

Paranoid Designs: **Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child***

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Abstract

Bambara's experimental novel, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), examines the African American community's response to the Atlanta child murders of the 1970s and 1980s. With the abductions and pointedly inadequate institutional responses combining to provoke a powerful paranoia in the African American community, the issue of perception-under-siege itself becomes a crucial point of focus for community members in Bambara's representation of the events. Bambara explores the ways that the community negotiates its experiences of paranoia, focusing on how community members respond to a crisis of interpretation as institutions that are charged to **assist instead** blame the victims and their parents for the murders. In this regard, the novel highlights, and adds to, an archive of cultural works that model the experience of paranoia and the steps necessary to gain a critical interpretation of paranoia when it is used as a means of racially-motivated social control. Engaging complex ethical issues, Bambara uses the style and content of her work to evoke a muted sense of paranoia in the reader at the same time that she provides models of homeopathic exposure to paranoia in the narrative. While Bambara takes an ethical risk when re-staging traumatic experiences of paranoia in characters and readers alike, these risks are balanced by the community's ethical norms that justify an ongoing preparation for racist actions like those embodied in the as yet unsolved Atlanta murders. Bambara's effort, in turn, has significant implications for current research on the literature of paranoia.

Keywords

African American community, African American literature,
Toni Cade Bambara, child abduction, paranoia, racism, terror

Fictionally reconstructing the Atlanta child murders of the 1970s and 1980s, in which more than 45 young African Americans were killed, Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999) foregrounds the battle that ensued between the city's institutions and the African American community.¹ As Bambara emphasizes, the government institutions repeatedly accused, both implicitly and explicitly, the African American community of being paranoid when it perceived the attacks to be both interconnected, as well as poorly investigated. This interpretive battle, focalized primarily through the perspective of the African American community, is at the heart of the novel; a reading that highlights this dynamic can offer an important means of contextualizing many of Bambara's narrative choices, including those that have been deemed weaknesses by some reviewers. Most importantly, this approach brings into focus Bambara's interest in what may be termed "critical paranoia." Specifically, the novel invites readers to identify with the experiences of paranoia described in the text, and in the process, Bambara proposes homeopathic possibilities that help one understand the ethical value of renegotiating injuries in literature, injuries that might be deemed too horrendous to "pass on," as Toni Morrison suggests at the close of *Beloved*. As Bambara's text makes clear, this potentially productive relation to paranoia evolves from a complex state of social interaction and interpretation developed in response to experiences of race hate, including psychological manipulation, that have a long history in Atlanta, and in the southern United States.²

Recalling that the Greek root for paranoia translates as "out of one's mind," we may read the representation, and solicitation, of *critical* paranoia in the novel as a pedagogical tool, as a means of thinking anew about institutions, kinship bonds and community agency. In this case, paranoia as a state of social interaction and interpretation offers a means of gaining a critical distance (stepping outside habits of thinking and feeling) while simultaneously embracing *communal* modes of interpretation that have been developed, in this case over hundreds of years, in response to white supremacist terrorism. *Those Bones Are Not My Child* is an excellent text for exploring such a revised sense of critical paranoia precisely because Bambara's novel focuses attention on local, national and transnational struggles over paranoia. The novel also highlights a micropolitics not yet

¹ For a detailed recounting of the investigation, see *The List* (1984) by Chet Dettlinger and Jeff Prugh.

² For an excellent, multidisciplinary account, see *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia: 1880-1930*, by W. Fitzhugh Brundage. The U.S. Senate also recognized this history in 2005 when its members approved a resolution apologizing for the Senate's failure to enact an anti-lynching law when it was first proposed more than 100 years ago.

sufficiently registered in literary theories regarding paranoia. Bambara's approach to paranoia discourages readers from pathologizing the individual or community caught up in the kinds of crises of interpretation represented in the novel. One may grant the existence of clinically-defined paranoia and yet note that clinical definitions have consistently replicated the very crises of interpretation associated with paranoia itself.³ As an alternative to this too simple pathologizing, Bambara's novel sheds light on paranoia as a social construct and as a rhetorical tool used by Atlanta's media and legal establishment in order to discredit readings that might pose a challenge to the regime's functioning, and to foster a sense of isolation among individuals who might choose a path of resistance. Manipulating paranoia as a strategy of social control, the media and legal establishment evoke in the African American community a crisis of interpretation, but one that is checked by an understanding of the community's present historical and political circumstances. In this vein, the African American community's response to the systematic attacks and the systematic denial of justice builds on past and present negotiations of terror, and on a *collective* experience of history.

Bambara's focus falls primarily on the African American community's response to the attacks, both during and after the highly problematic "official" recognition of the terror by local government agencies and law enforcement. Although one survivor has begun the healing process by the novel's close, Bambara emphasizes throughout the work the effects of the terror as these effects are perceived by the African American community. Bambara's focus on the communal effects of terror is sufficiently strong here that the issue of perception-under-siege itself becomes a crucial point of concern for the African American community members as they rethink the lenses that they use to make sense of their world. In particular, Bambara is interested in how these community members respond to a crisis of interpretation as institutions that are charged to assist instead either accuse the African American community, and especially the parents, of harming their own children, or presume a neglect by the community that fosters child runaways and vagrants, a loaded accusation given that vagrancy laws were used by southern police departments after abolition as a means of reasserting social control over freed slaves and their descendants.⁴

³ Laplanche and Pontalis describe this struggle over definitions in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (296). For a reading of why this interpretive battle tends to replicate features associated with paranoia itself, see Melley (17).

⁴ My thanks to Bryan Wagner, who provided information regarding the creation of the Atlanta Police Department, material that will be part of his forthcoming book.

While the readerly identification with the fictional African American family at the center of the story is predictably strong, Bambara invites her audience to rethink these readerly attachments. In this regard, she presents the larger community's understanding of its ethical commitments, and the structuring of its agency, as a model to be engaged, possibly even emulated, by readers. Contributing to this goal, the polyphonic quality of the narration, often noted in responses to the novel, invites readers to think of the community members, and their families, as mutually constituting one another. This polyphonic quality certainly presents a challenge to readers who must labor with some care to track the various characters and their roles as Bambara weaves their voices together. While the polyphonic narrative voice emphasizes the community as an agent, Bambara also strategically incorporates this complex voice in order to solicit in her readers a muted crisis of interpretation; this crisis, in turn, relates to that experienced by characters overwhelmed by information and contending with institutions eliciting paranoia.

