"WE, TOO": THE IDENTITY FORMATION OF CARIBBEAN WOMEN

Tanya Jo Woodward

Gardner-Webb University

The Mirabal sisters from Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies* are "agents of their own fate" (Paravisini-Gebert 166). What hope and agency can the Mirabals, as well as the women in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Michelle Cliff's *Abeng,* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker,* offer Caribbean women struggling to find an identity? Using Alvarez, Rhys, Cliff and Danticat's works, a number of characteristics toward identity formation surface. Through resistance to stereotypes, *metissage*, communal feminism, repurposed trauma, and self-referential definitions, the identity of Caribbean women flourishes.

Caribbean women develop identity through resistance to stereotypes. One such stereotype is woman as victim, or the pitiful "third world woman" (Mohanty 197). In Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette appears as a victim of identity paralysis until she embraces Christophine's suggestion to "have spunks and do battle yourself" (69). She eventually burns Mr. Rochester's house down: "I saw the flames shoot up" (112). However, this falsely constructed "victim" image does little to honor these strong women who possess aggressive, unflinching spirits which endure (Ormerod 114). Most often, due to slavery's destabilizing their relationships, these strong women were "deprived of the support of a partner or family," becoming their families' providers (Ormerod 114, 116). Paravisini-Gebert explains that women of the Caribbean were led "to assume roles not readily open to them" traditionally (167).

The Mirabel sisters in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies*, the legendary four sisters who resisted the dictator of the Dominican Republic Rafael Trujillo, embody women who resist victimized stereotypes and redefine traditional roles catalyzing their participation in "grassroots

activism and courageous resistance” (Paravisini-Gebert 166). For example, Minerva is emboldened from a young age to promote justice after observing the abuse of power and exploitation of women at convent school. After Minerva’s “woman’s eyes are opened,” she chases personal liberty in attending law school while promoting national freedom (ch. 6). Instead of being weighed down by Trujillo’s abuse of women, mirrored in her father’s secret second family, she realizes that the “things a man does” should not turn her into a victim (ch. 6). Following Minerva’s lead, Patria also crafts a new role. Patria would traditionally have been expected to concern herself only with her own family. After she observes “the life drain out of [a young rebel],” she realizes “he’s one of mine,” like her own child she is carrying in her womb (Alvarez ch. 8). Patria states “coming down that mountain, I was a changed woman” (ch. 8). Observing the brutal murdering of her people leads Patria to extend her insular traditional motherhood beyond her own family to the resistance movement. Later, Patria’s motherly softness, rather than Minerva’s ferocity, allows the Mirabal women to continue rebellion activities while under house arrest. For example, Patria’s gentle “sweetness [which] could move mountains” manages to persuade corrupt Captain Pena to grant visiting permissions to communicate resistance information with Dr. Vinas (ch. 12). Ultimately, resistance to victim stereotypes helps the Mirabel sisters form purposeful identities.

Additionally, identity flourishes through *metissage*. *Metissage* is the unique mixing, interweaving, or braiding of cultural forms. In a way, metissage represents a sort of third-culture. Beverly Ormerod unpacks metissage in her “The Representation of Women in French Caribbean Fiction” though it departs from the way Michelle Cliff depiction Clare’s *metissage,* or mixed, heritage in *Abeng*. For instance, Ormerod does not provide many examples of *metissage*, or the braiding of cultural forms, in a positive sense. Her examples imply that the trickster wins, not the

third culture woman. Ormerod's essay and definitions tend to put characters in clean categorical boxes without recognizing the complexity of the human experience. *Metissage,* as seen in the novels previously discussed, is beautiful, but messy. Ormerod's essay exposes the negative aspects of transculturation without much acknowledgement for the positive aspects. She speaks of these figures as ones of resistance in different forms (101, 105) However, she locks even the most resistant in the past. Her essay concludes with the "cultural pressures" which "cannot be resisted"—giving little room for Caribbean Women to cast a new vision for their future identity (117). As Ormond and Haigh discuss, a Caribbean woman's identity is characterized by a "restlessness" due to the conflicting and varied cultures part of their heritage (Haigh 3). However, a "new identity" is possible if these women seek to channel this restlessness into a unified, "braided" sense of self (Haigh 3). Just as many Caribbean women's narratives are "quilted," or told through multiple perspectives, so must these women stitch together the multiplicity of their identity (Davies 12). The Mirabal sisters fight for their families and extended Dominican national "family" by weaving together cultural values of community and motherhood to the resistance movement. For example, Patria's new role as Mother of the Nation is both a resistance to the stereotype of mother as well as an example of *metissage*: a braiding of her identity as caretaker to her new calling as resistor. Likewise, when Dede entwines the conflicting pieces of herself—her courage with her hesitation to join the movement—she finds her calling which is to "encourage [women] in their small rebellions" (ch. 9). Minerva also develops her sense of self through reconciling her values of communal culture with her call to promote freedom. She possesses a strong sense of justice, as seen in her shock at Trujillo's corruption: "didn't anyone tell him that wasn't right?" (ch. 2). Minerva "knows [she] would have" corrected their president (ch. 2). Her sense of justice unites her cause to the revolution

because she wishes for Sinita, Mate, and her fellow Dominicans to "grow up in a free country" (ch. 3). Minerva threads love for country with resistance to oppressive government. For the Mirabal women, *metissage* connects their cultural identity to their callings.

