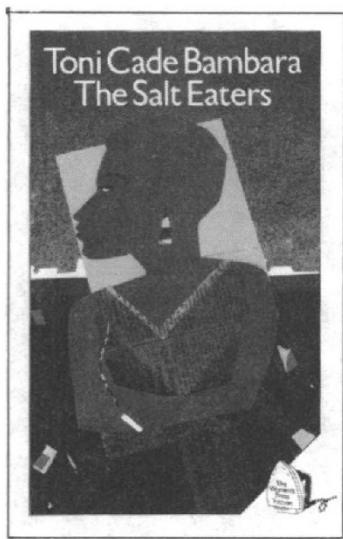


been confined to the French landscape. We need a more international, and international, view of feminist literary theory than Moi's old-fashioned New/Old world geography allows her to offer.

The exclusion of Black and lesbian critical theory rests on a rigid distinction between theory or politics which I think is regressive – a remnant of Althusserian 'rigour' which contradicts Toril Moi's opening point that feminist literary theory politicizes the whole business of literary studies. Not only are these omissions potentially damag-

ing and divisive within women's politics, they undermine her stated project: to theorize power relations in sexual/textual politics precisely involves the recognition, not denial, of the differences which Black and lesbian writing poses for us all. To move beyond the binary oppositions of Black/white, homosexuality/heterosexuality, masculinity/femininity – the Derridean vision invoked in the final paragraph – we need to move in and through existing differences, differences which no theory can dissolve.

Jean Radford



The Salt Eaters

Toni Cade Bambara

*The Women's Press London, 1982
ISBN 0 7043 3882 3 £3.50 Pbk*

This is a book about cultural identity and empowerment – the empowerment of a people, a race. The basic message is that the path to liberation lies in preserving that identity and not becoming available to madness. Not selling out. Not going under with someone else's aesthetic. Not becoming obsessed and isolated and cut off in the work

of political organizing. Staying sane means staying in touch with the collective – staying in tune with the lived experiences of older and very different people who have been struggling hard from the word go: that is the community that names you when you are a political worker. And staying sane means staying in touch with your own feelings – your own personal centre, your own inner core of personal power.

Building a sane, whole community means building sane, whole individuals. Political liberation is first and foremost about the liberation of the self: reality is us and our capacity to remain grounded in our history, our traditions. To survive we need to recognize also that not all power to change is man-made: *The Salt Eaters* often glimpses scenarios where individuals and groups journey through the presence, imminence or movements of nature or natural forces. The portrayal of people sheltering through a thunderstorm reminds us of the power of nature, and is a portent of meaning about changes that occur metaphysically from the roots of our existence, from the earth's core. Far from the compass of material explanation.

The danger for Black people, for Black communities, is going under, going mad because of being dazzled

by the white Anglo-Saxon aesthetic of scientific, materialist thinking. The tradition of spirit healing in Claybourne, Georgia, is but one example of a Black woman regaining her power from the truth and knowledge born out of her own friends and neighbours and relatives. The story of Velma Henry's healing is an affirmation of the power of her people and their history. Healing energy flowing from the collective gathering of local people, ordinary people who know her, are part of her and, we see, have the subjective power to bring her back to her centre – back to them.

The political wisdom of *The Salt Eaters* is fundamentally optimistic, positive and human. Toni Cade Bambara points out our obligations and responsibilities in the process of our becoming whole – the parallel journeys of Self and community. Facing up to the personal consequences of health is the same as out-and-out refusing to be available to madness. Velma Henry, political activist, naive and dogmatic, comes through the symptoms of her experience of burn-out in the community. In the story as Toni Cade tells it, the slashing of wrists and gassing in the oven are nothing to what lies ahead in the struggle to realize her own personal powers. That struggle is signposted in the narrative by the questions and choices put before Velma by the spirit healer Minnie Ransome. The principal work is a searching, asking Velma whether she wants to be well, whether she's downright up to being whole, and dumping the shit – the pain and the hurt and anger she has been busy taking in. To make room for good things – good feelings to rush in.

