READING/SPEAKING/WRITING
THE MOTHER TEXT
Essays on Caribbean Women's Writing

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2. "Or Not to Mother?"

Astrid Roemer's *Lijken op liefde* ("Looks Like Love")

DORIS HAMBUCH

*Lijken op liefde* ("LOOKS LIKE LOVE") (1997) is the second novel in Astrid Roemer's "Suriname Trilogy." Published in the 1990s, the Surinamese author's series begins with *Gewaagd leven* ("Risky Life"; 1996) and ends with *Was getekend* ("Something Signed"; 1998). Alternating narrative perspectives and time, the three texts revolve around the country's independence from Holland in 1975 and the impact this historical process has had on the population. *Lijken op liefde* might not at first suggest itself in the context of a collection dedicated to the theme of motherhood because its protagonist, Cora Sewa, is not a mother in the biological sense. "But the mother is there," as Adrienne Rich aptly remarks in *Of Woman Born*, "for better or for worse, in childless women as well" (189). I argue that for Roemer's main character, it is precisely the mothering detached from a physical delivery and nursing of infants, which gives the mother text a most prominent role in this novel.

While the lack of permanent parental responsibilities appears empowering, the novel also represents the longing for emotional fulfillment typically attributed to the mothering of biological children. In her profession as housekeeper Cora mothers a number of different children, and the manner in which she does this is conditioned by the strong bond she shares with her own mother. The ways in which Cora's relationship with her mother Hermine is always dominated by mutual support is my focus in the section "Creolizing Mother," which follows general information on Roemer's plot and its historical context. Cora's eventual resentment
of her husband’s wish for their union to remain childless is at the center of the third section, “Avoiding Motherhood.” The fourth section, “Special Needs” examines a sensibility Cora develops through experiences with her younger brother who has Down syndrome. Cora’s definition of herself within her transcultural family with a special needs sibling as caregiver for the children of other families, and as wife of a healer who denies her biological children, in the end, confirms that the mother is indeed there in childless women as well. With the creation of this protagonist, Roemer ultimately defies the stigma of the “old maid,” a stigma not challenged in all societies alike. Such defiance reveals that the stigma in question is much less about spouse-hood than it is about motherhood.

The representation of relationships throughout the trilogy, but particularly in the second part, which is dedicated to “lovers and their beloveds,” appears to be informed by the author’s experience as a family counsellor. All main characters are firmly situated within their families, and various family traditions are described in detail. Different cultural backgrounds represent the kind of creolization which stems from the Caribbean’s history of colonialism, slavery, and indentured labour. Relying on her observations as therapist, Roemer describes the implications this legacy has had in “Writing Back in the Diaspora” (1996), an essay mainly concerned with characteristics of post-colonial literature. Two centuries of broken kin connections, Roemer explains in this essay, “have had traumatic consequences for the Creole family structures” (“Writing Back” 38), and those very structures are fictionalized in the trilogy. A multicultural nature pervades the structures in question, and nearly all the main characters in *Lijken op liefde* represent a different cultural background. While Cora’s mother Hermine is Hindustani, her father Julius is of African descent, and her husband Herman, a traditional healer, lives in a rural community described “zo voorspelbaar [was] als een baarmoeder en gesloten als zaadballen” (“as predictable as a uterus and as closed as testicles”; Ll 26). Herman’s community consists of descendants from the West African Fante Akan tribe, and they populate a former plantation referred to as Plantage Jericho. Having largely avoided intermarriage and thus strictly preserved the ancient African rituals and
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traditions, unlike the ancestors of Cora’s (urban) Creole father, Herman’s community stands out as counterpart to all the other settings of the novel in which transculturation not only prevails but is also seen as a concept with constructive potential.