This essay begins by exploring theories regarding paranoia as a central issue animating contemporary U.S. fiction. In the process, the essay explores the potentials and limitations of these theories when they are placed in conversation with the literature of racialized communities. The focus then shifts to questions of group and institutional agency, probing notions regarding paranoia as these are attached to, and critically reworked by, communities, such as that represented by Bambara. Bambara suggests that victimized communities have been constituted by "passing on" a developing genealogy of critical reading practices from one generation to the next; these practices include critical approaches to the paranoia promoted by a long line of institutions premised on, or infected by, white supremacist ideology. With this genealogical process charted, the focus of the essay then moves to Bambara's complicated engagement with, and resistance to, narrative closure. This issue of closure, a dominant thematic element in the novel, is read in light of the failings by the government agencies to address the attacks on the African American community (failings that continued to make national news in 2005 as Atlanta decided to reopen the investigation regarding the child murders), but also in light of the imagined family's and community's potentially problematic desire to transcend the terrorism by retreating into a pointedly inadequate explanation of the murders, and into a prior, supposedly safer world defined by greater individual autonomy. The refusal to claim the bodily remains announced in the title of the work thus becomes an occasion to explore the relationship between paranoia, judgment, mourning and premature closure. Ultimately, the argument presented here invites readers to approach *Those Bones Are Not My Child* as a

carefully crafted novel that strategically and experimentally analyzes embattled manipulations of paranoia, where paranoia is understood both as a means of social control, and in its critical, alternative form, as an opportunity for gaining a more incisive understanding of institutional dynamics, collective agency and the politics of interpretation.

Theorizing Paranoia, Engaging Race

Bambara constructs *Those Bones Are Not My Child* through a series of snapshots—explicitly demarcated days in the life of its central characters, the most prominent of whom is Marzala Rawls Spencer. Extending from July 20, 1980, to July 8, 1987, this series begins *in media res* insofar as the terror campaign is concerned. Similarly, the prologue is chronologically situated at a midpoint of the action recounted in the novel, fifteen months after the abduction of Marzala’s son. As a result, these “beginnings” convey both urgency and a retrospective struggle as Marzala, her estranged husband, Nathaniel (“Spence”) Spencer, and fellow community members undertake a desperate search for missed clues or connections that might help them locate her oldest child, Sundiata (“Sonny”), who has disappeared during a Boy’s Club outing. The earliest dates in this temporal series, the dates coinciding with Sonny’s abduction, find Marzala both fearful of, and in denial regarding, the terror campaign targeting Atlanta’s African American children. When Marzala does begin the demeaning and frustrating effort to gain assistance from the police, Bambara suggests that her initial denial is itself problematic because Marzala has not previously helped others in the community who were already contending with the attacks and similarly inadequate assistance from police.

Contextualizing Marzala’s responses during the early stages of Sonny’s abduction, Bambara invites readers to focus on issues of collective agency and isolation in the prologue. Here, readers find Marzala enraged by police incompetence and inaction, in part because no progress has been made in locating Sonny, and in part because the city “too busy to hate” has settled on a scapegoat—a local African American named Wayne Williams—and announced that the terror campaign is over (a claim betrayed by continuing abductions and murders). Several features stand out immediately as one considers this prologue. Foremost is the palpable tension that Bambara creates between Marzala’s desire to gain information and her fear of being discounted as paranoid. Bambara introduces this tension as readers first encounter Marzala obsessively sweeping her front porch, an action that allows her to camouflage her “sweeping” visual surveillance of the neighborhood.

The struggle, between the desire for information and the fear of asking in a way that will be misread, is modeled repeatedly in the prologue, as Marzala poses well-worn questions to Sonny's school friends, and as Marzala calls Sonny's school to see if any news had been gained there. In addition to her concerns about being perceived as a legitimate and sane actor, Marzala also reveals a fear of being held responsible for Sonny's disappearance, in large part the result of police attempts to silence the African American community groups (which have desperately sought media attention) by inviting suspicion of the parents. Most fundamentally, the prologue conveys Marzala's sense of growing isolation, a strong indicator that institutional attempts to drive her into uncritical paranoia have had an effect. At the same time, the diversion provided by the Wayne Williams case weakens the community-based organizations responding to the terror campaign, leaving people like Marzala with diminished recourse to a collective agency that has constituted their only real hope.

Bambara's exploration of paranoia (foregrounded in her Prologue), and her elaboration of how Atlanta's African American community at times reworks paranoia for critical, homeopathic purposes, stand in contrast to the most prominent theories regarding the representation of paranoia in literature. These theories strongly, at times exclusively, emphasize an individualistic, nostalgic drive in narratives about paranoia. *Those Bones Are Not My Child* presents an invitation to rethink these theories of literary paranoia in light of counter-examples: texts that analyze collective social marginalization and offer a more nuanced approach to the interpretive battles engaged. Rather than simply reproducing the pathological symptoms associated with paranoia, such texts combine a sense of living in terror, and a sense of living with a critical understanding of paranoia-as-social-control, including the systematic delegitimation of African American analyses that would "connect the dots," and thereby reveal varying degrees of institutional complicity in racist violence and psychological manipulation.⁵ A number of rich critical studies treating paranoia in contemporary literature have been published in recent years; looking more closely at these treatments, Bambara's readers will find important opportunities to complicate understandings of paranoia and the socio-historical engagements of the literature.⁶ In particular, a dialogue between these studies and

⁵ For a reading of the ways in which the legal system undermines the recognition of race hate crimes by focusing narrowly on limited notions of perpetrator and victim, thereby avoiding questions of complicity involving bystanders, collaborators and other actors, see Gutiérrez-Jones's *Critical Race Narratives* (1-17). Novels that work in the fashion described include Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alejandro Morales's *The Brick People*, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*.

⁶ My survey focuses on three works examining paranoia and contemporary literature: Leo

Bambara's novel provides an occasion for considering the difference that race can make when analyzing the literature of paranoia.

According to *Merriam-Webster's Medical Dictionary* (2002), paranoia is defined as a psychosis characterized by *systematized* delusions of persecution or grandeur usually without hallucinations, and as a tendency on the part of an *individual or group* toward excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrustfulness of others. Mental illness, in the broad sense, had been described as paranoia until the late 1800s when physicians circumscribed its definition and distinguished paranoia from various forms of dementia. Generally speaking, this distinction signaled an apparent difference in terms of the patient's connection with reality. While patients exhibiting paranoia in this schema could show signs of dementia (including a disconnection from the world around them), these patients would typically construct interpretations and fantasies by drawing from a wealth of verifiable details, doing so in highly systematic ways. According to this theory, part of what typifies the patient with paranoia is the patient's ability to integrate his or her fantasy life with reality.

