Toni Cade Bambara

Biography

Toni Cade Bambara, born Miltona Mirkin Cade on March 25, 1939, lived the first ten years of her life in Harlem. Bambara credits the Harlem community as having a significant influence on her writing. She learned the power of the word from "the speakers on Speaker's Corner in Harlem" (Tate 28). She also credits the musicians of the forties and fifties with giving her "voice and pace and pitch" (Tate 29). While living on 151st Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, Miltona changed her name to "Toni" around kindergarten. The richly diverse population of the area contributed much to Bambara's life lessons. Always willing to "stop and talk," Bambara "adopted people" to fill the place in her life for relatives, especially grandmothers (*Deep Sightings* 208-209).

Although the neighborhood was instrumental in forming an important part of Bambara's identity, the author says her greatest influence and inspiration was her mother: "My mother had great respect for the life of the mind" (*Deep Sightings* 212). In a poignant dedication to her mother in *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara writes: "Mama, Helen Brent Henderson Cade Brehon, who in 1948, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me." In 1959, Toni Cade graduated from Queen's College with a B.A. in Theater Arts/English. For her first published short story, "Sweet Town," she received the John Golden Award for fiction. From 1962 to 1965, Bambara completed her master's degree while serving as program director at Colony Settlement House in Brooklyn. She began teaching at City College of New York in 1965 and continued working there until 1969. During that time Bambara became involved in many sociopolitical issues and community groups. Bambara also attributes her mother's influence as key to shaping her political being: "My mother gave us the race thing. [In school] we were to report back to her any stereotypic or racist remark" (*Deep Sightings* 216).

Quick Facts

* 1939-1995
* African-American writer, filmmaker, activist, and feminist
* First published fictional work was *Gorilla, My Love*

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Within the highly charged political atmosphere of the civil rights and women's movements, Toni Cade Bambara edited and published an anthology of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, entitled *The Black Woman*. An important product of the Black Arts Movement, *The Black Woman* was the first major feminist anthology featuring work by Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and others. The genesis of the anthology, Bambara says, "grew out of impatience with the lack of writing for African-American women by African-American women. Bambara herself contributed three essays to the anthology. In "On the Issue of Roles," she argues that "in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods" (*Black Woman* 102). This statement not only epitomizes the themes of many of the works within the anthology, but also explicitly reflects the emerging attitude of the time.

In 1971, Bambara edited her second anthology, entitled *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, while teaching at Rutgers. The first seven stories of the book fall under the category Bambara calls "Our Great Kitchen Tradition." They are the "stories of the family" that make up an inextricable part of the AfricanAmerican heritage and tradition of orality. Stories about "how Cousin Cora met and married the preacher from Atlanta, how Uncle Bubba would play the harmonica for country picnics, [or] how Grandaddy Johnson used to ride the Baltimore and Ohio . . . 'represent the meaningful heritage of memories passed on' in the family kitchen among elders" (*Tales* "Preface"). These stories are also representative of the kinds of stories "I wished I had read growing up," remarks Bambara (*Sturdy Black Bridges* 240). Included within the anthology is a work by Bambara entitled "Raymond's Run," which is about community and family and centers on a girl named Squeaky, who takes a giant leap of personal growth. As Martha Vertreace states in "The Dance of Character and Community," Squeaky becomes Bambara's metaphor for an aggressive approach to life that involves problem solving within a communal context" (*American Women* 160).

Bambara's contribution to the collection underlines the need to write a bildungsroman (coming of age) story in which actions speak louder than words. A year after editing *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, Bambara released the first book she had written entirely on her own, a collection of short stories entitled *Gorilla, My Love*.

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The short story genre is Bambara's favorite mode of written expression. Bambara says, for her, the short story "makes a modest appeal for attention, slips up on your blind side and wrassles you to the mat before you know what's grabbed you" (Sternburg 164). The stories in *Gorilla, My Love*, as described by Bambara, are "on-the-block, in-the-neighborhood, back glance pieces" (Tate 24) that argue for the strength and empowerment of community. Not only is community a thread that binds the stories in the collection together, but also the identity of women within the context of community appears as a significant theme throughout the book. Bambara is deeply concerned with how the wisdom of the community passes from generation to generation and "manifests itself in the living" (Tate 66).

