

# **Making, Feeding, Teaching: An Ontology of Care Learned from My Grandmother**

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## **Abstract**

Afro-diasporic mothers have always found innovative ways to sustain families and communities despite challenging socioeconomic, political and historical conditions (Hill Collins, 2000). These methods of sustaining care have often been undervalued as intellectual and pedagogical work. This creative non-fiction piece challenges that erasure by narrating how my grandmother, a Jamaican educator, used community-based practices as adaptive systems of care and knowledge transmission. These practices are consistent with the notion that within the Afro-diaspora, ancestral wisdom provides the blueprint for ways of being and is an embodied experience. Drawing on *Endarkened Storywork* (Toliver, 2022), Black Feminist theories on othermothering (Hill Collins, 2000), the narrative recovers fragmented memories to theorize an ontology of care as praxis. The piece resists extractive biographical writing through play between concealment and revelation. Finally, this piece seeks to affirm Caribbean women's material labour as a site of knowledge production (Dillard & Tyson, 2018; Hartman, 2019).

**Keywords:** *Endarkened Storywork; Othermothering; Caribbean pedagogy; Black feminist narrative inquiry; Ontology of Care*

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*[permissions granted by Saran James-Vaughan (author and artist), 2026]*

## Introduction

### *Making*

My grandmother taught me how to crochet when I was eight years old. I am left-handed, and she was right-handed, which made navigating the process of making less straightforward. In the summer, when others were playing outside, my grandmother sat with me determined to teach me anyway. Chain stitches, double crochet, and half-double crochet. Ultra-fine needles and threads suitable for ornate doilies that lined time-worn credenzas, darkened by decades of meals and quiet prayers.

I remember sitting up in bed, my foot wrapped in gauze after a surgery meant to relieve acute pain, but which left a dull ache over time. The type of pain that does not leave you even after Tiger Balm or Voltaren—persistent and quiet. Grandma turns the crocheted piece from side to side, making micro calculations about how best to show the piece from my perspective, so that I might learn how to make a slip stitch. She adjusts the angle, slows her hands, and tries again.

Mahogany deep brown skin and sturdy arms. Cheekbones that rise like the mountains above the acres of land my family inhabited for over a century. Memories of my grandmother dot the timeline of my life, and I hear her voice in my writing and imagination of futures shaped by care.

My grandmother—an expert in making. *Tek har hand tun fashion* and adapted herself to me as we co-created. I remember her hands: threading the near-invisible eyehole of a needle, shaping perfectly flaky plantain tarts, clasped at four in the morning in deep prayer.

Her hands did not know the impossible. They always found another way.

### ***Feeding***

Passing by to sit with my grandmother was a common practice for those in her community and sphere of influence. There was always something to offer. Cucumber and ginger juice. Fruit cake baked in an oven fashioned from kerosene cans. Advice and mentorship for young people. And if you were not an academic, she would teach you to feed yourself and others; how to go to the land for deep nourishment.

The emerald, terrazah-tiled porch gleamed from *Genie* floor polish, rising to meet the nervous feet of visiting pastors to the community. My grandmother's way was to serve a meal first, while conversation and reflection wove their way through the interaction. For those moving on, she might pack a few coconuts and oranges for the journey ahead.

### ***Teaching***

A life could be made through what you create. With A few rudimentary tools, excess from your farm's harvest can be reimaged into something unexpected. Perhaps carrot porridge, maybe cho-cho pudding or a rich and nourishing breadfruit punch. Need a container? Weave one from palm tree leaves. Making becomes a form of literacy, and if you learn, you teach.

My grandmother understood that nature invites creativity and that once you have a sound mind, it ought to do some good. My eyes mist as I look at the numerous certificates of achievement and appreciation my grandmother received over a lifetime, simply because she responded to what was needed.

Teaching, for my grandmother, went beyond the classroom or community centre. It meant an invitation to families on the weekend for a meal. It meant noticing a young person with great potential but with limited resources and quietly filling the gap. It meant meeting individuals where

they were while holding the vision of who they might become and reminding them of their inherent gifts.

From her, I understood that care extends beyond what the eyes might see and what the world might deem possible. In fact, my grandmother viewed possibility as something deeply personal.