Freud made significant contributions to the ongoing debates about paranoia, particularly in his work on Daniel Paul Schreber.⁷ For Freud, cases like Schreber's afford a glimpse into the most fundamental processes of psychic life and development because the symptoms are driven by basic psychological impulses (Gilman 135). In particular, Freud saw in paranoia a rebellion against external (social) prohibitions that have been internalized in the formation of the ideal ego (what he came to term the superego in his later work). In this sense, the patient with paranoia is rebelling against his or her own inner monitor, which may manifest as voices or plots conspiring against the patient, forces that seem to be external to the patient. Freud also claimed that paranoia was a defense against homosexuality, because he saw the ideal ego as being strongly fed by libidinal energies of a homosexual nature. Although Freud was not explicit on this matter, his writings suggest that the ideal ego (and internal monitoring function) had this homosexual charge because a) loving oneself is, technically speaking, a homosexual kind of love, and b) given that the formation of the ideal ego is prompted by prohibitions drawn from the social context, the expression of same sex desire is funneled into the ideal ego where it may be "safely" addressed (Laplanche and Pontalis 297).

Bersani's "Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature," Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy*, and Patrick O'Donnell's *Latent Destinies*.

⁷ See Freud's "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," and Schreber's *Memoirs of My Mental Illness*.

What is particularly important about definitions of paranoia, in light of these origins, is the close association the condition is presumed to have *vis-à-vis* social reality. According to Freud, paranoia arises from what are otherwise normal psychic processes (self-monitoring), and appears to transfer the critical monitoring function to an external source; this transfer, in a sense, brings patients full circle since according to Freud the prohibitions that have been internalized in the formation of the ideal ego were of an external social origin from the beginning. In sum, paranoia stands out as a concept that may deeply trouble the categorical distinction between normative, healthy behavior, and pathological manifestations, precisely because the concept emphasizes the interface between psychic and social life. As a corollary, one may consider Freud's efforts to establish psychoanalysis, and the reality of "deep psychic processes" based on interpretations of dream material and the like, as an extended struggle against being read as paranoid (Melley 24).

Freud succeeded in founding this science, but as Sander L. Gilman has demonstrated in *Freud, Race and Gender* (1995), when examined closely, Freud's work evinces a complex negotiation with the anti-semitism that was pervasive in his social context, and among his medical peers. One result of this negotiation was that Freud, when analyzing patients like Schreber, avoided pronounced racial material and displaced this evidence by emphasizing "universal" psychic structures, for example the Oedipal complex (Gilman 143-45). Based on the displacement of anti-semitism carefully documented by Gilman, we may surmise that Freud expended considerable energy in order to avoid racial controversies that, during his day, might have led many of his peers to discount his work. Given the prevailing assumption of the time, that people of Jewish descent were more inclined to develop mental illness, and the assertion by many of Freud's contemporaries that this propensity was a result of tribal inbreeding, it is not difficult to see why Freud would be concerned that his work could become a lightning rod if it pressed a critique of anti-semitism. But while the prevailing racial attitudes may have deterred Freud from more thoroughly developing the interplay of race and paranoia, he did acknowledge in a more general fashion that patients diagnosed as paranoid could truly be subject to threats and conspiracies: that their expressions of paranoia might be mixed in complex ways with real, socially-based, systematic efforts to harm the patient. Overall, the complex negotiation between social and psychic factors that come together in the concept of paranoia help explain why the term's definition is continually being contested within the medical establishment, provoking a crisis of interpretation that more than one commentator has likened to the interpretive battles

identified with paranoia itself (Melley 17).⁸

Although some of the most notable attempts to define paranoia in a larger social context have emphasized the condition as a clear cut pathology—Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), for example—one tends to find in more recent treatments a more sophisticated acknowledgement of the tensions that the psychoanalytic concept of paranoia creates for any categorical distinction between reality and fantasy (Melley 23).

All the same, these more recent studies, including those engaging literature, focus almost exclusively on the limitations of paranoia as a mode of apprehension and interpretation. A quick survey of the literary studies reveals certain dominant findings. First, paranoia as engaged in the post WWII U.S. fiction is posed as a fundamentally nostalgic gesture (Melley 33). A response to a sense of self that is thoroughly compromised by corporate influences and media saturation, paranoia in these fictional texts is most often a means of reasserting an unfettered notion of the individual agent drawn from the past (Melley 6, 25). This nostalgic impulse, highlighted in Leo Bersani’s frequently cited essay on paranoia and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, has been reworked in rich and varied ways in subsequent treatments of the topic, yet this fundamental notion regarding a retreat from the present (and future) remains an abiding feature of the critical reception (Bersani 109; O’Donnell 1-10). Second, theorists have assumed that anxieties regarding the compromised self, what Timothy Melley calls “agency panic,” harbor a desire for a male privilege that can resist the all-encompassing, feminine sameness of paranoia inspiring conspiracies and systems (Melley 32). According to these studies, the fictional paranoid, as well as the fiction of paranoia, most often records a desire to reassert the (potentially phantasmatic) masculine privilege of a bygone era. Not surprisingly perhaps, the “canon” of authors most often cited in such studies is predominantly male. All of these studies assume that an embattled sense of the individual self is a primary locus of concern for most of the authors treated.

While these studies generate powerful readings of the dynamics noted, they tend to miss the productive tension between the individual and society that Freud’s theory of paranoia registered, even as Freud simultaneously downplayed this tension, and especially racial factors, by making the interpretive focus of his psychoanalysis the individual patient’s negotiation of universal psychic structures and processes. One consequence of Freud’s response to his social context (his

⁸ See also Gilman’s account of the ways in which psychoanalysis was initially discounted as the product of Jewish mentality that was presumed itself to be inclined toward mental illness (30-31, 106).

deferral of anti-semitism while interpreting Schreber's paranoia) is that a model of avoidance has been passed along to subsequent theorists. The point here is not to dismiss the debilitating effects of what has been designated clinical paranoia, but rather to suggest that the embattled definitions of the phenomena are a product of the social context that they inhabit. The social forces that shaped the concept of paranoia were very much affected by racial dynamics even as the concept was constructed to limit recognition of these dynamics. Freud was invested in this inquiry about paranoia precisely because he understood its deep relevance to "normal" psychic functioning.

