Living in Place as African American Tradition: Inhabitory Consciousness in *Her Own Place*

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I

Recently many African American women writers foreground the importance of the connection to land or a particular place in their efforts to fight against destruction of their communities and cultural selves. In *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), African American cultural critic bell hooks articulates an affirming aspect of the rural South as its relationship with the land and community. Writing about a need for psychological and spiritual healing for black women in a racist and capitalist society, she emphasizes the importance of this cultural tradition for self-recovery through remembering how to connect to selves, ancestors, community, and the land. In the chapter "Touching the Earth," hooks especially asserts that farming and connection to the earth are valuable aspects of black heritage:

> When we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully. I believe this. The ancestors taught me it was so. As a child I loved playing in dirt, in that rich Kentucky soil, that was a source of life. Before I understood anything about the pain and exploitation of the southern system of sharecropping, I understood that grown-up black folks loved the land. (*Sisters* 175)

hooks stresses that touching the earth was crucial to black people's spiritual healing because it had given them emotions based on recognition of relationships, such as "a respect for life-giving forces of nature, of the earth" and "[t] he sense of union and harmony with nature" (*Sisters* 176). Living close to the land is essential in learning connectedness to other living things.

While critical of a history of slavery and social, material, and psychological oppression which black people experienced in farm life in the South, hooks feels that losing such a sense of connection or a relational mode of being is devastating to the African American community as a whole in the long run. Remembering the connection to the land, to the earth, is necessary for both African Americans' healthy existence and their survival as a community. Self-recovery through a sense of connectedness, hooks believes, is thus a part of collective efforts for social change.

One might consider this attention to the land-based tradition of African American culture against the emerging environmental movements or consciousness. Indeed, the rise in the interests in land or the rural is not unique to African Americans, but it is shared with diverse cultural or social groups including many white community-oriented ecologists or bioregionalists who are engaged in reflection over the dominant ideology in one's society as well as the revival of the caring tradition. African American writers' attention parallels the connection between the land and culture found in writing on rural or agrarian lives by these people. For instance, Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* offers a vigilant critique, from a farmer's viewpoint, of the capitalist culture's destruction of farming culture and its development of agribusiness, a "community-killing agriculture" (41). Berry regards this destruction of farming culture as a crisis of culture, and he underlines the necessity of conservation of the community-based farming practice as a resistance against further destruction of the community, land, and even

selves whose health can be realized only in wholeness, or relationship with other existence.

Gary Snyder also discusses the importance of the land or place to culture, community, and identity, presenting a view of land or place as a habitat. He maintains that land or place shapes community and that cultures have grown out of people's relationship to "bioregions," particular territories marked by local ecosystems. Hence, "knowing who we are and knowing where we are are intimately linked," and Snyder claims that from inhabitation, living in place, comes the sense of responsibility for community, as well as responsibility for land or place (189).

While attending to the historical condition of black farmers or agrarian workers in the South, I see the notion of inhabitation as a useful concept in reading efforts to return to and stay connected to the land in African American texts. These writers' view of land as a site to counter fragmentation is significant in understanding resistance in African American context. As many social activists and ecocritics have pointed out, today how a social or cultural group is treated in a society is still reflected upon how their land would be treated. The land-based identity, then, not only provides spiritual healing but also has some potential to create political agency to fight against environmental racism. In discussing decolonization of the body and the soul, bell hooks argues for recovery of relationship or connectedness as a vital practice, and states, "Recalling the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth" (*Sisters* 181). It is notable here that hooks's notion of self-recovery cannot be separated from the recovery of the land or the earth. Since one's recovery lies in one's healthy relationship with what surrounds one, hooks calls for

land-based identity that cares for the well-being of place where they belong.

In addition, relationship is a fundamental concept in various movements against destructive practices of the dominant culture, because it is an alternative mode of being when various systems of oppression lie in hierarchal ways of thinking that divide. Shamara Shantu Riley clearly sees that an emphasis on relationship is a challenge to the ideology of domination. In "Ecology Is a Sistah's Issue Too," she argues for this necessity of weaving environmental issues into African American, especially women's, movements for social change. Riley recognizes how the association of black women's bodies with non-human nature has worked for the Western ideology of domination. Yet, it is the ideology of domination that people must fight against, and she contends that "what we need is not a total disassociation of people from nature, but rather a reformulation of everyone's relationship to nature by socially reconstructing gender, class, and ethnic roles" (193-94). Her analysis of social movements in the United States and Africa shows that African and African American women are acting with an awareness of the connection between environmental degradation and oppression or social inequality based on race, class, and gender. Their activism aims to change both material and spiritual lives at the same time. Riley particularly suggests the African traditional values of "interconnectedness, community, and immanence" are useful notions for "Afrocentric Ecowomanist" practices (203). Thus, to the African American community that fights against oppression and fragmentation, living in place is an action for continuity.

