



Reflections

Pens, Grandmothers, and Friendship: A Jamaica Reflection

Susan FELCH¹

Calvin University, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA
susan.felch@calvin.edu

The verandah was wide and shaded, edging a house settled comfortably atop a sloping hill. The benches creaked gently. The breeze sighed up from the ocean bay. The warm, humid air invited quiet reflection, somnolence . . . and memories.

Seville Great House, in the parish of St. Ann, Jamaica, today offers visitors a quiet retreat.

Seville Great House, for over 150 years, offered enslaved Africans a brutal portal into the killing fields of New World sugarcane plantations. After the terrifying Middle Passage, they stumbled off ship decks, only to find themselves in another house of horrors.

The dizzying juxtaposition of tropical beauty, not unlike the island of Papua New Guinea where I grew up, and historical holocaust, a “hell without fire” as one enslaved Christian called her northern servitude,² induces spiritual vertigo. The sheer magnitude and duration of New World enslavement beggars imagination: it drains our capacity to muster sustained attention to this violent deformation of human community, too often propped up by religious language.

It would be easy for a white woman sitting on the white veranda on a drowsy afternoon at Seville to feel outrage and guilt — outrage that a beautiful place could be the site of such suffering, guilt at the white greed that perpetuated that suffering. Neither emotion is inappropriate. But neither emotion helps me pay

¹ Susan Felch is Professor Emerita of English at Calvin University (Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA) and served as a senior project mentor throughout the TWP, regularly guest speaking in the webinars, advising project leaders, and joining us for the Jamaica workshop as a keynote speaker.

² “Autobiography VI: Slavery Was Hell without Fires,” in *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*, edited by Clifton H. Johnson, 153–163, Introduction by Albert J. Raboteau (Cleveland, Ohio, USA: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 161.

Pens, Grandmothers, and Friendship: A Jamaica Reflection

attention to history or to where and with whom I am sitting right now. My beloved friend Barbara Omolade³ once told me, “Your white guilt doesn’t do me any good, and it doesn’t do you any good.” Guilt without attentiveness corrupts, shuts us down, separates us even further from one another. What Barbara taught me is that goodness comes from a friendship sustained over many years, a friendship that doesn’t flinch from differences, difficult histories, and straightforward conversations, held together by our love for God and for each other.

Barbara also told me: “Susan, all grandmothers are alike.” In one sense, of course, this isn’t true. Barbara’s grandmother’s grandmother was an enslaved woman. My grandmother’s grandmother spent her life in a small German-speaking Russian village. But grandmothers are alike in more important ways. Grandmothers give birth, they feed us special family foods and family stories. The first and perhaps most enduring memories of lavish love we carry with us come from our grandmothers’ kitchens, hugs, and goodnight kisses. The recipes may vary, but their graciousness flows from generation to generation.

Grandmothers model resilience. That we have memories of our grandmothers — that they existed and survived to birth and nourish not just one but two generations — is a testament to their resilience and a promise for ours.

I, with roots that stretch back to Russia, walk down the hill to the rediscovered African cemetery with friends whose roots are sunk in African soil. We stand in a circle holding hands, linking grandmothers’ grandmothers who had been enslaved with grandmothers’ grandmothers who may have enslaved. They welcome me and forgive. We sing. We pray. We cry. We listen to scripture. We remember. We lay our pens on the ancestors’ gravestone. We take them up again and vow to all our grandmothers that their now silenced tongues will speak again.⁴ We write.

³ *Editorial Note:* Barbara Omolade (1942–2023), an African American, was a professor, scholar, and author of such books as *The Rising Song of African American Women* (1994) and *Faith Confronts Evil: From Birthmothers to Holy Women: African American Christian Women, 1619–1865* (Eugene, Oregon, USA: Cascade Books, 2024).

⁴ *Editorial Note:* For additional perspectives on this event at Seville Great House shared in this issue, please see Jessie Ini Fubara-Manuel, “(Re)connections, Relationships, and Spiritual Expressions: Reflections on the Transatlantic Writing Project,” pp. 84–89 in this issue, and “Tears in a Bottle Liturgy: Jamaica,” adapted by Daniel Justice Eshun, Janice Mclean-Farrell, and Anna Kasafi Perkins, pp. 129–134 in this issue.