In those moments when I travelled to the valley to visit her in my adolescence, I did not recognize that her way of being was instruction. It was an unspoken pedagogy shaped in response to what others often named as poverty and limitation. I now recognize the embodiment of her pedagogy in my interactions with youth, how it settles the tone of my voice when a young person feels dejected by the hand life has dealt to them and how it triggers the reminder of why I must order food supplies for my classroom, or when to provide alternative strategies for success when traditional methods fail.

### **An Ontology of Care**

When I look at pictures of my grandmother, I first noticed what her hands are doing: holding a fishing rod, fresh flowers, or a great-grandchild. I then examined what my hands tend to do: hold a pen, gesticulate as a way of explaining, or reach for another hand. At other times using her one, two, three methods for making fruit cakes.

These gestures were integrated over decades of observing my grandmother, listening keenly to the way she counselled and asking her questions about everything that falls into the crevices of the forgotten. My gestures are shaped by repetition, proximity and care, as I carry forward an orientation toward making, feeding and teaching, when something is needed.

### Artist Statement

*Making, Feeding, Teaching* is a four-part creative nonfiction piece that examines how an ontology of care was learned through sustained proximity to my grandmother, a Black Jamaican woman, educator, and community mother, during my early childhood and adolescence. The piece is accompanied by a photographic collage in which her face is obscured while hands come forward to carry the weight of the image. I open the piece with a memory from my eight-year-old self, a left-handed little girl being taught how to crochet by my right-handed grandmother, demonstrating adaptive pedagogy.

The four-part structure traces three interwoven practices: Making, Feeding, and Teaching, that defined my grandmother's life, followed by a coda and moves between reflective interpretation and sensory memory (the texture of crochet thread, the gleam of terrazah tiles, her hands in prayer). Care compounds through skill transmission, material sustenance, and relational futurity. Care becomes an ontology—a way of being in the world rather than just a feeling or emotion.

I move between English and Jamaican Vernacular (Patois) because certain reflections can only be expressed in my mother tongue. Narrative autoethnography is used as a way of creating meaning through lived experience, relationality and restraint. I also draw on what Toliver (2022) terms “endarkened storywork”, as the practice of centring ancestral knowledge and Black imagination in narrative pieces, as well as Black Feminist approaches that question what is shared, what is sacred, and what should be protected in silence (Evans-Winters, 2019). Hill Collins (2000) describes othermothering as the social responsibility that Black women demonstrate for non-biological children’s well-being within their communities. Throughout the piece, I engage with Afro-diasporic traditions of othermothering, community care and survival pedagogies, highlighting practical ways in which my grandmother embodied Making, Feeding, and Teaching

as interconnected practices of care. Dillard and Tyson (2018) demonstrate the commitment to nurturing and sustaining community through teachings that go beyond traditional classrooms into “the spirit of our work”.

Though beloved in the communities she served, my grandmother was very private and intentional about what she shared and what she deemed “between her and her God”. Therefore, the decision to obscure her face was deliberate, both as a way of protecting her identity, while inviting attention to what her hands were doing. As a woman from the Silent Generation, her stories, like many Black and Afro-diasporic stories, exist in fragmented form.

In the tradition of Saidiya Hartman’s (2019) work on critical fabulation, I engage with parts of my grandmother’s story that exist in the unspoken. What can a picture tell by engaging with parts that were omitted and fragmented? How do we recreate the story in a way that centres what is most meaningful without idealizing or resolving grief?

In Afro-Diasporic contexts, mothering is not limited to biological mothers; it is expected that the village will help to raise a child, and this is the place from which my grandmother’s pedagogy emerged. She understood that relational responsibility extends to resourcefulness and land-based creativity. These challenges narrow Eurocentric definitions of education that privilege institutional validation. Throughout the piece, I affirm Caribbean pedagogies as adaptive systems of learning and demonstrate how this influences my response to students’ needs, offering alternative pathways to success in Canadian classrooms.

This work honours my grandmother and how care becomes an intergenerational, pedagogical practice that transcends the boundaries of geography. It is care that remains adaptive, yet unfinished.

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