Many of the literary authors who have been the focus of studies on post-WWII paranoia have been read as examples of the nostalgic, individualistic impulses noted, and these authors have been, implicitly and explicitly, offered as representative of U.S. literary ventures with paranoia. By contrast, even a cursory review of literature about racialized communities produces a host of rich yet neglected examples interrogating paranoia (including Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Louise Erdrich, Alejandro Morales). This writing tends not to be included in the lists of paranoia-focused authors, which frequently looks a great deal like the post-modernist canon. One reason for this pattern may be that the protagonists of the authors conventionally associated with exploring paranoia are more easily read as individuals and more easily isolated from their social contexts because they are often white and male and therefore frequently enjoy a greater degree of enfranchisement and autonomy than many of their female and raced counterparts. By reproducing the social norm of individualism, critical studies that focus primarily on characters exercising white male privilege displace struggles regarding the legitimacy of social groups and collective action, struggles that are fundamental for winning reparations, and enforcing policies and laws that would address the legacy of racism in the United States.⁹

Among the critical studies devoted to paranoia, Timothy Melley's *Empire of Conspiracy: the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (1999) is the most successful in terms of engaging questions regarding group agency. While asserting the primacy of the nostalgic impulse in many paranoid texts, Melley describes several of Margaret Atwood's novels as achieving a uniquely self-conscious and critical paranoia (110). Here, Melley reads Atwood's feminist critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution as a politically charged engagement with the present, and

⁹ Melley wrestles with this problem in a very provisional manner when he argues that literary approaches to paranoia appear to "flatten" social experience (and therefore analyses of race) but also offer the possibility of innovative social analysis (10-11).

as an action undertaken on behalf of women in general (123-32). The chapter on Atwood, a particularly rich part of Melley's study, raises a number of questions because it recognizes the ways in which versions of critical and uncritical paranoia (i.e., those registering a more complex sense of social interaction, and those reproducing the nostalgic, individualistic drive exclusively) can contest one another within a single fictional work. Taking into account the subtle approach offered by Melley in his reading of Atwood—a reading that mines the social complexity of paranoia alluded to by Freud—we might well ask if there is also a greater concern with collective agency than has been heretofore acknowledged in the “canonical” postmodern texts. In what ways might these canonical texts be said to draw on collective agency and cultural traditions as a counter to the nostalgic individualism that they thematize? Might literature focusing on race dynamics, as well as texts focusing on the experiences of other marginalized social groups, evince the kind of critical paranoia attributed to Atwood? As Bambara's novel suggests, one may also rethink the interaction of paranoia and race in texts that foreground inquiries regarding institutions, such entities understood not simply as a threat to self, but also as a loci of will and desire in themselves. With these issues in mind, we turn to Bambara's novel in order to explore its collective, critical analysis of paranoia, an analysis that undertakes, first of all, rigorous self-examination (of the individual and group), thereby halting the problematic transference of the “monitoring function” to an external entity, and, at the same time, mining of a cultural archive conveying strategies for negotiating actions imposed from without, and intended to create a paranoid response.

An Archive for Contending with Terror

While several commentators have noted the emphasis on African American oral, musical and manuscript traditions in this novel, especially in the novel's epilogue and prologue, important critical connections remain to be made regarding these features and an understanding of Bambara's larger strategy with the novel (Taylor 261-63; Bone 233). Specifically, these traditions constitute for Bambara a developing critical genealogy: an archive with the ability to teach community members how best to read and respond to this and other campaigns of terror.¹⁰ This

¹⁰ The Taylor essay argues that the community develops alternative means of organizing and analyzing information and she focuses in particular on the creation of an archive that can serve pedagogical and politically-resistant functions (7-12).

rhetorical and pedagogical goal helps explain why Bambara took certain risks with the narrative. Foremost among these risks, at least judging by the initial responses to the novel, is Bambara's decision to displace the Spencer family as a point of focus for significant portions of the novel. This attenuation is achieved through a number of techniques, most obviously by incorporating various alternative plot lines and by recounting at length the information regarding the abductions gathered by the family and community.

When such priorities dominate the narrative, readers can find themselves longing for reentry into the familial conflicts and for the closure that could come with the solving the mystery behind Sonny's abduction. Some responses to the novel have suggested that the extended incorporation of these additional plot lines and documentary elements weakens the work, that Bambara might well have removed these parts in order make the family focus, and therefore the novel as a whole, stronger (Benjamin 340; Birkerts 17). While it is apparent that *Those Bones Are Not My Child* tests readerly expectations, it does so strategically. If the reuniting of the family constitutes the hope that keeps many readers motivated, the offering of this hope is a means, not an end in itself. Bambara once described her short stories as functioning something like a Trojan horse; the same may be said of this novel.¹¹ With *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, Bambara's goal is to facilitate a partial transfer of the affect readers have for family to Atlanta's African American community as a whole, and to a degree, to similarly positioned international communities (including, for example, the social groups in Latin America and South Africa studied by the Atlanta volunteer groups investigating the murders).

This strategy contextualizes Bambara's decision to focus on Marzala's initial impulse to withdraw from the community struggle once Sonny is found, and why this desire to separate as an individual (and as a discrete family) is ultimately superseded by Marzala's renewed commitment to the community's volunteer efforts. Bambara explicitly ties Sonny's, and his family's, prospects for recovery to their integration into the community's agency and collective history. At the end of the work, two actions reinforce this drive toward integration. In these final pages, Marzala speaks at a rally organized to fight for a reopening of the official investigation, and this address includes a demand that community members be granted more direct access to testimony and information (660-64). In these same pages, a community network, including Marzala and Spence, carries out its own raid of a home used by Sonny's abductors. Crucially, the description of the raid

¹¹ See Elliott Butler-Evan's analysis of Bambara's short stories and her interview with Claudia Tate regarding her strategies.

ends without providing answers as to who was involved in the crimes, nor is the reader provided motives for the abductions and murders. Instead, the emphasis falls on the “in-process” action taken by the community as represented by Bambara.