The transculturation fictionalized in Roemer’s novel and theorized in her essays follows the idea of Cuban anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Fernando Ortiz who replaced the preceding concept of “acculturation” in order to emphasize the complexity of processes during the encounter of different cultures. Diversity in Roemer’s work is in every way connected with opportunities for minorities in general, and integration of “Differences” (“Writing Back” 43) with a capital “D” is continuously encouraged. It is of particular significance to look at representations of minorities with regard to the mother text in *Lijken op liefde*. In Herman’s conservative community, the marital union serves the exclusive purpose of procreation, and a couple’s decision to remain childless is accordingly not acceptable. This community further disapproves of special needs children, which is a shocking discovery for Cora. Opposed to Herman’s conservative mono-cultural community, the transcultural structures characteristic of Cora’s upbringing provide vital grounds for integration and acceptance, despite the effects of the kind of trauma Roemer describes in “Writing Back in the Diaspora.” Hermine, whose family never accepts her husband, welcomes Cora’s decision to marry into another tradition. She further respects her daughter’s agreement regarding biological children, against the resistance of Herman’s community.

The “Suriname Trilogy,” collected in a single volume referred to as *Triplets (Driefing)* in 2001, is Astrid Roemer’s opus magnum. There is to date no English translation of any of Roemer’s novels, but translated shorter texts appear in *The Oxford Book of Caribbean Short Stories* (Brown and Wickham), *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women* (Esteves and Paravisini-Gebert), and in *Sisters of Caliban: Contemporary Women Poets of the Caribbean* (Fenwick). As mentioned already, the plot of the trilogy is driven by the population’s preparations for and the consequences of Suriname’s independence in 1975. *Lijken op liefde* scrutinizes Suriname’s immediate post-independence decades during which the new nation struggles with its status as the only
"former" Dutch possession in the Caribbean. During the same year *Lijken op liefde* was published, Roemer also co-authored a non-fiction book about Suriname titled *Een gids voor vrienden* ("A Guide for Friends"). This guidebook includes maps on which one can locate the many different places throughout the country, on land, and on water, which serve as settings in the trilogy. As Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger indicates in the second part of A. James Arnold's *History of Literature in the Caribbean* (2001), Roemer's three novels are an excellent example of Surinamese writing which "displays a breathtaking effort to (re)write foundational history from a postcolonial perspective of its own" (538). The postcolonial perspective is also informed by feminist insights, and as the public sphere continuously merges with the private, the mother text receives significance in the context of the family as well as from the political scenario. The connection between colonial power and colony is, for example, sometimes compared to love/hate relationships between relatives, and for a military coup, the image of an abortion is used.

*Lijken op liefde* is the only novel in the trilogy in which precise dates are crucial, as it projects a particular event in the immediate future, on the eve of the year 2000. Traumatic historical moments, such as the coup and the following dictatorship, are remembered during the preparations for a cleansing tribunal to take place at the end of the millenium:

*Het naderende jaar 2000 had Suriname de mogelijkheid gebracht de volgende eeuw verschuif van het verleden in te gaan. De regering die gekozen was had na heftige etnische conflicten het volk via een referendum gebaat over twee "vreselijke kwesties": de verbonding met Nederland en de verwerking van de decembermoorden* (The approaching year 2000 has given Suriname the opportunity to enter the coming century excused from history. The elected government has, after violent ethnic conflicts, asked the people in a referendum about two "terrible questions": the affair with the Netherlands and the investigation of the December massacre). *(LJ 22)*
"OR NOT TO MOTHER?"

The use of the word “verhouding” with regard to the relationship between ex-colony and colonizer suggests the connotation of a relationship between lovers. As already mentioned, the novel is dedicated to “lovers and their beloveds,” and countries are here envisioned as individuals. The concepts of “motherland” and “mother tongue,” which have been analyzed thoroughly in the context of other Caribbean women writers, provide a leitmotif throughout the trilogy. In Roemer’s version of this filiation conceit elements of what has been referred to as écriture féminine can be identified to literally evoke the human body and manifest its place within not just the family, but also the larger community, ultimately within public politics. The mentioned comparison of Herman’s community with a uterus and testicles is an excellent example of this stylistic element. The effect is an awareness of how intricately linked the individual person and her/his tangible appearance are to her/his social environment and how it is governed. Political decisions, to state the obvious, require that the person socialized into making them is first conceived and given birth to. The most apparent demonstration of such merging between private and public spheres throughout the plot is that Cora, the housekeeper, takes on the role of a detective in her personal attempt to explain crimes in which famous politicians are involved. It is Cora’s very own decision to undertake the long journey to the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, with the goal to create her personal tribunal parallel to the one organized in the courthouse of Paramaribo.

