mother both know that those in the family who emigrated to the U.S. would face beatings and profound degradation. In contrast to the erasure of Blackness prevalent in the Dominican Republic at the time of the publication of the poem, the speaker's mother is well aware of her children's roots and chooses to meet racism and Negrophobia with unconditional love of her own. In other words, her love is born not of ignorance of the difference between races and classes, but rather because of that difference and the need to mitigate the violence engendered by it. The Afro-Caribbean mother depicted in Cartagena Portalatín's text, then, faces a violence done to her offspring by a world that would either erase them or abuse them: a violence against her children's identities and bodies as much as it is against her own motherhood. She then processes this violence as a trauma that can be reclaimed through loving acts, serving as an "other mother" (Alexander 7) to all who confront the same racial dilemma as her family.



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As I foregrounded in opening of my analysis of “Elegía segunda,” the theme of mourning in Cartagena Portalatín’s poem is twofold. At first glance, the title and the verses themselves capture the voice of a daughter who mourns her mother’s passing and reminisces her mother’s love as her most outstanding and impactful trait on her children and generations to come. At the same time, mourning from the maternal perspective can be discerned in the very acts of defiant love for which the mother figure in this poem is so well remembered. It can be argued that the mother here is well aware of how her children are a ‘racial problem’ just a few hundred miles north of where her family resides, and that her children’s racial status as “ni blancos ni negros” places them in peril in other lands and in a strange position between poverty and privilege in the Dominican Republic. It can likewise be argued that her refusal to engage with religious and political discourse on money, charity, and rights is deliberate. Rather than being *ignorant* of “Teorías Políticas,” she *ignores* them—the poet’s careful diction here framing the woman’s choices as active instead of passive. In this way, the speaker’s mother challenges the frameworks of society that would discriminate against her children (much the same frameworks that could cause their death and a maternal trauma as deep as that of the lyrical voice in “On Maternity”) by functioning as mother not to one,



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not to seven, but to all. She engraves herself and her love into the memory of Blacks, whites, *mulatos*, and *indios* alike, so that “[m]ujeres de vida buena y de vida mala aun la lloran” (l. 11). Thus the cycle of violence, pain, and mourning that haunts the notion of maternity in the Afro-Caribbean context is rechanneled into a collective memory of other-mothering, and in so doing, the speaker’s mother—and the lyrical voice itself, in disseminating this memory—take another step toward the reclamation of the beauty of Black motherhood.

Georgina Herrera and Reclaiming Motherhood

The reproductive cycle of violence, trauma, and mourning underscored in “Elegía segunda” and partly in “On Maternity” is counterbalanced with reclamation. I argued above that the Afro-Caribbean mother of Cartagena Portalatín’s poem seizes the pain of the violence done to her children, at home and abroad, for their race and class, and transforms it into a potent demonstration of universal maternal love. In this sense, trauma lent itself to a reformation of identity and a direct resistance of the climate of racism and Black erasure that contextualizes Cartagena Portalatín’s work. Death shows its face once again at the opening of Georgina Herrera’s “Elogio para las negras viejas



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de antes,” another poem capturing the perspective of an Afro-Caribbean daughter as she muses on her memories of mothers and grandmothers congregating in bubbles of wisdom at funerals. Much like Miriam DeCosta-Willis’ observation that the work of Cuban poetic icon Nancy Morejón embodies the voice of a historical actor (108) for Afrofeminism, Juanamaría Cordones-Cook also describes the poems of Herrera—a close friend of Morejón herself—as “[una] historia ancestral de rebeldía” among Afro-Cuban women (*Cimarroneando con Georgina Herrera*). Herrera notes in the same interview with Cordones-Cook that there is a power in an oral culture of Black women telling stories, and more importantly, of “recontando abusos con triunfo.” Ivette de Assis-Wilson concurs that in Afrofeminist writings, but particularly Herrera’s poetry, there are “three frames to facilitate a deeper understanding of Black women’s texts: revision, (re)membrance, and recursion” (6). In this sense, intergenerational memory of trauma, rebellion, and victory is key to the speaker’s understanding of her own identity in “Elogio.”