One such practice of living in place, recognized by many African American women, is gardening. As argued in Walker's 1974 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," a garden, just like a quilt, was a place for African American women to express their values and relationships to the

world. Dori Sanders's "Hidden Gardens," an essay included in her cooking book, conveys how slave women managed to feed and nurture the bodies and spirits of themselves and their families against some plantation owners' will to deny such an attempt:

> According to our handed-down tradition, many slave women would say to the plantation overseer, "Oh, I just want me a few buckets of hollyhocks, a few little rows of flowers." Well, the overseer couldn't find an excuse to deny a woman her little flowers, which required almost no care, so he'd give her permission. The slave women would plant their flowers, and behind the tall hollyhocks, they would hide a kitchen garden. From those gardens came the spring onions and sweet potatoes and tasty herbs and all the good, fresh vegetables that are such a part of our cooking heritage. (*Country Cooking* 108)

Gardening was a resistant action for African American women in slavery. In gardening, they fought for their biological and spiritual survival, as Walker says of her mother's gardening: "She has handed down respect for the possibilities — and the will to grasp them" (*In Search* 242).

In "New Moon over Roxbury," Rebecca Johnson also relates this "art" of gardening as a practice of remembering the Southern tradition for African Americans in the North: "Organic gardening is my link with The Land as an idea and a complex corporal system. I garden for sustenance and as spiritual practice" (252). Johnson realizes the importance of remembering the connection to the land when there are generations who are "quickly losing the nourishing link with the natural world which nourished our ancestors" (257). She believes that this connection is a source to counter "commodification of every aspect of our lives," and writes: "Black people have lived under and resisted the complex realities of oppression.

Today, we can mine that experience to help change the systems that threaten the whole earth. Perhaps then we will be able to read and celebrate the earth's signs again" (258, 260).

As shown above, many African American women writers are making efforts to conserve or revive their traditions of living in place through their "arts" — various everyday practices as well as writing about their experiences of relational existence. They inherit from their ancestors a view of art as a material and spiritual practice of traditional values of continuity and connection. Through the arts of gardening, quilting, or even cooking, the different generations have been practicing such values daily, with whatever time, space, and materials that are available to them. In this way, they have resisted disintegration of the community or loss of values of continuity and connection. They have integrated their arts embodying alternative values into their lives, and their lives have been arenas of resistance against domination and the destruction of life-sustaining entities and a sense of connectedness. Dori Sanders's *Her Own Place* (1993) is another work that expresses this tradition of living in place. In the novel, the main character's efforts to stay on the farmland cannot be separated from her sense of rootedness in a community. Instead of developing an oppositional African American self through black-white conflicts, Sanders presents alternative construction of cultural self through living in place.

II

In the essay "Follow the Southern Cross: African American Writers Reclaim the Agrarian South," Frederick Waage discusses the celebration of staying in the South and returning to the agrarian life in contemporary works by African American writers. He points to "the presence of

'ground'" in those texts and finds a reevalutation of the connection to the land (9). Yet, it is important to note that there are those who have kept the connection to the land, as some characters in contemporary Southern writer Dori Sanders's *Her Own Place*, a text which Waage mentions. The novel depicts the life of a black woman, Mae Lee Barnes, in Rising Ridge, South Carolina. Waage refers to Mae Lee as a place-centered character, who exhibits an awareness of her location. As Waage points out, Mae Lee tries hard to keep working the farmland throughout her life and never wishes to leave. Her attachment to the land and the farming life is central to the novel, and this attachment seems a significant element to her sense of community and identity in Sanders's narrative. In *Her Own Place*, identity is land- or place-based and also is connected to community in the work. I would argue, then, that Sanders writes inhibitory consciousness as a resistance to the uprooting of cultural identity and to the fragmentation of a community.

Inhabitory consciousness, or identity in relation to the land and community, is found in Sanders's *Her Own Place*. In 1941, sixteen-year-old Mae Lee marries Jeff Barnes, who goes off to the war shortly after the wedding. In his absence, Mae Lee works hard at the munitions plant and purchases a piece of land with her savings, hoping to work on "their land" together with her husband, Jeff, when he comes home. Yet, it does not turn out as Mae Lee imagines. After returning from the war, Jeff, reluctant to stay on the farm, spends most of the year in the city. Eventually, he heads for the North and abandons his family. Mae Lee tells her mother what has been bothering her about her husband: "After the war, Mama, there was this new way about him. I could never get used to it. He was always on the move. Always in a rush to go someplace" (39).