The military coup which precedes the “December massacre,” the main tragedy that prompts the idea for the public tribunal, is presented as an abortion by Cora’s husband Herman: “Niemand had aan de zestien mannen gevraagd om een ‘bloedige ingreep’ te plegen in de buik van de Surinaamse politiek” (“nobody had, after all, asked the sixteen men to conduct a bloody procedure [or intervention] in the belly of Suriname’s politics”; L1 145). The massacre, which followed about two years later in 1982, was a secret execution of dictatorship opponents, a crime for which the former military ruler Desi Bouterse has never been convicted. Elected president in 2010, despite conviction in absentia of drug trafficking, he was able to pass an amnesty law at the last minute
to stop his trial. To present his coup as abortion forces the reader to consider political action in light of procreation, birth, parenting, and socialization. The procreation metaphor is continued when Cora’s husband observes that “De politiek moest maar blijven baren wat haar bevruchtte: groot geld, papieren verdragen, beloften, dromen, macht en bedrog” (“politics must continue to deliver what it had been inseminated with: big money, useless contracts, promises, dreams, power, and betrayal”; L1 145). It is only natural for the protagonist’s husband, a professional healer, to use such metaphors and to express such frustration with politics. The same corrupt officials are frequently the ones asking for his professional help. Herman’s work as a “natuurgenezer” (“healer”) often enough forces him to perform illegal abortions, and this circumstance appears as the main reason for his wish to remain childless himself. Even after he retires as healer and opens a family restaurant together with Cora, he does not change this condition for their marriage. Ignorant about the illegal part of his job, Cora is not at all concerned about Herman’s wish not to have children when she accepts his proposal.

Suriname’s dictator managed to become president with his alleged crimes unpunished. Roemer’s fictional characters, however, believe that the open debates of post-independence tragedies such as the December massacre will improve the country’s situation in the new millennium. The novel emphasizes possibilities of healing related to the activity of cleaning. While Cora’s husband belongs to a family of healers, her profession as housekeeper revolves around homemaking for other families. Cora decides to travel to the Netherlands, England, and the United States in her pursuit to explain two murders related to her occupation. The first victim is An Andijk, the Frisian secretary and mistress or “buitenvrouw” (“outside wife”) of an important politician who was once Cora’s employer. The second victim is An’s friend and Herman’s adopted brother Onno Sewa. Onno selects Cora to guard a mysterious key to a postal box in the Netherlands just before his death. While the story thus shows elements and at times the suspense of a murder mystery, it avoids the kind of ending expected from this genre. Although the individuals involved in circumstances surrounding the crimes, no single culprit is exposed, and no public punishment
can accordingly take place. This lack of closure with regard to Cora’s mission parallels the outcome of the country’s tribunal. The general lack of clear solutions can be read in line with a postmodern skepticism of the concept of truth, but more importantly, it supports a philosophical argument made by Cora’s father and illustrated by most of the novel’s characters: the co-existence of “good” and “evil.”

Patricia Krus, who scrutinizes the many facets of the healing process in “The Ethics of Postcolonial Healing in Astrid Roemer’s Trilogy of Suriname,” emphasizes the significance of Cora’s father’s belief that purity and ugliness, innocence and guilt, are mainly human constructs (186). Of the politician Crommeling, for example, An Andijk’s lover and possibly father of the fetus she carries when murdered, it is said that he can do as much evil as he pleases because of his one public heroic deed to prevent a political murder (LI 98). While Cora is appalled by Crommeling’s adultery, when working in his household she finds herself on his and the daughter’s side against the incestuous mother and son. To distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, is an unavoidable element of parenting. Examples of children’s tales, which typically make the distinction very clear, and often enough mark the bad as dark, are numerous. Cora’s father acts exceptionally when he challenges such simplicity with regard to ethics, and the mother does not contest him. Those in charge of the fictional tribunal, in contrast, believe in the possibility to identify culprits and even that their conviction will radically change the future of the country during the approaching twenty-first century.

