The purpose of this essay is to examine Toni Cade Bambara's utopian thought, particularly the remarkably rich vocabulary she gave us for describing and analyzing the sensuality of social movement and the day-to-day practice of instantiating an instinct for freedom. Indeed, it is my view that Toni Cade Bambara was one of the great utopian thinkers of our time. Most people treat the utopian as an ideal future world, which at best provides a beacon of hope and at worst reflects an unrealistic fundamentalism bound to failure. But Bambara acted and wrote as if the utopian were a standpoint for comprehending and living in the here and now. Consequently, she gave us an extraordinary example of how to combine complex and acute social analysis with a vision of how some people have lived and do live today that is a model for how all of us could live. Without ever abandoning a strong sense of the past and the future, she always asked us to keep focused on where we live now, insisting that history is only ever made in that conjuncture. Bambara always insisted that the spirit of making history must be tied to, indeed generated from, an uncompromising diagnosis of the deathly apparatuses of power. Indeed, what seems most characteristic of Bambara's work is the way in which she patiently yet urgently called her audiences and the people who inhabited her imagined worlds to see how the devastations and affictions to which we are too routinely subjected require from us "something more powerful than skepticism."

A Brief Biographical Sketch

Toni Cade Bambara was a Black writer, filmmaker, community activist, and teacher who died from cancer in 1995, at the age of 56. She was born and raised, primarily by her mother, Mrs. Helen Cade Brehon, in the Harlem of the 1940s. Her mother's unwavering respect for reading, writing, the arts, day-dreaming, and
politics, combined with the rich cultural and community life of Harlem, shaped Bambara’s earliest experiences and memories, teaching her, among other things, that an active political life was perfectly normal.2

Bambara moved out of Harlem and attended Queens College, where she received her B.A. degree in 1959 and also received the John Golden Award in Fiction. In the early 1960s, she worked for a variety of social service agencies including the Harlem Welfare Center, the Metropolitan Hospital’s Psychology Department (as director of recreation), and Coloney House Community Center (as coordinator of neighborhood programs). She traveled to France and Italy to study theater and film and began to work on her Master’s Degree in American literature, which she completed in 1965 at City College of New York. While an instructor at City College from 1965–1969, she helped organize the SEEK program to recruit Black and Latino youths to the college, and she was a valued faculty advisor for the student protest leaders during the uprisings in 1968–69. She remained a popular teacher when she moved to Livingston College at Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1969 to teach in the English Department. Although she held a variety of university appointments over the years—at Duke, Spellman, Stephens College, Atlanta, and Emory universities—she did not pursue an academic career and did the majority of her teaching in workshops, in prisons, and in community organizations, as well as through numerous public readings, lectures and interviews.

She traveled extensively all over the world, her trips to Cuba in 1973 and Vietnam in 1975 being especially noteworthy. In fact, she said that although she had been writing since she was a very young girl, she didn’t see writing “as my way of doing my work in the world” until she returned from her 1973 trip to Cuba. It was that trip which taught her “what Langston Hughes and others, most especially my colleagues in the Neo-Black Arts Movement, had been teaching for years—that writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community.”

Her view of the role of writing evolved out of the consciousness and struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, although one hallmark of her writing and activities was its defiantly un-nostalgic approach. She said, “I always stretch out towards the future. I’m not interested in ... replaying flashbacks.” And she meant it, producing, along the way, a body of fiction unusual for the prominence of children who are assumed to be “responsible, competent, efficient, and principled.” And who are capable of being taught social theory (defined by Bambara as the study of the good society) by their elders, and more often than not, being the better teachers of it.4

Her first book was the groundbreaking anthology, _The Black Woman_, published in 1970. _The Black Woman_, a collection of short stories and nonfiction essays by Black women, was really the first collection of Black feminism in what’s called the second wave of the women’s movements. Bambara contributed the preface, where she described the purpose of the book—to “find out what liberation for ourselves means, what work it entails, what benefits it will yield”—and three important essays, the most well-known being “On the Issue of Roles.” And in her inimitable style, she insisted that the book cost only $1.00 and be small enough to carry in your pocket! She also wrote the “Foreword” to _This Bridge Called My Back_, which appeared ten years later in 1981 and is often mistaken as the inaugural work of second-wave, women-of-color feminism.