Giving detailed attention to these processes, Bambara highlights the sharing of knowledge about paranoia and its debilitating effects. For example, having struggled to gain national attention for the investigation of the attacks, the community groups find themselves the recipients of letters from across the country, including pleas for help and offers of advice and information. Working as a volunteer for the Committee to Stop Children’s Murders (STOP), Marzala encounters a letter from a mother of an abducted and recovered child. This letter acts as a warning, inasmuch as the author conveys how her connections to those around her were destroyed while she agonized for her child’s return.

There’d been a mother who’d written from New Hampshire that it wasn’t until her baby girl was returned three years later—plump, cheerful, her ABCs and a few numbers in her repertoire—that she acknowledged the disintegration around her. Her husband had become a drunk. Her older daughter was suffering from double vision and malnutrition. Her son was withdrawn, had failing grades and a juvenile record. The mother had collapsed. (336-37)

This mother’s story resonates in pointed ways with Marzala’s experience. At the beginning of the novel, she is so overwhelmed by Sonny’s disappearance that she neglects her youngest daughter, Kenti, leaving her unattended and vulnerable in a manner that brings censure from another parent. Many other scenes document the deteriorating communication within the family.

In such episodes, Bambara conveys a crucial lesson regarding paranoia: one debilitating effect of the abductions is often social isolation experienced by the individuals within the community. The strategic “disappearance” of people, most notably as practiced by military regimes, is premised on similar assumptions. The police in Atlanta contributed to this effect by refusing to acknowledge the terror campaign in its initial stages, then by devising a list of victims that was fundamentally inadequate, thereby attempting to divide the families of the different victims, a fact that Bambara underscores as Sonny’s case falls outside of the officially recognized criteria for inclusion.¹² The media add to this sense of iso-

¹² For an analysis of the battles that ensued over these criteria during the investigation, see *The List*.

lation during much of the terror by burying the coverage of the abductions and murders, or by avoiding the topic altogether, a point emphasized by Bambara in the novel when she describes Marzala's younger son, Kofi, as stunned to find the news of the child murders treated with such disregard (57).

Analyzing this "blackout," Marzala and others in the novel attribute the local media's response to a protection of Atlanta's convention income and what Martyn Bone has described as Atlanta's global capitalist identity, an abstraction that facilitates the city's continuing success as the most profitable convention host in North America, even as it grimly erases the local body politic in a grotesque performance epitomized by the abductions themselves (Bambara 151-52, 230). Noting the role of the national media, Bambara offers an exchange between Marzala and a network newsman who provides two rationales for the exclusion: black kids dying in the South is old news, and terror is something that happens overseas (274). Taken together, the police and media responses amplify the sense of isolation produced by the abductions. To a significant degree, Bambara's focus is this amplification as much as it is the abductions themselves. Although they struggle with a sense of isolation throughout the text, the Spencer family and the community do not succumb to it. Instead, they join volunteer community organizations to do the work of the government institutions that have failed them.

A crucial part of the foundation for such action is the memory of community activism. These memories frequently recall previous periods of community action and resistance. As such, they counter the isolation associated with uncritical paranoia, and act as conduits redirecting the affect of the Freudian paranoia scenario (the anxiety for the isolated self and the fear of the omnipotent other) toward a third entity: kinship within the community of one's peers. In this vein, Marzala recalls how she, as a child, assisted civil rights groups by painting over roof top markings made by the FBI in order to coordinate helicopter surveillance of activists. The success of such collaborative efforts also depends on establishing trust across class barriers, a prerequisite for action that contextualizes one of the more pronounced chronological leaps in the text. As Spence attempts to coax information from an unfamiliar, lower class African American mechanic who is danger because he has witnessed an abduction, the narrative thrusts the reader into Spence's memory, to an episode in which his uncle Rayfield first introduced Spence to his poor country relations. This recollection stands out because of Spence's embarrassment regarding his awkward initial reaction to his backwoods relatives, and because his reaction garnered his favorite uncle's enraged disapproval. In the present of the novel—the period of the abductions—this link to the past provides a context for Spence's

awkwardness as he confronts the class line. This episode also situates a phrase repeated in the text, and attributed to uncle Rayfield—"memory is hope" (145). Ultimately, Bambara incorporates this jarring turn in her narrative in order to underscore the need to extend understandings of kinship, and in so doing, she emphasizes the value of memory and of a sense of history. The foundations of the archive—memory and history—stand as resources when people like Spence and Marzala must find a way to trust others within the volunteer organization despite the fear and suspicion that the city's institutions would foster within the African American community.

Witnessing and Testimony: Negotiating a Crisis of Interpretation

As Carole Anne Taylor has noted, the archive presented by Bambara is above all a collection of community stories that are rarely granted legitimacy by society's institutions. Marzala considers these stories carefully as she collects them, and while she is certainly deeply invested in seeking out those which will be most useful in solving the murder cases, she is also keenly aware of how the stories themselves fulfill a social function in the community, establishing a matrix for collecting, organizing and conveying ideas and feelings generally. This awareness is especially noteworthy immediately after the bombing of the Gate City Day Nursery in the Bowen Homes project. A sustaining feature of the community, this network of stories is posed as an important and complicated resource by Bambara when the community is confronted by traumatic events like the nursery explosion, which takes the lives of five people, including four very young children (297-98). This alternative archive incorporates a range of explanations for events like the bombing, and while the novel does not suggest that these stories are presented in order to legitimate one particular version, it does suggest that the stories are circulated so that they might be tested against community norms that are grounded in historical knowledge and experience. As such, community witnessing through storytelling constitutes a monitoring function that is analogous to the ideal ego formation described by Freud. This type of function is what Marzala helps Sonny to reinvigorate once he is back with his family, Bambara describing his "treatment" as a matter of learning to tell his own story (519). Bambara's analysis of storytelling also suggests that readers—to the extent that they are traumatized by this recounting of the murders and their effects—may find hope in the archiving process to which the novel itself contributes. In sum, Bambara's meditations on storytelling invite

readers to view the novel as a form of collective testimony and witnessing responding to the paranoia that the terror campaign promoted.