Herman, like Cora’s father, is more sensible with his answer to the hopeful suggestion that the planned tribunal could prevent future corruption and political crime. He indicates that no laws and methods of contraception have yet eliminated unwanted pregnancies and abortions (LI 56), once more emphasizing the individual’s existence as both public and private person. Indeed, the main reason why the tribunal’s judges are unable to accuse him as an abortionist is their own involvement in ever-so-many abortions they themselves demand from their mistresses, daughters, or sisters. Herman’s wish to prevent the conception of a legitimate child is a result of his work for men who prevent the birth of al-
ready conceived but illegitimate children, according to legitimacy as defined by Suriname’s laws. To keep this part of his job a secret from his wife later leads to the most severe test for their marriage. Cora’s capacity to resolve the resulting conflict has much to do with the support received from her parents, in particular her mother. My analysis will therefore focus on Hermine’s significance before it returns to Cora’s assessment of Herman’s indebtedness to his healer tradition, and the relation between this indebtedness and Cora’s sense of herself as mother.

CREOLIZING MOTHER

Cora’s mother Hermine is expelled from her own Hindustani family when she marries Cora’s father, who is of African descent. Cora visits the mother’s family only once, when she is eleven, because of the grandmother’s death (LI 129). She then witnesses the grandfather’s open hostility as he forces her father Julius to remain outside the premises. In their home in New Nickerie, Cora and her siblings learn of both the father’s Afro-Surinamese and the mother’s Hindu culture. Especially for Cora’s wedding preparations, Hermine re-creates the entire experience of her own wedding, with an emphasis on its ethnic uniqueness (LI 37). The power of the bond between mother and daughter becomes obvious when, towards the end of Cora’s journey to investigate the Andijk/Sewa murders, it is the memory of her mother which comforts her. Distressed not only by her findings and the lack of conclusions but also by a tropical storm in Curacao, the last stop before her return to Suriname, Cora first remembers a tale Hermine used to tell her children, beginning with the Sanskrit original, then translating into Sarnami (Hindi Creole) and finally explaining it in Dutch (LI 216-7).

The evocation of this tale, one of the mother’s favourite Vedas praising natural beauty, leads Cora’s memory to the Hindu recitations during Hermine’s funeral and on to the details of the mother’s death. The date of this death is of no relevance for Roemer’s plot, as the event occurs only in retrospect, during Cora’s return from overseas. Although Cora fails as a detective aiming to solve crimes, it becomes clear that she uses the journey...
to gain important insights with regard to her personal identity and origins. The mother's significance regarding these insights is symbolized by the fact that only this late in the novel, just before the reunion with her husband, Cora reveals Hermine's actual name, the name she became aware of only during the mother's funeral: Saraswati Parashurama Persad (LI 217). Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of knowledge and learning, and it appears as an appropriate name for a mother who teaches valuable life lessons, for example how to overcome times of crisis. The comfort Cora derives from the memory of her mother revolves around the latter's lesson to recall the splendor of natural landscapes when in distress. African American author Alice Walker offers thoughts on the connection between nature's magnificence and the memory of her mother in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983). In this essay from the collection subtitled Womanist Prose, Walker relates gardening to the creative process: "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark" (240). Walker compares the mother's creativity with flowers to her own with words. It is particularly relevant to look at Walker's essay in this context because of the connection between the two writers, both from the Americas and both of African origin.