She went on to explore and portray aspects of the struggle for liberation in her fictional and nonfictional writings. She edited _Tales and Stories for Black Folks_ in 1971, inaugurating a long-term interest in Black folk tales, and published two important collections of short stories, _Gorilla, My Love_ in 1972 and _The Sea Birds Are Still Alive_ in 1977. Her 1980 novel, _The Safe Eaters_, won her an American Book Award. Bambara moved to Atlanta in 1974 and started, around 1980, a novel about the Atlanta Murdered and Missing Children’s case. That work, thirteen hundred pages of which remained unpublished at the time of her death, was edited by Toni Morrison and released posthumously as _Three Bones Are Not My Child_ in 1999.5 Morrison, Bambara’s editor at Random House in the 1970s, also edited another posthumous collection of unpublished fiction, critical essays, and interviews entitled _Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions_, which was published in 1996. In fact, Bambara actually produced a significant body of unpublished, planned, and works-in-progress which may, in the future, become more available, and which ought, in an act of redefining the meaning of productivity, to be counted as part of her life’s work.

Bambara’s fiction is filled with ordinary people fighting oppression within their communities, going up against the system, and in the process building a new sense of collectivity and community. She was, as she readily admits, a “brazen message writer,” and she produced, especially in her short stories, pointed allegories about choices taken or not. _Afford ... choose ... always the choice_ were her carefully chosen watchwords.6 Known for her ear for the nuance of language and character, Bambara was a master at writing with great subtlety and complexity about the politics of culture and the culture of politics in the details of everyday life. As Toni Morrison said of her, “I don’t know if she knew the heart cing of her fiction. Its pedagogy, its use, she knew very well, but I have often wondered if she knew how brilliant at it she was. There was no division in her mind between optimism and ruthless vigilance; between aesthetic obligation and the aesthetics of obligation. There was no doubt whatsoever that the work she did had work to do. She always knew what her work was for. Any hint that art was over here and politics was over here would break her up into tears of laughter, or elicit a look so withering it made silence the only intelligent response. More often she met the art/politics false debate with a slight wave-away of the fingers ... like the dismissal of a mindless, desperate fly who had maybe two little hours of life left.”7

By the 1980s, Bambara’s main interest had turned to making films. She moved to Philadelphia where she met Louis Massiah, founder and director of Scribe Video Center, and worked there from 1986 until she passed away. Bambara had a very extensive career as a screenwriter, filmmaker, film critic, and film teacher, starting with the TV documentary, “Zora” (on Zora Neale Hurston, whose writings on folklore, _The Sanctified Church_, Bambara prefaced in 1981) and continuing with a series of made-for-TV adaptations of her and other writers’ stories, including _The Johnson Girls_, _The Long Night_, _Epitaph for Willie_, “Tar
“No, I wouldn’t identify myself as a utopian writer”

In 1982, shortly after the publication of The Salt Eaters, Kay Bonetti of the American Audio Prose Library interviewed Toni Cade Bambara in her home in Atlanta. Bonetti asked Bambara, “Would you be comfortable being called something like a utopian writer? Being seen in that tradition?” Bambara responded:

Oh, absolutely not! No, I don’t identify with the utopian literature tradition. There are several features of that kind of literature. One, it takes a satiric stance about the current society. I’m not so much satiric. I’m critical but not satiric. For satire, you need a certain kind of sneering temperament, and that’s a little removed from me. Another feature of the utopian literature is that it presents a vision based on the assumption that the reader and writer share a common set of values. I do not identify with the values of most utopian literature. I mean it does not speak to the world as I know it. It certainly does not speak to the international scheme of things. Another feature of utopian literature is that it doesn’t look at process, it doesn’t attempt to look at this new society as part of a historical continuum, and I find that a little stupid. And finally its most characteristic feature is that it’s very futuristic looking. I’m also future-oriented, but it has to do with memory, with what I know is possible because it already happened. People need not be corrupted or perverted, because I know in the past people were not. So my glance is both a back glance as well as a flash forward. No, I wouldn’t identify myself as a utopian writer.

By the utopian literature tradition, Bambara is referring primarily to the distinct genre of European and American fiction, running from Thomas More to Ursula K. LeGuin, which creates and peoples a distinctly “other” world in which the putative problems and limitations of the writer’s existing world are overcome. Bambara’s critique of this literary tradition, however, is applicable to the range of projects—both in writing and in doing—to which the description utopian can and has been applied. It is especially relevant to the field of utopian studies broadly construed, which has played a major role in constructing what the utopian means and who and what counts as an instance of it.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the Western historiography of utopian thought and practice and the contemporary field known as utopian studies is a decidedly Eurocentric and racially exclusive construction. It is a field dominated by a limited and often formal definition of the utopian, and it is a field in which the definition of failure and success borders on the perverse.