One of the stories, entitled "My Man Bovanne," reflects Bambara's strong belief that the African-American oral tradition keeps the "strength of [the] past, available in the present so that it can move our future" (Tate 69) and promotes the value of elders to the younger generation of the community. The protagonist of the story, Miss Hazel, a mother pushing sixty, is confronted by her children about "makin a spectacle of [her] self" (*Gorilla* 5) by dancing with an elderly blind man. The thoughts of Miss Hazel at the end of the story reveal Bambara's own feelings about preserving the valuable voice of the elderly: "Cause you gots to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix the mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program goin, and the school for the little kids and the campaign and all. Cause old folks is the nation" (*Gorilla* 910). "My Man Bovanne" is one of Bambara's most endearing stories and is exemplary of her style of writing, what she terms "straightup fiction" (*Gorilla* "Preface"). *Gorilla, My Love* was accepted enthusiastically and received favorable reviews, especially within the African-American community.

Between the release of *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and the publication of Bambara's second collection of short stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), the author traveled extensively. In particular, her visits to Cuba in 1973, a move to Atlanta with her daughter, Karma, in 1974, and a visit to Vietnam in 1975 had a powerful impact on many of the stories in the collection. In Cuba, she met women working in factories, on the land, and in the street who were able to resolve class and color conflicts. In Vietnam, she was "struck by the women's ability to break through traditional roles, traditional expectations" (Bell 238).

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In reflecting back on that period, Bambara refers to herself as “a nationalist; . . . a feminist” (Tate 14). Her writing of the time deals with the injustices inflicted upon children and minority women’s struggle against oppression.

In particular, three of the protagonists in the stories in *Sea Birds* resonate with a strong feminist voice: Virginia, in “The Organizers Wife,” Lacy, in “Broken Field Running,” and the narrator in “The Apprentice.” “Broken Field Running” vociferates with the intersection of the oppressive forces weighing on the African-American community and the injustices leveled upon the children living there. Strong images symbolizing the European Whites’ continued oppression of African Americans are prevalent in the stories; for example, a “Gothic cathedral looms” and “gargoyles peer down on the children” (*Sea Birds* 52) as they walk through the streets. Lacy, who continually struggles with the predicament of the African-American children, realizes that the system hinders because: “We blind our children . . . Blind them to their potential, the human potential. Cripple them, dispirit them. Cripples make good clients, wards, beggars, victims” (*Sea Birds* 52). Lacy, aware of how oppression is the juggernaut that prevents the children and the rest of her community from escaping the status quo, fights for their survival. Lacy is what Bambara would call a “warrior” because the women in her stories are fighters and survivors. Bambara understands and believes in surviving because she grew up listening to stories about “Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and [Bambara’s] grandmother, Annie” (Sternburg 163), and so the women in her stories not only survive, they inspire.

Although Bambara’s preference for the short story was responsible for the publication of her first two books of fiction, the author began writing her first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, in 1978. Published in 1980, Bambara says the novel “came out of a problem-solving impulse.” She was interested in bringing together the activists, warriors, and medicine people within her community to “fuse those camps” (Tate 16) into a venerable force. Set in Claybourne, Georgia, the novel is about a community of black people searching for the healing properties of salt. In a recorded interview with Kay Bonetti (1982), Bambara reflects on the symbolism of salt and the African flying myth, both critical metaphorical components to the novel. Her reflection is itself wonderfully representative of the eloquent oral tradition of the African-American community: “We got grounded because we ate too much salt, but some folks say it, we got grounded because we opened ourselves up to horror -- invited it onto the continent -- that created tears. And it was that salt that drowned our wings and made us earth-bound.”

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The novel centers on Velma Henry, a community organizer who experiences both a mental and emotional crisis, and Minnie Ransom, a faith healer. However, according to Ruth Elizabeth Burks ("From Baptism to Resurrection"), "the characters speak little, because they have lost the desire to communicate through words. Their thoughts, as conveyed by Bambara, are more real to them than that that is real" (qtd. in Butler-Evans 173). For Bambara, this is purposeful; she looked for "a new kind of narrator narrator as medium . . . a kind of magnet through which other people tell their stories." *The Salt Eaters* was met with mixed reviews. Her experimental technique appealed to some but not to others.