After her first encounter with Walker, Roemer wrote an essay that reflects on their introduction and most explicitly revolves around mothers and family relations: "Astrid H. Roemer Meets Alice Walker in Amsterdam" (1995). The comfort inherent in a healthy relationship between mother and daughter is at the core of this essay. Divided into two parts, it begins with an autobiographical account titled "The Dream" in which the author's mother who is "within heart's reach" ("Astrid H. Roemer" 244) prepares a favourite dish called "moksi-alesi." In the second part, entitled "The Massage," Roemer takes on the persona of the other author, mentioning the publication Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992) and considering her daughter "a blessing": "She has taught me to 'love unconditionally' and to feel solidarity with younger women. ... Because of her, I have promised myself particularly always, always to be honest, and to write about my experiences ..." ("Astrid H. Roemer" 245). Walker herself writes about this daughter, Rebecca,
in the same collection, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, in which she introduces “Womanism” as the African American counterpart to the predominantly White, so-called Second Wave Feminism in 1960s-1970s American politics. In this collection’s final chapter, “One Child of One’s Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s),” a tribute to the former teacher Muriel Rukeyser, Walker reflects on the fear of her generation’s artists to become parents. Identifying Rebecca at the same time as inspiration and distraction, and her delivery as possibly “the one genuine miracle in life” (367) she writes, “We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are” (382). It appears that Roemer includes herself as sister in the essay inspired by the encounter with Walker. Unlike Walker, but like her protagonist Cora Sewa, Roemer is not a mother in the biological sense. Much like her fictional character demonstrates how childless women nevertheless practice motherhood, so the autobiographical narrator of the essay writes of Rebecca as her own daughter by taking on Walker's persona.

The sisterhood in question may be perceived of as one of womanists, since both authors are of African descent and racism is a prominent theme in their texts respectively, but it may more inclusively be perceived of as a global sisterhood. In the latter sense, this sisterhood affirms the kind of creativity evoked by Walker in the context of the mother's garden. It includes Herman's female relatives of African origin as much as Cora’s Hindustani mother, and Cora herself merging African and East Asian heritage. It is creativity, linked to a sense of productivity, which gives the mother text its encompassing scope to include the delivery and socialization of children, designing anything from flower arrangements to sculptures, and also recalling as well as imagining stories. Like the mother celebrated in Walker's essay, Cora’s mother and Cora herself cultivate gardens, maintain households, and raise children. Roemer’s concern is to situate such activities within a larger context of public politics.

Heroes of Latin American independence movements, for example San Martín and Bolívar in South America, are male. The forging of national identities in newly independent Caribbean countries has also been male-dominated. National identity is closely linked
to cultural identity, and seminal works that readily come to mind for the development of Caribbanness are, for example, Édouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse* (1992) or Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island* (1997). It is therefore imperative to see the function of historical fictions by women writers in light of the roles these writers play with regard to location and spatial definitions, and ultimately to public politics. Roemer confirms her intention to provide alternative collective memories in an interview with Charles H. Rowell where she considers fiction “the only way to write about [the Surinamese population]” without hurting their feelings (Rowell 510). As already discussed, Roemer uses original metaphors emphasizing the role of the human body to link the private to the public sphere. Pointing out controversies over Roemer’s writing style as well as her activism as member of the Green party in the Dutch parliament, Michiel van Kempen goes as far as to speak of “a completely unique literary universe” in reference to her texts (195; emphasis mine). A working-class woman who is married but childless by choice is arguably not the most common of protagonists. The circumstances of Cora’s childlessness, and the ways in which potential heroes of independence and nationalist movements are involved in them, are scrutinized in the following segment of this chapter.

**AVOIDING MOTHERHOOD**

Cora is preparing to accompany her very agreeable employers, the Jodka family, to their new workplace in Venezuela when the encounter with Herman causes her to change these plans. She reserves “hem als een noodzakelijk organ een platas in haar lichaam” (“him the place of a vital organ in her body”; *L* 21), and she does not pay much attention then to his condition that their marriage should remain childless. It is not until after about seven years of marriage that Cora urgently desires a child with Herman:

_Een zoon met dezelfde slanke vingers en tenen, het hoge jukbeen, de brede neus. Een dochter met de gelooide structuur van zijn huid, de ochtenddauwkoele lippen et_
This passage demonstrates the force of Cora’s emotional attachment to Herman, as well as her desire for a symbol, proof, and continuity of their attachment. In reference to French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich in “The Kingdom of the Fathers,” one of the chapters in Of Woman Born, discusses procreation as conditioned by the desire for immortality. “A crucial moment in human consciousness, then, arrives when man discovers that it is himself ... who impregnates the woman,” Rich writes there, “that the child she carries and gives birth to is his child, who can make him immortal...” (60). One may wonder whether it was an arbitrary choice or whether Rich deliberately used the adjective “human” in the beginning of this sentence, in which she goes on to describe the male consciousness. Deliberately chosen, “human” would suggest that the father’s desire for immortality is paralleled by the mother’s. The way Roemer represents Cora’s urge to procreate, on the other hand, indicates that his wife has Herman’s rather than her own continuation in mind when she describes the desired child with only his and none of her own features. It has to be ascribed to her insurmountable devotion that Cora, despite her own strong desire and society’s pressures, does not plead with Herman more about this matter.

Early on in her influential Reproduction of Mothering (1978) Nancy Chodorow states: “Two centuries ago, marriage, especially for women, was essentially synonymous with childrearing” (4). Beginning with a closer look at terminology such as “mothering” versus “fathering” and their connection or disconnection with concepts of “nurture,” “care giving,” and “socializing,” Chodorow’s study both explains and challenges a common division of labour based on gender distinctions. The seemingly dated assumption that procreation is the main purpose of the marital union has been largely contested throughout many of today’s
societies, but this does not imply that there are no places in which a childless union is still considered exceptional or a deviation from the norm. Plantage Jericho in Roemer’s novel is such a place. The longer Cora and Herman remain without children the more indiscreet and at times even insulting do the inquiries by some of the community members become. The assumption is mostly that the lack of children in the couple’s marriage is due to incapability rather than choice.

Cora’s journey to Europe and North America gives her ample time to reflect on her past and her life. One such reflection revolves around possible explanations for Herman’s wish not to become a father. The fact that he is traumatized by his duties as abortionist, which eventually leads him to break with his family’s tradition as healers, connects with Cora’s thought that he would also not want another heir of these capacities (LI 147). An additional compelling circumstance is, however, that Herman’s own mother died at his birth, and that he might therefore be afraid of Cora dying a similar death (LI 146). Subsequent to this circumstance, it also occurs to her that she might actually herself, to some extent, fulfill the mother-role for her husband, which would explain the rejection of parenthood with reasons pertaining to the much-theorized Oedipal Complex. Granted, to understand Herman’s rejection of fatherhood as result of filial feelings for his wife appears as the most far-fetched of assumed reasons. Cora’s reflections do illustrate, however, that Herman’s wish must be conditioned by a combination of reasons. Because she respects his wish, the couple remains without children of their own, and Cora’s experiences as mother are restricted to her paid profession, which at the same time makes them more varied than they could possibly be with one’s own biological daughters and sons.

With regard to the extent to which mothering is part of Cora’s employment as housekeeper, the novel presents two contrasting families. Cora’s first employer, the Jodkas, much like her own harmonious family stand in stark contrast to the Crommelings, whose patriarch is adulterous and whose matriarch has an incestuous relationship with the son. The only similarity between the Jodkas and the Crommelings is that they each include a son and a daughter, which Cora looks after with the same patience and
love she has observed in her own mother. Although she spends much time with these children and conveys lessons learned from her parents during this time, she lacks the responsibility of the biological parents, and the personalities of the children appear as a result of their interactions with their actual mother and father. An Andijk, one of the victims of the crimes Cora attempts to resolve, is only the most prominent among a series of mistresses Crommeling has throughout the years. Crommeling’s wife Dora, herself the victim of abusive parents, reacts with jealousy and intrigue. She furthermore treats Cora as inferior and rejects her own daughter’s boyfriend as unacceptable. The desperation that results from this disastrous family situation leads Dora to comment that a woman who cannot have children may be better off (LI 165). Like many of the inhabitants of Plantage Jericho, she assumes that Cora is not unwilling but rather unable to have children. She further illustrates the limitations of the housekeeper’s mothering. Caring for her employer’s children includes many of the maternal activities Cora learns from her own mother, but her responsibility is necessarily different.