For example, this is a field that treats the brutal colonization of the Americas as a successful utopian enterprise, but deems the long history of what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker call the “many-headed hydra” of the “revolutionary” seventeenth-century Atlantic as all but irrelevant. The many-headed hydra—hewers of wood and drawers of water, prostitutes, prisoners and other conscripts, indentured servants, slaves, maids, pirates, sailors, runaways, deserters, religious heretics—all those who dared to challenge the making of the modern capitalist world system, are simply absent, buried under the weight of a triumphant modernity and the specter of Stalinism. Consequently, this is a field that includes the French Revolution, but not the thirty-year war waged by the Black and Red Seminoles against the United States. It is a field that includes Karl Marx, but not Christian Fricke, a German socialist exile who joined the Cherokee Nation in 1736 and was captured by the British (later to die in a South Carolina prison) because he refused to declare loyalty to the French or British and was helping to unite the Southern Indian Nations in what was then Cherokee Territory. This is a field that includes the craftsman William Morris, but not the worker Harry Haywood. It includes Ernst Bloch’s dreamy anticipations but not C.L.R. James’s philosophy of happiness. It includes the feminist Frances Wright’s failed and deeply flawed abolitionist experiment at Nashoba, Tennessee, in the 1820s, but not one example of maroonage in the entire Americas. This is a field that includes Brook Farm and numerous white middle-class separatist communities, but not the multicultural Combahee River Collective or the many communal collectives like them. This is a field that includes Ursula K. LeGuin’s off-world anthropology, but not Toni Cade Bambara’s in-the-here-and-now community studies.

It would take a book to elaborate persuasively how and why the utopian is constructed as it is, and that is not my intention here. Moreover, the characteristic meanings and reference points attached to utopian thought and practice in the West raise the question of why I would want to associate Toni Cade Bambara with a tradition she not only rejects for good reasons—not the least of which is that it can’t recognize her at all—but which she’s also clear she doesn’t need. The utopian as we primarily know it has missed the opportunity to chart a richer and more adequate history and theory of our real and imagined strivings for a livable social existence. This missed opportunity is a blind spot. However, there is always something living and breathing in the place blinded from view.

In the place blinded from view is the tradition of Black struggle and radicalism as Toni Cade Bambara knows it, conjures it, invents it, and pushes it along, taking up her role as a politically engaged radical critic, "siding with the ex-
included and the repressed . . . develop[ing] insights gained in confrontation with injustice, nourish[ing] cultures of resistance, and hel[ping] to define the means with which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of human potentialities.” I do not identify with the values of most utopian literature. I mean it doesn’t speak to the world as I know it. In the world Bambara knows and imagines, process, memory, and struggle replace the fantasy of a common culture realized as a little nation, magically pre-established, and founded on good rules given from above. In her world, contradictions abound and complex individuals negotiate the dialectic of enclosure and breathless expansiveness. In her world, there’s a rich living history, filled with legends of people who can fly and walk across the water and who can also organize meetings, institutions, and whatever’s needed to survive and thrive in a permanently hostile environment. Bambara’s world is not a nation-state, although she’s an avowed Black Nationalist; her world is centered on a community capable of mediating between what we shorthand as the local and the global. In her world, freedom is not a futuristic construct; it is grounded in our present existence as we relay individually and collectively between what’s past and what’s to come. In Bambara’s world, freedom is grounded in what we are capable of, the possibilities of which we know because of who we are—always better than we’re told we can be—what we remember about what’s already happened, and what we do when we act upon these capabilities. There is a premium on truth in Bambara’s world, on finding a better language than mercantile English for using the power of the word to harness rage to a joyous spirit of release and an outrageous permissiveness to be anything but merely a mercantile subject. In Bambara’s world, the instinct for freedom or what Fred Moten calls the freedom drive is the antithetical core of culture, where the seeds of opposition grow into something much more powerful than skepticism.