With so many of the abducted children in Atlanta ultimately murdered, Bambara prompts readers to consider carefully why she would choose to have the Spencer family in the relatively unique position of recovering their son. Perhaps most strikingly, Sonny's reintroduction into the narrative offers a lesson regarding a primary effect of his kidnapping, inasmuch as "Sonny was taught fear" (564). In addition, Sonny's recovery gives Bambara an opportunity to draw a parallel between his and the community's response to the abduction. It is not simply that Sonny's injuries have rippled out into the empathetic community, although the novel suggests this is true. Instead, Bambara strives to detail the complicated and diverse ways that the media and legal establishment foster fear in Atlanta's African American community. Making the parents highly visible suspects, and demanding privacy-invading lie detector tests from them, promotes a fear that is explicitly associated in the novel with the desire by the legal institution to stifle community activism, and to silence criticism of law enforcement (185-89, 660). While Bambara describes an array of institutional practices that function in this manner, two techniques receive notable priority: the government's opportunistic use of the crisis to justify spying on African American activist organizations, and the manipulation of strategically leaked "secret" information that heightens the sense of institutional agency at the expense of the community. While such leaks sometimes misdirect the STOP committee and other volunteer groups, the greater impact emphasized by Bambara involves the radical undermining of any trust that the groups might place in law enforcement or other government agencies.

Although the official police task force receives frequent generalized attention in the text, only two figures within the legal establishment are developed in a sustained manner: Detective B. J. Greaves, who fights within the police department for recognition of the terror campaign and who offers initial encouragement to Marzala; and Judge Webber, who becomes a crucial, if cryptic, source of information regarding the cases over the course of the novel. What is most striking in these characterizations is how utterly difficult it is for these figures to negotiate their highly complicated political contexts. In both cases, their access to information and their position in the system of power is so tenuous that they are imbued with a distrust of institutions strongly mirroring that experienced by the parents. As Bambara notes in the text, the Atlanta Police Department of the time was constituted by two separate power structures, an older department run by whites, and complete with remnants of white supremacy, and a younger, largely African

American department wrestling for power and reform (19). Bambara captures this intensely vexed political context in broad strokes, and this understanding is always working in the background as Bambara documents in significant detail numerous police actions related to the terror campaign. These actions, in the best spirit, would be termed incompetent, for example, discounting witnesses with unique and verified knowledge of the abductions and murders, as well as seriously mishandling crime scenes. Particularly disturbing in this regard is the mistreatment of the murder victims' remains, or "those bones" (361, 370).

Despite the detailed description of certain police actions, Bambara is more interested in how the African American community is perceiving the legal establishment than in that establishment's comprehensive workings. The novel does not engage the process of decision-making in the police department, except in the most cursory way, and the city's African American mayor, Maynard Jackson, is virtually ignored, a decision by Bambara that may be intended to protect the African American political establishment from criticism, or one that may suggest its relatively ineffectual role in achieving justice in this case. However this question is resolved, it bears remembering that the novel is not committed to a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of Atlanta's institutions, but rather to an examination of how Marzala, Spence and their peers react to the legal establishment and the media.

As represented in the novel, the community's anger and frustration takes a quantum leap as the Atlanta Police Department declares the deadly pre-school explosion an accident despite evidence strongly suggesting otherwise. During the period represented by Bambara, convincing judgment of this event remains out of the question, as it does for the abductions and murders generally, and while *Those Bones Are Not My Child* offers an exhaustive accounting of the community's desperate efforts to find answers, the novel's principal concern is that the paranoia inspired in the community by the legal establishment and the media not isolate people and "teach them fear." Instead, Bambara argues for the construction of a consciousness-raising, community-based critical approach to paranoia. As a step in this process, Bambara represents a range of conspiracy theories (322-24) that have developed in response to the abductions. She then differentiates among these by subjecting them to "reality checks" that are informed by a complex understanding of how fear has been used to control communities, and by extensive community conducted detective work. This detective work includes interviews of witnesses, surveillance, forensic analysis, as well as careful inquiry regarding patterns among the abductions and murders, and is all guided by off-duty or retired law officers, most from the community.

It is out of this process that the STOP committee ends up focusing on three likely (perhaps overlapping) perpetrators of the abductions and murders: the Klan, a child pornography ring, and a network of drug dealers. As with Marzala's sweeping surveillance at the beginning of the novel, the volunteers make use of their everyday mobility (for example, Spence is a cab driver) in order to collect information that is ultimately evaluated by the committee. Represented at some length in the novel, the committee's analysis of the evidence and theories constitutes, in the best instances, a collective self-monitoring based on shared ethical commitments. Crucially, it is this self-critical work that helps the committee resist the narcissistic aspect of uncritical paranoia. Bambara extends this emphasis on collective analysis by noting the wide range of STOP committee collaborators—similar groups from around the world that are struggling for justice in a setting where government institutions attempt to control victimized populations by promoting a sense of paranoia.

Judgment and Closure

Bambara's focus on the process of evidence gathering, evaluation and theory testing goes no further than the informed speculation that to this day hangs over the unresolved abductions and murders. This focus on the process of alternative, yet incomplete, judgment invites readers to reframe what has at times appeared to be a fundamental conflict in Bambara's project. John Lowe emphasizes this conflict when he argues that Bambara's work records a seemingly paradoxical set of wishes:

There are tantalizing questions [in the novel] and many merely get asked. Throughout the story, suggestions of sinister Klan/porn cabals are thrown out, a frightening but deserted warehouse-district cult refuge is discovered, and the reader is encouraged to think of the murders as all part of a master plan. Yet the book never resolves these issues, content it seems, with merely suggesting that Wayne Williams was a scapegoat. . . . To be sure, Bambara the activist is intent, as Zala and Spence are, on getting the case reopened and thoroughly investigated, but the decision to avoid extended speculation might seem to play havoc with her fictional rendition. (267)

While Lowe is correct that both desires (to reopen the investigation and to solve the case) inform the novel, they are not equivalent. As much as the characters

demonstrate a desire for answers regarding the terror campaign, Bambara is primarily devoted to analyzing the fundamentally flawed environment in which the investigation is being conducted, a setting poisoned by the media's and legal establishment's actions, including the infiltration of the committee groups by spies, and national security directives to obstruct international collaborations (392, 397). Rather than speculating beyond the limits of the information obtained, Bambara focuses on the process of judgment itself, and on the difficulties of gaining justice and knowledge in a setting imbued with paranoia. To this end, Bambara offers various windows into the STOP committee deliberations, exchanges that she then mines for lessons about the role of paranoia. Even late in the novel, crucial questions about government manipulation threaten to derail the STOP committee's work.