Velma's personal experience of healing reveals the nature of 'illness', 'insanity' as it affects the individual and the community at large. Velma has come away from her centre; withdrawn from herself and those closest to her, and has retreated temporarily to a place of safety, a cocoon of illness. In her

political work she has bitten off more than she can chew – taken on more work than her colleagues were able to manage – and ended up ahead of them doing things alone. She comes adrift from the community that names her. The community gathered in the Infirmary (established by the 'free coloureds' in 1871) can pull together to will her back to health, can take responsibility for her in a way that doesn't make her dependent and victim. That is, by the process of asking questions of her, making her accountable in some way, presenting her with a choice, a decision to make. The healing is the very point at which Velma takes responsibility for herself – the point where she gets in touch with her inner resources, her own motives/energies for survival – and is also the point at which she responds to those around her. The community becomes a community, works together and focuses its power in the act of being responsible for Velma. 'Ordinary people' have a place, a role to play in that room in the Infirmary. There are no special qualifications required, no set formula for the healing. An open space for participation and empowerment.

Truth, sanity, reality is located by Toni Cade Bambara in her people's tradition of struggle. Insanity, habits of illusion, bogus civilization come from faith 'in a science that only filled people's lives with useless structures, senseless clutter' (p.147). In other words, detached, academic, élite knowledge which is the product of white, male, hierarchical power structures: fancy formulae that are imposed by the bigger and stronger on the smaller and weaker in any unequal power relationship. White culture and Black culture. Middle class and working class. Men and women.

The nugget of wisdom, then, in *The Salt Eaters* is that Black people must stay true to their culture if they are truly to liberate themselves. And for all societies, the

linchpin or basic unit of struggle is the individual, the Self. We have to sort out the Self first – become true to ourselves before we can achieve a sane, whole, healthy community.

Toni Cade Bambara is someone who makes writing politically important because she demands that the reader stretch herself and take an active part in the story as it unfolds. She places the reader immediately into a fluid, changing context of characters and events which is Claybourne.

Bambara insists on the here and now as reality, continually stopping the reader in her tracks – making her look hard and long, making her appreciate the value of the language. The arrangement of words can be unfamiliar and disruptive – deliberately anarchic in the craft of making each word mean something – engaging the reader as an active participant in making the story.

This is a pertinent example of Bambara's thought-provoking prose, showing her skill to illuminate unconventional meanings from life experience.

No one remarked on any of this or on any of the other remarkable things each sensed but had no habit of language for, though felt often and deeply, privately. That moment of correspondence, noumena – when the glimpse of the life script is called dream, *déjà vu*, clairvoyance, intuition, hysteria, hunger, or called no-

thing at all. Released now, lungs sucked air and feet scraped against the grit of the bus floor. (p.89)

The book requires the reader to let go – and to give thought to the step-by-step struggles, dilemmas and relationships which are being narrated. Nothing is taken for granted. We are put in touch with the writer's work of slowing down – taking time to examine carefully, and in some detail, the complexity of our lives.

In her way of describing a community, Toni Cade Bambara forces a respect that comes from representing people as they are – 'ordinary people' with all their many different aspects and dimensions. There is no sacrifice to development of a 'plot', no obligation to conform to linear time sequences.

Toni Cade Bambara forces us to pay attention to the detail of our lives – the detail that makes up our reality. That is us. Forces us to look at who we are and what we are made of. Forces us to see our strength – our identity. Forces us to be aware of the powers and pressures that shape us. Forces us to acknowledge that everything is in flux, changing. Forces us to recognize that there are also energies – other energies than the human, here and now, mortal coil.

Carole Walley

Something More Than Force: Poems for Guatemala, 1971-1982

Zoe Anglesey

Adasta Press Easthampton

Massachusetts, 1982

\$US5 Pbk

Something More Than Force is based on personal travel in Central America, a region torn by civil conflict and US intervention. As a poet from the US, Anglesey bears special witness. As a North Ameri-

can, she has taken pains to reflect the ample weave of Guatemalan reality, and the poems speak with a diverse range of voices. One could expect as much from a decade of committed work.

I sense a special interest on the part of the author in a number of poems about Guatemalan women, from the brief word play on the social position of 'Maids', to longer tributes to heroic women in struggle, such as Alaide Foppa de Solorzano, someone who disappeared under the pseudonym