As much as the Crommeling couple is portrayed as unlucky and tormented, the Sewa union appears blessed and harmonious. The lack of children does not harm the strong bond between Cora and Herman, even when it is tested by Cora’s discovery of Herman’s work as abortionist, or when he remains adamant despite her changed attitude towards the unusual wedding condition. Disregarding his consistent rejection of fatherhood, Herman’s support of his wife is otherwise considerable. When Cora is about to depart by herself for the longest journey of her life he assures her to continuously keep his company in spirit: “Zodra je aan mij denkt en aan thuis ben ik vlak bij je” (“As soon as you think of me and home, I am very close to you”; LI 27). Cora frequently sends tape recordings informing Herman about her impressions and assuring him of their symbolic proximity. Her spoken words on these tapes, rather than written letters, function as chapter divisions in the novel. Each of the divisions includes flight details, thus allowing the reader to keep track of Cora’s journey. Her preference to send her spoken rather than written voice to Herman gives these signs of love a more original character.
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While on the first tape she imagines, for example, to be holding Herman’s hand continuously (LI 12), on the second tape she suggests that all the days of her trip might melt into one Sunday at Plantage Jericho, since everything lasts longer in his company for her to enjoy (LI 57). Cora’s final recording, spoken after her return, takes the place of an epilogue, and the sentiment with which she describes the pleasures of her reunion with Herman leaves no doubt that the answer to the prologue’s question, whether there will be time enough for the couple to learn to love each other anew, must be affirmative. Their mutual affection, commitment, and passion persist throughout conflicts over Herman’s work, as well as Cora’s re-evaluation of her agreement to the childless marriage. A similarly strong union is the one between Cora’s parents. What seems to increase the harmonious and stimulating character of Cora’s childhood home is the fact that the younger sibling has Down syndrome. This younger brother, nicknamed Dearest, provides Cora with her earliest motherhood experience. The significance of this sibling, and how his character adds to Roemer’s concern with the integration of “Difference,” is the center of the following, final segment of this chapter.

SPECIAL NEEDS

Cora’s younger brother Dearest is not the only disabled character in Roemer’s trilogy. Dora Crommeling, for example, develops muteness that cannot be explained medically. Onno Mus, the protagonist of the first novel in the trilogy, is a friend Cora visits in Amsterdam. He became deaf as result of a car accident, which did not prevent him from pursuing a successful scholar of astronomy. Along with the main character of the trilogy’s last novel, who suffers from an eye disease, Dora and Onno evoke the ancient “Three-Monkey-Symbol,” represented by a statue of three animals that see, hear, and speak no evil. Cora owns a version of this statue. In Lijken op liefde (86) she remembers how she received it as a teacher’s gift in reply to her question about “discretion.” Both in her profession as a housekeeper and during her journey as a detective, Cora exercises the kind of discretion symbolized by the three wise monkeys. More than herself, however, she considers her
brother, Dearest, entirely incapable not only of seeing, hearing, or speaking but even of ever doing “evil.”