What had been striking Spence lately about the meetings was that even the radicals, white and Black alike, did little more than react to the authorities' agenda, as if there were no alternative way to organize or to think. They appealed to the same fear and hatred the "enemy" did to promote a version of reality that didn't match any other in the room, including each other's, though their main tactic was the same—to provoke the authorities and keep the leadership in a bad light, and then appoint themselves as saviors of the people. (651)

The narcissistic self-aggrandizement described here reveals all too well just how easily the STOP committee, and even those members most critical of the government, could fall into uncritical paranoia. And it is no accident that the legitimacy of Spence's assessment is based on the failure of the individual radicals to present a theory that meets the norms of the group, or the self-monitoring functions established by the committee members through the painstaking collection and analysis of evidence. In this case, then, the leap toward the speculations desired by Lowe becomes a means of falling into uncritical paranoia because the available evidence simply does not allow one to go further than Bambara has gone in the novel.

Faulty judgment, in the form of premature closure, is marked as a central problem in the opening pages of the novel, further suggesting that Bambara's primary focus is the investigative process itself. For example, the first time that the novel's title is invoked within the body of the work, the reader is invited to identify with an unnamed mother who has been asked to claim the remains of her missing

child. This section invites the reader to share this mother's confusion and panic as she realizes that the body is not her child's, and that no one wants to acknowledge this fact (a discovery made evident by the absence of a prominent scar). Silenced by her family and her pastor alike, this mother is presented as a victim of the community's desire to put the trauma behind them.

The mother is showing her arm. Her child had a bad burn from an iron. The body downtown did not. Her pastor pats her. Relatives shush her. . . . Everyone who's kept the faith through the whole ordeal wants to pay respects and leave. It's somebody's child downtown on a slab, so claim the bones, mother. Set the funeral date, mother. Don't make a fuss, mother. You're not yourself, mother. Let's close the lid, mother. Let the community sleep again. (12-13)

A form of self-protective denial, this "sleep" is a survival strategy for a community that has been subject to systematic attacks since its earliest days in the U. S. As with other notable African American fiction (for instance, Morrison's *Beloved*), Bambara's critique of religious calls to accept suffering and loss leads both to a rethinking of the judgment brought upon Lot's wife, and to a refusal to embrace the biblical lesson of her story (150).

Freud, of course, proposed a strong relationship between the paranoid formation and religious belief, emphasizing among other things the shared projection of omnipotent power and surveillance, as well as the sacrificial logic that makes one's manipulation by larger unseen forces a source of grandeur. In the case of the unnamed mother, a coercive closure is pressed upon her by the religious community, kin and counselors who would prefer to ascribe the child's death to an ultimately benevolent "conspiracy," in Freud's terms, rather than to the killers that the STOP committee seeks. Challenging this premature closure, the mother relies on a visceral memory, a scar that she confirms by reenacting its physical presence, and by recalling her experience of it through touch. As much as this sensual appeal is an attempt to convince her kin of the validity of her testimony, it is also a claim of a common bond built on a recognition of what Judith Butler has termed in *Precarious Life* "the social vulnerability of our bodies"(20). If the politics of mourning offers a particularly powerful way of shaping community bonds and values, as a number of commentators have suggested, Butler offers an insightful way of understanding the body's role in this process: "Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments,

exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (20).¹³ A participant in this process, Bambara’s unnamed mother is drawing on a communal memory of touch and vulnerability, something shared across the range of human experience, and something distinct from the self-aggrandizing gestures associated with the paranoid individual.

In the novel, the logic of sacrifice is not identified solely with the clergy—Marzala’s night school studies, for instance, result in a research paper on ancient Greek examples, including Clytemnestra—but the prominence of the church in Atlanta’s African American community compels Bambara to focus her critique on this institution. And even as Bambara undertakes this critique of passive acceptance, she is careful to differentiate among different segments of the clergy. Emphasizing this point, Bambara has one of the local clergy, Reverend Thomas, make some of the most powerful calls to action at the close of the novel,

. . . many of us are still unwilling to dismantle the authorities’ myth. While we may despise the treachery of lies, we seem to fear the squalor of the truth even more. Let us bow our heads and pray for the strength to overcome our fearfulness. . . . And for the strength to make this city responsible to people’s need for the truth. (657)

Such redemptive action is not granted the other institutions in the novel, as both the media and legal establishment are accused of, at the very least, burying the terror campaign and scapegoating Wayne Williams.

Arrested and convicted on the basis of circumstantial evidence for the murder of two people, Wayne Williams’ imprisonment is presented as the end of the story by Atlanta’s courts. Far from convincing for many people in Atlanta and elsewhere, this turn of events has led to intense and lasting criticism of the prosecution and its assessment of the terror campaign, criticism that includes dissonant voices from within the original police task force itself. In May of 2005, these questions reached a head as Atlanta authorities announced that they would reopen the case against Williams.¹⁴ While Bambara describes the Williams trial, reviewers have noted that the case is not as much of a focus in the novel as one might expect (Lowe 273). As has been suggested, this displacement may be a sign of Bambara’s incredulity; there

¹³ For a theoretically and historically rich summary of the politics of mourning, see Mitchell Robert Breitwieser’s *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning*, especially 17-70.

¹⁴ For a description of the reopened case, see the CNN story of May 11, 2005, “[Police to Discuss Reopened Atlanta Child Murders Investigation.](#)”

is also, however, a sense developed early in the novel that the Williams trial is intentionally diversionary. In this regard, Bambara notes several times that the Williams case came about just in time to block the transfer to the public of comprehensive information about missing persons and murders in Atlanta (21, 509-10, 634). But while the lost information is deeply troubling for Bambara, even greater emphasis falls on how the Williams case forestalls adequate mourning for the murder victims because the surviving family and community members are denied a credible explanation of what has happened. In this sense, the institutions are party to a disappearance of the disappeared.

Touch, Memory and a Usable Past

The “unmaking” of reality that is promoted as they are fed glaringly inadequate explanations by the legal system leaves the characters, and especially Marzala, in a state of panic that at times produces a literal vertigo. As noted, part of Bambara’s accomplishment with this text involves precisely her ability to draw the reader into the somatic experience of the characters. These heightened sensations, amplified by a masterful use of narrative pace that conveys both rushed action and interminable waiting, are from the outset identified with a mix of emotions: a combination of fear, a forestalled sense of mourning, and a deep anger. Marzala recovers Sonny, and in this way her mourning is of a different order than that faced by many of the parents, yet Bambara highlights that the child who returns is not at all the same: he has lost a fundamental connection to his family and to the world around him. This change helps explain why Marzala’s first reaction on seeing Sonny again, Sonny now horribly beaten and malnourished, is to declare “Those bones are not my child” (517). By virtue of her activism and collaboration with other mothers of abducted children, Marzala understands, long before the recovered Sonny speaks, the depth of their loss.