Herrera’s piece encapsulates the unique relationship I have traced thus far between birth, motherhood, and mourning, all of which may appear to be a closed cycle but which, through the spirit of these poets, can strike a new path toward



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intergenerational memory and cultural and bodily reclamation. In the first few verses, the poetic voice of “Elogio” recalls:

Los velorios
eran el sitio exacto para que se abrieran
como libros fabulosos
en sus mejores páginas. (ll. 1-4)

In contrast to the somberness of bereavement that characterizes “La silla dorada” or even the unmitigated agony of “On Maternity,” grief in the lines above is but the backdrop of a fond recollection. The wakes in the speaker’s childhood provided the setting in which “las negras viejas” could share their sagacity. The poet’s choice to compare these old women to books in the opening simile becomes well justified in the succeeding lines, where we begin to see a blossoming contrast between the knowledge of her ancestors and the knowledge of written books and university courses.

Notably, the poet posits herself in an unspecified “we” from the next lines onward, while she maintains “las viejas negras” as an equally nameless group of “ellas.” The effect of this anonymity is twofold. On one hand, the speaker emphasizes the fact that these memories do not simply belong to an individual, but are meant to represent an almost universal experience in the childhood of any Afro-Hispanic



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Caribbean child or woman. On the other hand, the construction of a *they* versus a *we* hearkens back to the thematic tension between old knowledge and new, or oral tradition and written. The speaker laments that she and the other young girls or women like her spoke back to their elders and “no sup[er]eron oír” (l. 11), instead taking “cursos de filosofía” (l. 12) and acting without listening. A cursory reading of the reference to philosophy courses might at first lead us to believe that the poet is mocking the usefulness of formal education. However, when compared with the parenthetical inclusion of ‘Political Theory’ and ‘Encyclicals and Marx’ in “Elegía segunda,” what emerges is a much more profound tension between cultures. For the voice of “Elogio,” philosophy courses represent all the written knowledge of the postcolonial world which she and her fellow young women prioritized over the tradition of their foremothers; they did not learn to value in time the virtues of power and resistance, for example, that their ancestors might have passed on to them. For this reason, the opening simile painting the old Black women as books is even more significant, because at this later age the poetic voice now realizes that the knowledge of her (grand)mothers is every bit as precious and potent as the knowledge she might have attained through schooling.



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The poet attributes her inability to listen to the old Black women to the fact that “[h]abíamos nacido demasiado cerca / de otro siglo, sólo / aprendimos a preguntarlo todo, / y al final estamos sin respuestas” (ll. 14-17). The years that exist between her and her grandmothers have already distanced her from the palpability of their struggles which have yielded their wisdom. Extrapolated further, the centuries that lie between the speaker and her ancestors, those from the coasts of Africa and those enslaved in the first plantations of the Caribbean, have divided her deeply from the consciousness of the violence and trauma that were sustained by those mothers’ bodies and passed on through the generations to their daughters and descendants. At the same time, it is the fact that this violence and trauma are so engraved into the Afro-Caribbean woman’s body and identity that, much like the speaker of “La silla dorada,” the voice of “Elogio” eventually comes to realize her foolishness and begins to contemplate the years of wisdom she has missed. In this sense, the tone of “Elogio” centers on regret and backward glances, while the speaker’s attitude in “La silla dorada” takes the act of recollection as a means of expressing righteous anger at her present and her future.

“Elogio” is an especially relevant and productive piece for this study of maternity and cyclical tropes, because in the latter half of the poem the speaker depicts



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her own transition from daughter to (grand)mother, from young to old, from one generation to the next. She takes on the mantle of the old Black women of days gone by; it is her turn now to occupy the seat at the wake and beckon the young girls forward to listen. “Ahora, en los velorios, alguien, / estoy segura, espera / que contemos lo que debimos aprender,” she surmises (ll. 18-20). The cycles are manifold: the narrative setting begins in and returns to the wakes; at the new wake, there is another circle of younger women waiting to hear the word of the old Black women; and, most importantly, the poetic voice has shifted from the *we* of the deaf youth to the *we* of “las negras viejas” who at one time in her eyes were the unreachable *they*. Yet at the same time, the cycle has been broken, because the speaker acknowledges that she and those her age in the present day are no longer like the old Black women of days gone by. Instead of possessing the power to open up like books to their best pages, “[p]ermanecemos silenciosas, / parecemos / tristes cotorras mudas” (ll. 21-23). Where the speech acts of the previous generation of old Black women were equated with the power of the written word, here the speaker’s pages are blank and her tongue is bound by silence. The ‘philosophy courses’ from her past do not serve her now at a time when all she wishes is to be able to reproduce the sagacity of her foremothers, but cannot



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because “[n]o supimos / apoderarnos de la magia de contar / sencillamente” (ll. 24-26).