Unlike Jeff, Mae Lee and her parents are described as having attach-

ment to the land on which they live and work. Mae Lee never likes the idea of moving, and, even when she once decides to follow Jeff to live in the city, she declares to her parents, "[W] e'll hold on to our land" (34). Jeff's final leave makes her all the more determined to stay on the farm. Mae Lee's parents also love their land, which was bought by her mother Vergie Hudson. When Vergie and her husband, Sam, have to go down to Low Country to take care of Mae Lee's old grandparents who refuse to leave home, they first hate to leave their land. Yet, after a while, Vergie and Sam get attached to the new place so much that, this time, they do not come back to Rising Ridge: "[H] er mama had insisted on staying down in Low Country. She said Sam had planted a few tings and she'd stay on with him until after the harvest" (70). Mae Lee and her people are inhabitants of their places, working their land. Mae Lee's love for the land is expressed in the following quote:

> Now the seventy-some acres, including the portion leased from Warren, stretched out before her. She inhaled the clean smell of freshly plowed soil and listened to the din of tractors plowing or disk-harrowing throughout the countryside.... Mae Lee liked the way the land spread out before her. (102)

Mae Lee never loses her love for the land and her interest in the farming life throughout the novel.

Although Mae Lee and her people love their farmland, their hard work on the farm is also a matter of necessity, since they earn their living from the crops they grow and, as Sanders puts it, "[f] armers need to stay close to their land, not only because they love it, but because they have to be there" (103). Left with five children to raise, Mae Lee has to work hard for survival of the family with help from her parents and a sharecropper couple, Hooker Jones and Maycie. Her farmland materially supports her family.

Yet, to Mae Lee, the land is more than what provides for her needs. Even when her children have grown up and make their own living, when she leaves the farmland for town in order to live close to her friends, Mae Lee does not like the idea that no one cultivates the land: "Mae Lee couldn't bear to think of her good farm soil growing only weeds and blooming wild morning glories" (204). Her land is described in the narrative as follows: "It was good farmland. The soil had been kept fertile through careful crop rotation. Mae Lee had learned that from her daddy" (199). The land is something to be worked and maintained. People are parts of the land on which they live. The narrative thus expresses the interdependence between people and the land.

Also, in the novel, land or place is related to community. Sanders suggests that place or location shapes and reflects community and social relationships between people. On the farm, Mae Lee and the Joneses work together and help each other. They understand each other's needs as ones without their own land and a woman who has to take care of five children by herself, and the farming, too, requires their collaboration. They form a caring farming community. When her children are still young, the Joneses help Mae Lee's work without taking any extra share or pay. Remembering this, Mae Lee decides to let the Joneses stay on her farm even after they cannot work any more because of their age and illness.

Sanders not only depicts the farming community which has a strong tie to the land, but she also deals with such a community in relation to its historical and social locations. Set in a town in the South, the novel at times suggests how the issue of race has affected the community and the black people's ways of living. When young Mae Lee plans to buy a piece of land with her saving, her father arranges the meeting with a white landowner and tells her, "[T] hey will never sell you their best, so take

what you can get and make it good" (28). Sam knows what particular land the landowner will likely sell and what the land can offer:

> "Oh, he'll let us buy it, since it's near to the land he sold your mama years ago.... Only about ten acres or so right alongside the road is decent farmland. Most of the ground all along Catfish Creek is bottomland, too wet for cotton, but, oh Lord, it'll grow sugarcane and late corn." (21)

Mae Lee learns from Sam how to survive on the land which she can get. Also, Sam tells her about how his friend once was about to be cheated out of his share by a white landowner but managed to keep his own share of cotton with Sam's help (24).

These stories remind us that black farmers have to live close to the land, since knowledge of agriculture is very important for their survival and also which land they can take reflects a social element, namely, the issue of race. In the novel, then, Mae Lee and her people's way of living in place is not simply a matter of culture or philosophy of life. They have to practice a land-based way of life for survival, with very limited choices in their lives. When asked by white woman to leave farming and be a cook for her family, Mae Lee declines the offer by answering, "Farming is not too hard when it's your farm, your land, Miss Ellen. You see, that farm is mine, so it's not too hard at all" (61). The words shows that her inhibitory practice of farming has a history, developed in a certain place.