After publishing *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara wanted "to explore more senseably" another kind of medium that would enable her to expand her repertoire of rhetorical skills. In "Salvation is the Issue" (*Black Women Writers*), Bambara states that she "wanted to experiment with new kinds of writing materials and writing forms and to pick up another kind of pencil the camera" (44). Bambara went to Philadelphia and met Louis Massiah, founder-director of the Scribe Video Center. There, she not only learned about the art of editing, she also became involved in teaching others about filmmaking. Three of Bambara's short stories, "Gorilla, My Love," "Medley," and "Witchbird" have been adapted to film. In *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, Bambara openly criticizes previous Hollywood films about blacks. She says, "the tools of my trade are colonized . . . the global screen has been colonized. And the audience -- readers and viewers -- is in bondage to an industry" (139-140).

Bambara's need to challenge the industry provoked her first film project, the documentary *The Bombing of Osage Avenue*, in 1986. She won the Best Documentary Academy Award for the film, which is about the May 13th, 1985 bombing of the headquarters of an emerging black organization, MOVE, in Philadelphia. The mayor at that time, W. Wilson Goode, ordered the attack. With more than 500 police officers surrounding 6221 Osage, a 90-minute gun battle ensued, and a bomb dropped from a state helicopter ignited not only the MOVE headquarters, but also another sixty-one houses in Cobb's Creek. Eyewitness accounts and interviews are the backbone of Bambara's *Bombing of Osage Avenue*. Falling back on her ideology "to tell the truth in her writing," Bambara used film to expose the brutality and inhumanity of an event that left eleven -- six adults and five children -- dead.

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In 1993, at what seemed the height of her career, Bambara was diagnosed with colon cancer. Pulling herself up after diagnosis and treatment, she was determined to "kick cancer's ass" and get on with her work. During the process of recovery, Bambara began working with Louis Massiah on her next documentary, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices* about the long and remarkable life of Dr. William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963). The film was released in early 1995. Bambara succumbed to colon cancer on December 9, 1995 in Philadelphia. However, her work has lived on two posthumous publications are proof of her enduring spirit and legacy. In 1995, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* was released. In the collection, an important interview by Bambara's longtime friend, Louis Massiah, entitled "How She Came by Her Name," offers an indepth and valuable look into the author's personal history and the formation of the unique identity she came to claim as her own. She reflects on growing up in Harlem and the importance of her mother's influence in her life, her political insights, and her writing.

Bambara's second posthumous publication, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), was the result of about twelve years of work and research. Bambara's close friend and editor, Toni Morrison, edited the book. *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, a novel about the Atlanta child murders that took place in the early eighties, centers on the Spencer family. Nathaniel (Spence) and Zala Spencer, the separated parents of three children, find themselves pulled into a living nightmare when their eldest son, Sonny, is missing. The events in the story, based on the true accounting of the murders that claimed over forty children, was seen by many as "a class thing" (*These Bones Are Not My Child* 103), the main reason it took almost two years to solve. The novel uncovers the unbelievable corruption and coverup that took place in Atlanta at that time, amid political, racial, and class tension.

Toni Cade Bambara was a writer, activist, feminist, and filmmaker. In 1982, in a taped interview with Kay Bonetti, Bambara reflected on her work: "When I look back at my work with any little distance the two characteristics that jump out at me is one, the tremendous capacity for laughter, but also a tremendous capacity for rage. " Bambara spent her entire life writing about both. Her ability to laugh and imbue laughter into her stories came from her strong conviction and belief in family and community. Her rage came from the injustices she saw in the treatment of children, the elderly, and the oppressed black community.

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As she wrote in “What It is I’m Doing Anyhow,” writing was “one of the ways [she] participate[d] in struggle” (*The Writer on Her Work* 154). She witnessed that struggle between old and young, blacks and whites, and men and women. Bambara worked to change the oppressed situation of blacks in the U.S. She worked to destroy illusions, demolish myths, and celebrate struggle within an exploitive, strangling, capitalist society. And she never gave up, for she knew there was “lotta work ahead of us” (*Black Women Writers at Their Work* 14).

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