According to the doctors, Dearest never becomes an adult, but Cora thinks that the only thing differentiating him from adults is that he was born without the trait which allows adults to bring harm to others: “Dearest was niet te dóm voor de mensenwereld, Dearest was ‘te góed’ voor de wereld” (“Dearest was not too dumb for the human world, Dearest was ‘too good’ for the world”; LI 42-3). While Cora’s family perceives Dearest as an “unusual gift” (“ongewoon geschenk”), people in Herman’s community are ashamed and afraid of children with mental disorders and therefore keep them hidden. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explained in “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory” how disability studies expanded out of the medical and social science disciplines into the humanities. At the same time she criticized that many Disability Studies scholars were ignorant of feminist theory and that, in turn, many Women’s Studies scholars were not aware of the significant parallels between the two areas of inquiry. “Just as feminism ... has thought to understand and destigmatize [sic] what we call the subject position of woman,” Garland-Thomson writes, “so has disability studies examined the identity disabled in the service of integrating people with disabilities more fully into our society” (1-2). Roemer’s novel advocates Garland-Thomson’s claim with regard to Dearest but also the other characters mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. Once Cora observes the rejection of children with special needs at Plantage Jericho, she offers to open and supervise a public home for them (LI 42). The level of her own integration in Herman’s community, however, never reaches a point that would lend her enough authority to realize this plan. What Cora has learned about the mothering of mentally disabled children, such as her younger brother, cannot be applied at Plantage Jericho, at least not during Cora’s lifetime. The fact that Herman’s choice of a foreign wife finds the village council’s approval is, however, in itself a step towards transculturation. Transculturation, according to Roemer’s representation, provides better grounds for the integration of “Difference,” as discussed in the second segment of this chapter. Even if the community initially disapproves of
the Sewa couple's decision to remain childless, this decision has to be accepted eventually, and when Cora returns from her long overseas journey, the neighbours welcome her back as enthusiastically as her husband does.

*Lijken op liefde* largely revolves around the integration of minorities in the most general sense of this concept. The novel, as all of Roemer's writing, is "rooted in the inheritance of the diaspora, in multiethnic and multicultural projections" ("Writing Back" 39). Combining the heritage of her Hindustani mother and her Creole father, Cora marries into a closed community of Afro-Surinamese settled on a deserted plantation in the countryside. Other ethnic groups are represented throughout the trilogy, and an ongoing glossary in the first two novels explains a great number of terms from the various Creoles spoken in Suriname. It is the task of parents, as they convey cultural identity symbolized through language, to create awareness of the transcultural society's potential. Not a biological mother herself, Cora passes the lessons learned in her home on to the various children she mothers in her profession as housekeeper. Unlike the biological mother's, Cora's mothering is therefore paid labour. This economic circumstance is, however, unrelated to the characteristics that dominate her relationship to the diverse children in her care. She is very much the nurturing, patient, and gentle kind of mother Hermine has, as a role model, socialized her into. Even if the influence of a housekeeper on the children in her care never equals that of the biological parents, Cora appears to perceive of herself as a mother much the same way she perceives of Hermine.

In his review of the novel, Frans van Rosevelt claims "[n]obody is more innocent" (851) than Cora. One could argue that she herself considers her younger brother Dearest more perfect yet, but the criticism on the protagonist's almost saint-like personality is pretty much the only criticism justified in the otherwise misguided review. Cora Sewa is as much the perfect daughter, sister, wife, friend, and housekeeper as Hermine is the perfect mother. Inasmuch as Cora's family contrasts the Crommelings, the contesting of a good/evil distinction taught by Cora's parents and represented through many of the novel's characters is not completely consistent. It is of course precisely the good-hearted nature of a mother who
embraces diversity in every conceivable way, which allows for the strong and molding bond with an equally good-hearted daughter whose choices in life, likewise, do not follow the principle of the least possible resistance. Both Hermine and Cora can be very determined in their respective goals. The former would otherwise not marry against her parents’ will, and the latter would not suddenly embark on the long journey, which drives the novel’s plot. Their relationship is comparable to the mother-daughter bond Roemer describes in the essay inspired by her meeting with Alice Walker. The sisterhood evoked in this essay and discussed in the second segment of this chapter encompasses all women, whether they mother in the biological sense, as nannies, teachers, older siblings, or many other occupations. Reaching beyond Walker’s Womanism, Roemer’s global sisterhood emphasizes the integration of “Difference” in transcultural societies, which _Lijken op liefde_ portrays as more conducive to change. Mothering individuals play a crucial part in the context of such change. The novel’s protagonist, Cora, presents a confirmation of Rich’s observation that childless women are mothers nevertheless, thus rendering my title’s question rhetorical.

¹Translations are mine, and _Lijken op liefde_ is referred to as _LL_ in the following citations.
²See Nasta and Castillo García, listed under works cited.

WORKS CITED