It is significant to note that Sanders depicts inhibitory consciousness, self in relation with community and land or place, as what must be kept in the face of changes in the contemporary world. The book covers Mae Lee's life from the 1940s all the way to the late 1980s. As the time passes, Mae Lee feels lonely; she is alone on the farm after all her children have grown up and left. When planning to move to a section of town where she

will be close to her old friend Ellabelle, Mae Lee is very conscious of where she lives and of her choice to stay in the area:

> To all the people she grew up with who had moved away, Mae Lee wanted to prove that it hadn't been a bad idea to stay in Rising Ridge. Maybe continuing to live down in what some called the boondocks hadn't been the fashionable thing to do back in the 1950s and 1960s, but now, when her old friends and classmates would come back to Rising Ridge with all their city airs, looking upon her as down-at-the-heels country, she'd have something for them to see. She'd show them. (110)

As Waage points out, the text records the return of the black people from the North to the South in the 1980s:

> During the early 1980s, the exodus of the blacks from the rural farming area to the North after World War II ended was reversed by their return. Mae Lee Barnes watched and listened to much-changed speaking voices shifting in and out of varied accents when they told questionable stories about their very successful northern jobs and businesses. (108)

It seems to me that the narrative encourages the reader to consider Mae Lee's sense of place against this social phenomenon of the period. Mae Lee is determined to inhabit the place where she has lived. In spite of her strong tendency toward inhabitation, however, Mae Lee has to renew or recreate her connection to the community in the course of time.

In the new house, Mae Lee at first suffers a sense of displacement, as described in the first chapter of the book: she was "like orphan plants with their support systems removed" (3). Yet, she starts to get back her liveliness again, by regaining the sense of place and community through her volunteer work at the hospital which her son, Taylor, recommends to her

saying, "you need to get out and do things" (125). The work at the hospital opens up her contact with people from different communities, and especially her white co-workers make Mae Lee reflect on her own black community and tradition. Although Mae Lee makes friends with some white women working together and thinks that they mean no harm, Mae Lee at times gets upset by their insensitive remarks about her family or black people. She talks about those upsetting moments with her old friend, Ellabelle, and realizes her responsibility to speak up as a part of the community of black people:

> They didn't always understand. And as far as she was concerned, the job was to make them understand, help them to understand. If she were to allow little things, unintentional things, like that to keep her from being part of the group, when everybody concerned, including Bethel Petty, wanted her to be part of it, then they would never, ever learn to understand. (147)

Instead of giving up her relationship with the co-workers, Mae Lee socializes with them and even invites them to her "silver tea" party, an old-day tradition of women in the farming country, entertaining them with her mother's recipe, with the help of her friend and family.

Such sense of community and responsibility renews Mae Lee's feelings for family tradition and roots. In a trip with her co-workers to the old houses and plantations around the Carolina and Georgia coast, one place makes her think of people who came before her:

> Just walking the grounds of a home outside Savannah that once had teemed with slave servants evoked an indescribable feeling of kinship within her. The thought that maybe her ancestors had walked on the very same soil was overwhelming.... [S] he walked, her eyes searching for anything that might offer a trace

of her roots. (194)

This place plays an important role in bringing up the sense of community within her. In the narrative, the history of a larger community of black people is inseparable from her family history.

Although Mae Lee's knowledge of her family history is not complete, she remembers the quilt which has been passed down for generations in her father's family:

> The quilt must always be kept in the family. It represented families that had been stitched together by women of many generations. If or when the quilt was torn, according to legend, it was because it needed to open up to make room for a piece of another family member's garment. A custom passed down from the days of slavery, it all started with a slave woman's prayer that perhaps through a family patchwork quilt the memory of a piece of a garment might serve as a clue to identify and reunite a family broken apart and children sold off at an early age. It had been a mother's way of stitching a family together. It was the thread of the family heritage that bound them together. (196-97)

The quilt represents the legacy of black people's resistance to the fragmentation of family and the effacement of heritage or family history, which has been discussed by many African American writers such as Alice Walker and bell hooks. Especially for many slave women who were allowed so little, the quilt was an art, a practice, of remembering and handing down the history and values of their ancestors. Mae Lee decides to pass down the quilt to one of her daughters, Amberlee, who shows interest in family history. Thinking about the quilt, she thinks of those who came before her and who come after her. Thus she renews her place in the family, under-

standing herself in her connection to the rest.

