



## Savoring the Salt: *An Introduction*

LINDA JANET HOLMES AND CHERYL A. WALL

Salt is a partial antidote for snakebite. Bleeding the wound and applying the tourniquet, one also eats salt and applies a salt poultice to the wound. To struggle, to develop, one needs to master ways to neutralize poisons. ‘Salt’ also keeps the parable of Lot’s wife to the fore. Without a belief in the capacity for transformation, one can become ossified. And what can we do with a saltlick in the middle of the projects, no cows there?—TONI CADE BAMBARA

**S***avoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara* explores the life, art, and activism of a singular woman. Born in 1939, Bambara came of age along with the movements for social justice of the 1960s. She helped shape and was shaped by the Black Liberation Movement, the Women’s Movement, and the struggle against the war in Vietnam. She worked to build coalitions among women of color internationally. She belonged to a group of African American women writers who came to voice in the early 1970s. Bambara’s art shares much in common with that of Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. Widely published, Bambara was the author of two books of short stories *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977); two novels *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (2000); editor of the path-breaking anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) and of *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971); and author of a volume of fiction and nonfictional prose *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* (1996). After Bambara’s death in 1995, her friend and editor Toni Morrison called Bambara’s writing “absolutely critical to twentieth century literature.”

Best known as a writer, Bambara published her first short story, “Sweet Town,” in 1959. Her work was one of the first fruits of the “Second Renaissance” among African American artists. She set her stories in cities, and they bristled with the edgy rhythms of urban life. Several of her most memorable characters were young black girls, who refused to be defeated by their circumstances. Humor and a sharp tongue were their weapons. No one rendered their speech better than Bambara. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Bambara published her stories in magazines, including *Redbook* and *Essence*, which reached large audiences. When Bambara’s stories were

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collected in *Gorilla, My Love*, critics applauded a fresh, new voice. The book has never gone out of print. Generations of readers recognize and love Toni Cade Bambara's voice. Although rooted in the urban speech of African Americans, Bambara's language is distinctively her own. As she told interviewer Kalamu ya Salaam, she was "in search of the mother tongue": "I'm trying to break words open and get at the bones, deal with symbols as if they were atoms. I'm trying to find out not only how a word gains its meaning, but how a word gains its power."

That search resulted in *The Salt Eaters*, a visionary novel that enacts the fusion of literary and political, social and spiritual perspectives. Experimental in its nonlinear narrative, it is specific in its representation of the cultural practices of African Americans. But the novel maps a larger world. As it does, it highlights common values—respect for the elders, concern for the children, cooperative economics, functional and collective art, and metaphysical beliefs—among traditional communities of color. It suggests that those values might be the basis for coalitions that would forge a politics for the twenty-first century.

The plot of *The Salt Eaters* unfolds in an afternoon; *Those Bones Are Not My Child* is, by contrast, an epic novel that was inspired—or compelled—by the rash of murders of black children in Atlanta in the 1980s. Its fictional city is drawn in careful detail, and the characters that move through its streets represent a broad cross section of its residents. They are old and young, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. Bambara's ear is attuned as always to their speech. *Those Bones* is one of the most precisely drawn portraits of contemporary urban American life we have.

Her literary reputation notwithstanding, Bambara's importance is not just literary. Indeed, her favorite way of describing herself was as a "cultural worker." She was an activist who worked in Harlem, Philadelphia, and Atlanta. In 1970 she edited *The Black Woman*, a volume that brought together more than thirty women who spoke out on politics, racism in education, stereotypes about black women, and relationships. They wrote poems, short stories, biographical and autobiographical essays, and position papers. Among the contributors were Nikki Giovanni, Abbey Lincoln, Paule Marshall, students, and members of a feminist collective. When Bambara, then Toni Cade, wrote that "it is revolutionary, radical, and righteous to want for your mate what you want for yourself," her words cut through a haze of reactionary rhetoric; they inspired young women to imagine new possibilities for themselves. Still passed from hand to hand in its original paperback edition, *The Black Woman* was reissued in 2005.

Bambara was a teacher, who was one of the first faculty members at the Search for Education, Elevation, Knowledge (SEEK) Program at the City

College of New York, the program that transformed the student population and the university. Later she taught at Livingston College at Rutgers University, Atlanta University, and Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center. Throughout her life she was a catalyst for the work of others.

Bambara was also a filmmaker, who collaborated on documentaries including *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (a film about the attack on the MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia and its aftermath) and *W.E.B. Du Bois in Four Voices*. She was an enthusiastic supporter of the black independent film movement. Julie Dash, writer and director of *Daughters of the Dust*, suggests that Bambara's writing informed her approach to filmmaking:

The way Toni Cade takes an idea, a thought, weaves it for many paragraphs and then brings it back around, it was just like a regular conversation. It was the way your mother used to talk to you, the way your grandparents would speak to you. I would go as far as to say her work even had an influence on *Daughters of the Dust*.

A teacher of film, Bambara worked with Scribe, a nonprofit film and video center in Philadelphia. In every aspect of her work, she inspired and empowered young people.

Bambara might best be understood as an organic intellectual, who grounded her political and social thought in the lived experience of everyday people. She believed that social change happened from the bottom up, and the intellectual's role was not only to analyze that change but also to participate in it. That participation might take many forms, from explaining to people in the neighborhood how their lives were shaped by the forces of global capitalism to organizing local protests. If the problems were both local and global, so were the solutions. An effective and ethical politics was informed by ideas drawn from progressive movements across the globe. Bambara was a citizen of the world. Yet she understood that the intellectual also needed to speak the language of her community. She had total confidence in the capacity of that language to convey political complexities and moral values.

*Savoring the Salt* is organized to reflect the multiple legacies of Toni Cade Bambara. Writer, activist, teacher, and filmmaker, Bambara found many ways of doing her work and making her mark in the world. Each section of the book highlights one aspect of her work. But Bambara was too dynamic a woman and artist to be constrained by categories. The boundaries are blurred here, as they were in her life. Following the model that she set in *The Black Woman*, *Savoring the Salt* mixes genres. It includes personal essays,

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poems, and critiques, as well as brief reminiscences from cultural workers who knew and collaborated with Toni. It examines Bambara's work—her fiction, nonfiction, and film, as well as her activism and teaching. It honors her resilience and ability to celebrate radical acts as well as her sense of humor and personal grace. Toni Cade Bambara's extraordinary spirit lives on.

The range of contributors to this volume demonstrates the power of that spirit. Their voices are varied and memorable. Seasoned poets take their turns alongside poets who were Bambara's students. Critics who have kept Bambara's work alive in the academy write for the general audience, while activists who were empowered by Bambara's example contemplate agendas for the future. Young filmmakers testify to Bambara's impact on their art.

The weave of voices creates a stunning tapestry. The voice that links them is Bambara's own. In each section, she speaks first. Her words are excerpted from her writings and from speeches she made throughout her life. Several of these pieces are published here for the first time. Bambara's initial statement explains the image that we have chosen for our title. Salt as an antidote for poison, a component of tears and of humor, became for Bambara a metaphor to be endlessly mined. We hope that it can represent for our readers a legacy to be savored.