While the novel does not present a “working through” or “successful” mourning of this loss, Bambara’s work does offer a map of sorts for what this process might look like. In addition to community-initiated alternative institutions, the text draws on African American oral tradition, including music and poetry, in order to pose these as standing resources for contending with terror (658-60). Citing Gwendolyn Brooks, Andrew Salkey, Alexis DeVeaux, and Maya Angelou, Marzala draws on poetry in a call and response protest setting in order to underscore the community’s shared responsibilities (“We are all each other’s harvest, we are each other’s business”) and the need for courage when confronting state and media

authority. Part of what makes these cultural resources effective is their embodiment: their acknowledgement of somatic experience. In this vein, one may recall *Beloved's* Baby Suggs, and her admonition to the members of her community to love their bodies—their flesh, hands, mouths and hearts—in the wake of slavery (88-89). At crucial moments in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, moments when Marzala is on the verge of being destroyed by her complex awareness of the Atlanta terror campaign and of similar campaigns in the U.S. and overseas, Bambara describes her as reaching out to touch objects, including her own name printed in a phone book (178, 337-38).

Such touch serves a complex purpose in the novel. Most obviously a reality check, these sensations elicit bodily memories; in this regard, the contact with the phone book brings to mind calls to and by Marzala, no small feat when paranoia threatens complete isolation. But Bambara is also describing touch in the context of savage beatings, physical abuse that would destroy any memory of the caring touch of kinship, with all of the history attached to it. In this sense, bodily sensations are subject to complex, divergent interpretive agendas in Bambara's Atlanta. Most obviously, the body's responsiveness (to violence, to a caress) is woven into narratives (learning fear and isolation, pursuing touch as confirmation of community history and kinship) that have considerable political power because the infusion of bodily memory in characters like Marzala and Sonny influences which of the competing narratives, and approaches to paranoia, will most strongly inform present and future behavior.

These ideas regarding touch contextualize a climactic moment in Sonny's (albeit incomplete) healing process. Temporarily relocating to Marzala's mother's (Mama Lovely's) farm, the family begins the difficult process of addressing the psychological damage inflicted on Sonny. Tortured by his inability to fit back into the family, perpetually fearful, and overwhelmed by the caring that he has learned to live without, Sonny begins to roam secretly farther and farther from Mama Lovely's home. Aware of his escapes and convinced that Sonny's true departure is imminent, Mama Lovely confronts Sonny late one night as he is about to leap over her fence and out of her yard.

There'll be hell to pay should you move. That spot you standing on, scheming with little boy understanding, stay put. 'Cause if you run, I will lash you all up and down this road to wherever you planning to go to throw yourself away like this family had nothing better to do with its love than raise garbage and grief. Hear me now, 'cause if you

don't care, I don't care

It'll be one helluva skin-peeling time on Randall Road. I'm telling you. 'Cause this time, I choose her, not you. You been through it, I know. But I can't think about that right now. You can mend. But my girl, you see, I don't think she could take your going off, and she's my child. You do see my point?

It'd be a punishing trip, I ain't fooling. I ain't all that tired and I really ain't that old.

She felt ready when he made his move. But she wasn't prepared for how he moved. The sudden solidness of him against her made her drop the switch. He heaved the whole of himself at her in a torrent of words that rushed the wind from her lungs. (568-69)

This confrontation is striking in terms of method and outcome. Modeling the responsibility and caring that Mama Lovely expects to inhere among family members, she focuses on her love for her daughter, Marzala. Mama Lovely grants Sonny agency—she tells him that the decision to run or not is his—but at the same time she announces a strong and lasting love for Marzala, not for him. By leaping into her arms and not over the fence, Sonny confirms through touch a choice to be part of the family. While this episode far from resolves the issues faced by Sonny, his family, and his community (he was horribly injured in ways that will always be with him), this confrontation suggests that there are viable, if ethically complex, means for addressing the alienation announced by the novel's title. Mama Lovely positions herself as something of a transitional object in this scene; although she is very clear that her purposes are quite different than Sonny's abductors', Mama Lovely "overpowers" Sonny, both through surveillance and through the threat of physical abuse. Mama Lovely, thus, uses a modulated, homeopathic form of paranoia to counter the psychological effects of Sonny's captivity. In this manner, Mama Lovely effects a translation between the (body) language that Sonny has internalized—the violent authority of his captor(s)—and the norms of her family and community. A stage in the process of reclaiming Sonny, this exchange conveys Mama Lovely's subtle understanding and manipulation of paranoia, as well as a reassertion of generational kinship responsibilities.

The leap into Mama Lovely's arms is, therefore, also the embrace of a usable past, an embrace that signals the constitution of the self with, and in, community. Bambara's stress, then, is on the *usable* past, not a nostalgic displacement of the present nor of history in general as many recent theorists of literary paranoia predict.

Incorporating the “you” address in her prologue and epilogue, an address that could be inhabited by any reader, but that is especially evocative for her African American audience, Bambara constructs an activist text intent on mobilizing resistance to campaigns of terror. The novel is a call for a new investigation, but it is also a relentless critique of those institutional forces that have worked to undercut community agency.

Ultimately, Bambara insists that a critical appraisal of the paranoia dynamics must be part of achieving justice in this intensely racialized context. To the extent that paranoia manifests as a problematic transfer of “monitoring functions” to an external agent, we may read Bambara’s decision to focus on the community’s response—as opposed to the police and media decision makers, or even the killers—as a gesture of self-critical analysis. Such analysis would check collective narcissism by carefully engaging community norms that embody a history of critical responses to the manipulation of fear: the beatings, the rapes and the lynchings—the physical and psychological terrorism that coerces silence. Inasmuch as these techniques of social control have played, and continue to play, a significant role in U.S. race relations—an inescapable conclusion when confronted with the Atlanta child murders—cultural critics cannot effectively respond to texts like *Those Bones Are Not My Child* without engaging the very effects that the politics of fear sets in motion. In a relation that bears some resemblance to the crucial exchange between Mama Lovely and Sonny, Bambara carries the reader through a muted experience of paranoia in order to model a homeopathic intervention and to highlight the long-standing resources in African American culture that embody a critical response to paranoia.

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