In contrast, Caribbean women wither in isolated singular identities. For example, Dede wrestles between "strangely mingled surges of dread and joy," equally fearing involvement with the rebellion or being left behind (ch 9). Like Minerva, Dede masks herself as the smiling complying "sonrisa," locking herself into a passive singular identity, because she believes "of course, she never plays" or that can only be a bystander (ch. 5). Likewise, Clare from Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* is held captive by one identity. She believes her father's insistence that she "came from his people, white people" despite contrary evidence (127). She wonders "how she could be white with a colored mother, brown legs, and ashy knees" (73). Her parents are further unable to help Clare articulate her multiethnic identity because both, in different ways, "were locked in the past"; Mr. Savage clings to his European roots and Kitty cleaves to her fractured people (128). In order to fully "braid" the various pieces of her identity, both Clare and Dede must move beyond singular identities. Lionnet suggests that Caribbean women such as Clare and Dede can flourish when they "re-appropriate the past" (5). Both women must integrate the complexity of their polyphonic identity in order to envision a new future.

Caribbean women blossom when they refuse to allow the horror of the past to define their future, but when they cannot, they become stagnated by the past. For instance, in Edweidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, Haitians like Beatrice maintain a mental prison, "whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives" (137). Such characters remain wedged in the past, unable to release themselves from reliving the trauma of Dew Breaker terrorization. Similarly, Kitty in *Abeng* keeps "darkness locked inside" by living in the shadow

of her husband’s rape, which further stunts her daughter (Cliff 151). She lives out the worldview Clare voices that “dark people [should expect] to suffer in a white [society]” (77). Assuming her daughter’s lighter skin makes her a natural inheritor to white privilege and oppression, Kitty neglects to change the cycle of generational abuse. Instead, after Clare kills a man and her grandmother’s pig, Kitty passes her off to have Clare’s worldview reinforced by a racist white woman (151). Kitty makes the mistake of permanently “casting her people [and herself] into the position of victim,” believing the “revolution was lost” and there could be no future for herself, her daughter, or her people (128). In contrast, Inez does not allow her imprisonment as Judge Savage’s sex slave to determine her future. Empowered by Mma Alli, she escapes and becomes an advocate for her people, a “friend of the slaves”(33). Unlike Kitty, Inez repurposes her traumatic captivity to emancipate a new future for her community, securing land and economic freedom (39). Similarly, Alvarez’s Minerva could have determined the revolution ”lost” and allowed Lina’s story to become hers at the Discovery Day Dance. It would have been easier for her family if she would “become [Trujillo’s creature] like all the others” (ch. 6). Aware of the horror of what’s being done to Dominican women by Trujillo, she acknowledges how “easily it happens” to give in to oppression, such as lying about not knowing Lio. Yet, Minerva refuses to become the next “conquered,” she subversively plays Trujillo’s ego against himself to manipulate access to university (ch. 6). Likewise, Anne from *The Dew Breaker* dwells in the difficult space, the “pendulum of regret and forgiveness,” which could have positioned her to seek revenge against her brother’s killer, her husband (Danticat 242). Yet, she makes “sadness beautiful” because she concentrates on and “revis[es] who she was now, or who she wanted to become” rather than dwelling in vengeance (176, 241). The women in the novels who lost

themselves in their trauma become “fragments of themselves long lost to others,” but those who work through the trauma find healing in their new identity (138).