Mae Lee maintains her connection to the land, too. As time passes, it gets harder and harder for her to maintain the farming life because her age makes it difficult for her to work the farmland as she used to and also because she cannot find anyone to cultivate her farmland. However, Mae Lee, who never wishes to give up her farmland, gets to know Fletcher Owens, who hopes to return to the land where he was born: "[J] ust a stretch of land on the way to somewhere, but it's a nice little piece of ground, good farmland. Might plant me a little vegetable garden in the spring" (243). And, the book ends with the possibility of her going back to the farming life again: "Mae Lee also owned land alongside Catfish Creek. Visions of the creek teeming with catfish, and fields of fresh tomatoes, peas, and silver queen corn danced in her head" (243). The text implies, too, through the thought of her son Taylor watching Mae Lee's uncultivated farmland, that he might nurture interest in farming in the future, although it is just a possibility at this point: "Parched, open fields that spread out empty and unproductive.... Earlier, after the peonies had bloomed, his mama had asked him to wee. He'd never gotten around to it" (225).

Even the sequence of the story seems to suggest a shift in the focus of reading from individual characters to particular issues or relationships, namely the connection to land in this text. For instance, to the novel, it is possible for the reader to bring in the conventional practice of reading narrative for plot — "what happens next?" — since the story is narrated mostly in chronological order. Yet, the narrative begins with a moment when Mae Lee feels lost, uprooted in a beautiful room in her new house "like orphan plants" (3). This opening section is followed by two parts: Mae Lee's memory of years on the farm and her rooting in a new location and new relationships. Then, the novel ends with a moment when a view

of her small farmland dances in her head. What kind of narratives concerned with "development of characters" would end with this scene? When we attend to the sequence of the story, it suggests that the narrative is narrated toward remembering and reestablishing a relationship with land. A theme of place-based consciousness, seen in Mae Lee's sense of self as a rural Southerner, is also expressed in such a sequence of the narrative. Mae Lee's consciousness is rather about reviving land-based consciousness.

Thus, *Her Own Place* depicts people's connections to land and community. The novel does point to changes in today's world — fewer people work on the farm, for example: "People throughout the South were leaving the farming life" (199). It, nonetheless, does not present inhabitation as a mere nostalgic vision or old-fashioned practice. Rather, Sanders seems to revive inhibitory consciousness, presenting self as relational and always developing in relation to the land and community. She reintroduces such consciousness as something that must be kept in the face of changes in society. Indeed, at the "Writing the Rural" conference held in October of 1997 in Georgia, Sanders, who works on the family farm during the summer, stated that she considered herself as a "present-tense writer."

Why engage in writing the rural now? And what does it do to the contemporary reader? It seems to me that the narrative serves as a space where the reader can realize and reimagine people's connections to land and community. With inhibitory consciousness, people can care for where they are and where they belong. In this sense, literature about rural or agrarian lives, writing about lives in a particular place, takes part in today's environmental or earth-conscious movements because it centers relationships and connectedness.

In *Living by the Word*, Alice Walker also maintains the importance of connectedness to the land and community — including ancestors, animals,

and the earth — for healthier identity and caring social practices, and she expands its relevance from the African American community to a larger community of human beings on earth. Discussing that humans' treatment of animals and the earth reflects their treatment of each other, Walker notes,

> Our thoughts must be on how to restore to the Earth its dignity as a living being; how to stop raping and plundering it as a matter of course. We must begin to develop the consciousness that everything has equal rights because existence itself is equal. In other words, we are all here: trees, people, snakes, alike. (148)

For Walker, every human being is responsible to make an effort to create a better relationship with the earth, including its inhabitants, and she utilizes her writing — especially apparent in such essays as "Am I Blue?," "Everything Is a Human Being," and "The Universe Responds" — as a space to explore relationships with other living things such as horses, snakes, dogs, and trees and to convey messages from them. At the "Writing the Rural" conference, Walker suggested that such activism should come out of a strong connection to land cultivated in the country, and she stated that "ruralism" is "powerfully important" because it is linked to "how we are going to survive." Cultivating a sense of living in place may lead to alternative culture and practices that support the survival and coexistence of diverse cultures and various living things.

As has been shown, African American traditions in writing about living in place, about the connection to the earth, urge the protection of the land and community that nurture and support people in order to resist the fragmentation of community or the uprooting of cultural self. These texts together suggest inhibitory consciousness, as cultivated in gardening or conveyed in *Her Own Place*, as an alternative relationship to the world.

They suggest an inhibitory consciousness as a ground for caring and taking responsibility for where humans, not just African American, live or belong. An inhibitory consciousness is a mode of being, an experience of the world through an "aesthetic of inhabiting space" to use hooks's words (*Yearning* 104), such as farming, gardening, quilting, and writing. Writing about living in place generates a space for the reader to participate in such consciousness by envisioning the relationships expressed through those actions.

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