Silence arises again as a motif, and an ironic one. Here in “Elogio,” silence is reproduced not because of violence done to the body of the woman speaking, but because of the violence done to the valuable words and lessons pronounced by the generation of women before her. Phrased another way, the selected poetry at this point has tended to depict profound traumas that result in a mother’s inability to articulate her voice, herself, or her body; by contrast, “Elogio” captures the mourning of an Afro-Caribbean woman who committed violence against the memory being handed down to her by her foremothers, and so lost the power of those recollections and must lapse once more into silence.

The tone of the poems read thus far overlaps in the overarching presence of grief. “On Maternity” reveals the depths of maternal loss and questions if the mother’s body and identity can ever be separate again from her child who died. “Elegía segunda” mourns the passing of a beloved mother to all. What, then, can be learned from the speaker’s grief over her foolishness and the loss of generational memory in “Elogio”? Conrad James points out that “anguish and a sense of loss feature in most of Herrera’s poetry” (475), giving rise to a kind of “psychological orphanhood” (477) that colors the



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lyrical voice of much of Herrera's writing and which works in interesting opposition to her readings of motherhood. In a 2014 interview, the poet explains that much of her poetry comes from a place of resisting cultural isolation by recognizing the power of a culture of Black women telling stories (Cordones-Cook). Specifically, she characterizes the storytelling trope as an essential congregation in which memories are recovered and bodies (and, I would argue, agencies) are joined in a mutually supportive circle. "Elogio para las negras viejas de antes" therefore serves an exhortation to the young Afro-Caribbean women of today to listen when they, too, like the poet herself, have the fleeting chance to draw from the memory of their ancestors and reclaim it as their own for their womanhood and their identity.

Conclusion

The three poems by Vázquez, Cartagena Portalatín, and Herrera studied in this essay represent diverse approaches to motherhood as works narrated by daughters, granddaughters, outsiders, and mothers themselves. They relate specifically to Afro-Hispanic Caribbean motherhood by highlighting the racial struggles that Afro-descendants inherit from their foremothers; reading colonial and postcolonial violence



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against mothers' bodies and identities in those narratives; and reclaiming physical and psychological trauma as a key to recovering one's body and identity as a modern Afro-Caribbean woman. Cartagena Portalatín's poem builds on the multi-layered violence against Black bodies, found in the erasure of African roots in Dominican narratives and the brutality toward Blacks in the U.S. South, to eulogize the speaker's mother as a woman rebelling against the hostility of the world with (other)motherly love. "On Maternity" provides an intimate glimpse into how the voice of the bereaved Afro-Caribbean mother, such as that of the era of Cartagena Portalatín's text, would process grief and trauma from a lifetime of violence against her and her child.

These poems are significant to a literary and discursive study of Black womanhood in the Hispanic Caribbean, where postcolonial traces of violence against the Black female body yet exist vis-à-vis discrimination, racism, erasure of heritage, and even brutality. The poems are even more crucial to understanding Afro-Caribbean motherhood not only as an institution of expectation, but also as a struggle made more complex by racial tensions and the heightened possibility of the premature death of the child or the mother to violence. The poets' texts diverge in the manner in which their poetic voices define reclamation of trauma in the identity of the Afro-Caribbean mother;



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for example, where Morejón might advocate for an expressive pride in one's Blackness and womanhood as a way to honor the memory of one's abused and enslaved foremothers, Vázquez looks at the internalized pain of motherhood in the present tense and poeticizes that individual trauma. Meanwhile, Cartagena Portalatín and Herrera share some thematic commonalities in their exhortations to readers and young Afro-Caribbean women to honor their mothers and elders for the wisdom they can pass down about converting pain into a beautiful expression of identity. Ultimately, the poets' voices converge in that they all identify the traumas of slavery and racism as an ineluctable foundation of Black motherhood in the Caribbean today. Whether it be through maternal acts of charity, an indomitable spirit against racism, or candid cries of agony, the lyrical voices of these poems choose not to flee the pain of motherhood, but rather confront it and embrace it as the blessing and the curse of Black maternity.

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