Caribbean women find voice when they transvalue, or reappropriate, western feminism. Often, Caribbean women’s “values and priorities” conflict with traditional western feminism (Haigh 6). Unlike western freedom which is for the individual, for these women, revolution and freedom is for the community, not merely the individual. For example, both Danticat’s voiceless Ms. Hinds and silent, hurting Nadine in *The Dew Breaker* need one another to find their voice again. As Nadine reassures Ms. Hinds, “I’m here”; these women acknowledge their collective pain, a metaphor for Haitian national trauma and Caribbean women’s suffering (61). Furthermore, Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido observe the impressive, unique way “in which Caribbean women fight for their families. They are often superlatively resourceful, strong, patient, and capable of immense ‘grace under pressure’” (xv). However, these strong women are not invincible independently. For Caribbean women, it’s necessary to work together as they are oppressed together. For instance, Mate’s declaration, “we’re a cell,” from *In the Time of Butterflies*, symbolizes the Mirabel’s shared work to make the resistance effective (ch.9). The sisters know liberation isn’t singular. Patria observes, “Papa’s other family would be the agents of our salvation” indicating the solidarity necessary as women for a better tomorrow (ch. 10). Finally, it is the collective generational resistance of *Abeng* Nanny, Mma Alli, Inez and Kitty the “Maroon Girls” who subtly resist an enslaved future for women in Jamaica (127). While western feminism values the individual, Caribbean women’s identity values the collective community rather than only individuals.

Identity flourishes when allowed to be self-referential. When Caribbean women are allowed to write their own definition of self, they find themselves. Conversely, women who

define their identity in reference to others lose themselves. For example, both Lina and the Senator’s wife remain trapped as Trujillo’s prey in Alvarez’s *Butterflies* (ch. 2, 6). As Ormerod explains about these women trapped by other’s definintions: “at the level of gender, [they] are wom[a]n as victim” who reinforce the “sexual helplessness of the [Caribbean] female” (103). Both women, out of misunderstood love or fear, are helpless to resist becoming victimized. Though Patria’s wooing of Pena may appear victim-like, it is actually a subtle subversion of the “victimized woman” label because she uses her femininity for her cause (ch. 10). She self-defines woman not as victim but victor. Also, Dede initially struggled to define herself not according to Jaimito, who demanded no involvement in the rebellion. She explains to the journalist: “back in those days, we women followed our husbands” (ch. 9). However, she privately admits to herself that dictatorial husbands are “such a silly excuse” (ch. 9). By contrast, the other Mirabal sisters find freedom in an identity which is not dependent on victimizers. Though Dede regrets waiting to get involved, she eventually finds a secure identity through solidarity with her sisters, with whom she isn’t “withdrawn” but is able to give and receive love “in full measure, both directions” (ch. 9).

Apart from power abusers, women struggle to differentiate themselves from strong personalities, such as Minerva from Alvarez’s *Butterflies*. For example, Dede and Mate struggle to define themselves apart from Minerva instead of forming a self-referential identity. Part of Dede’s internal struggle is a false perception of courage. She can only imagine courage not shadowed by fear. Dede falsely believes courage can only exist in ways Minerva displays, instead of the daily courage she herself exemplifies. What she doesn’t see is that Minerva’s bravery initially stemmed from others, “I had to be brave for Sinita” (ch. 2), before it could be self-motivated. She does not see Minerva’s own hesitation to give over all to the rebellion: “I

feel ready—as I wasn’t before—to risk the truth” (Ch. 6). Also, Dede doesn’t see how Minerva “hid my anxieties,” acknowledging “if they had only known how frail was their iron-will heroine” (ch.12). Suffering from survivor guilt, Dede struggles to see her own courage in her daily “clothing [the family] in silk and pearls” and being the calculated caretaker of the Mirabals (ch. 1, Epilogue). When Dede accepts the ways she can uniquely and bravely provide for her family, how she can “save the sisters,” she begins to find her identity (ch. 9). Similarly, Mate compares herself to and idolizes Minerva. Unlike Dede, Mate joins the resistance movement for the adventure (Ch. 3) and stays out of her love for her sister. In prison, she compares herself to Minerva, not realizing her greatest asset is her solidarity with her sister: “what was I supposed to do? Leave Minerva behind to be a martyr [in prison] all by herself” (ch. 11). Mate freely admits to herself “like Dede, I just didn’t have the nerves for revolution, but unlike her, I didn’t have the excuse of a bossy husband” (ch. 11). Mate is aware that she is unlike Minerva, but unlike Dede, she isn’t paralyzed by the difference. The Mirabal women best approach their senses of self by embracing their own unique gifts rather than depending on others to determine and define their identities.

For the Caribbean woman, it is the “love among us” which enables survival and resistance to the horrors of oppression the women in Rhys, Alvarez, Danticat, and Cliff’s novels experience (Alvarez ch. 11). In examining Caribbean women writers to understand the identity formation of women of the region, women become victims no longer in forming identities which resist stereotypes, including western ideas of feminism. These women achieve self-actualization through *metissage* of fractured identities, repurposing trauma to find self-referential senses of self. As Mate observes in prison: “there is something deeper…, a current going among us, like an invisible needle stitching us together” (Alvarez ch. 11). What is the current and invisible

stitching? A hopeful metaphor of reaching self-actualization for the women of Rhys, Alvarez, Danticat, and Cliff’s novels.

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