It is my argument that the world Toni Cade Bambara knows, peoples, and describes is a model or a standard for making utopian thought and practice more “usable,” a favorite word of hers. My aim in making this argument is not to tie her back to a tradition with which she doesn’t identify but to identify a few elements of what the utopian tradition could mean if we looked at some of what’s been in its blind field. That we need an adequate utopianism—precise in its diagnoses, inventive in its political-aesthetic form, expansive in its vision, courageous in its anticipations, reflexive in its prefigurations—I take not only as a given, but as one of Toni Cade Bambara’s most consistent and challenging claims. In my view, it is not the need for utopianism that is questionable. Rather, it is with what words, ideas, traditions, sources of authority—in short with what practical spirit—such a utopianism is created and maintained that’s at stake.

“You can hear the voices”

“You can hear the voices long after you turn the final page,” writes Farrah Griffin. “Toni Cade Bambara’s extraordinary ordinary people—streetwise, sensitive, and complex— taunt, tease, and haunt. Don’t you want to be free? Yes, You. Freedom. What are you going to do to be free?”

Yes, You. The don’t you want to be free? and the what are you going to do to be free? go hand in hand. Not only because it’s a serious responsibility to want to be free, but because wanting it really—not just intellectually or abstractly or for somebody else—but You wanting it as if anything else would be unheard of—is already about what you are doing. On the call—Yes, You—and on the inextricability of wanting and doing, Bambara is adamant and uncompromising and also very understanding, that is, both knowledgeable and sympathetic. The taunting, teasing, and haunting question Don’t you want to be free? presumes that somewhere you do want it, and if you don’t then why don’t you, exactly? As teacherly as it sounds, What are you going to do to be free? presumes you can be doing something, and if you don’t know what that is, you should find out. What is involved in wanting and doing freedom? The heart of Bambara’s contribution to utopian thought and practice is contained in the answer she gives: To want to be free, you have to live and act as if you are free to live, right now, right this minute, in the midst of all the life-threatening forces arrayed and ready at hand. Then be straightened, back stiff with the conviction that he, like many others going home now, was totally unavailable for servitude. I’ll try to explain what I think she means.

Face Up To What’s Killing You

She was turning the bend now, forgetting to not look, and the mural the co-op had painted in eye-stinging colors stopped her. FACE UP TO WHAT’S KILLING YOU, it declared. Below the statement a huge triangle that from a distance was just a triangle, but on approaching, as one muttered “how deadly can a triangle be?” turned into bodies on bodies. At the top, fat, fanged beasts in smart clothes, like the ones beneath it laughing, drinking, eating, bombing, raping, shooting, lounging on the backs of, feeding off the backs of, the folks at the base, crushed almost flat but struggling to get up and getting up.

Virginia, The Organizer’s Wife, passed it quickly, because she’d been leaving since the first day coming, the day her sister came home to cough herself to death and leave her there with nobody to look out for her, except some hairy cousins in town and Miz Mama Mae, who shook her head sadly whenever the girl spoke of this place and these troubles and these people and one day soon leaving for some other place. On this day, having absent-mindedly crushed the vegetables in her untended garden, Virginia had no energy for a smile or a wince. All energy summoned up at rising was focused tightly on her two errands of the day, both of which are oriented to getting Graham, her organizer husband, out of jail and both of them out of town. Because at this point in the story, Virginia just wants out. Away from the farms, the co-op sheds, the long gas pump, a shoe left in the road, the posters promising victory over the troubles. Away from an imprisonment she had come to measure by how many times that same red-and-yellow jumper met her on the road, faded and fading.
some more. Away from land grabs and mining companies, corrupt governments, opportunistic preachers, tobacco sheds, and the troubles. Away from the men waiting patiently in her garden, ready to help, away from the choir women and their Everything all right, away from the discipline, consciousness and unity taught at the co-op school, away from the bound-to-come weariness of always creating something from nothing. All she wanted was that thing stitched up, trimmed, neat, finished. Wanted to be able to say she asked for rathin from nobody and didn’t nobody offer up rathin. No attachments. No responsibilities. Pay the bill and unhook them both from this place. Virginia wanted only to get out of “this place,” which became her “situation,” knowing well enough that there was something rude about treating other people’s home as “this place.” This place, her situation, killing her with isolation, loneliness, the struggles WE CANNOT LOSE, and the notion, trapping her like a vise, that home is what makes you stay and fight.

Virginia has no intention of staying. She has a plan, her own freedom plan, an honorable one with a long history. Running away. And isn’t that what she thought initially made her fall in love with Graham? It was his would-be-moving-on clothes that had pulled her to him. But then the pull had become too strong to push against once his staying-on became clear. So, baby at her breast, men in her garden waiting patiently, she’s focused on her errands, clear in her mind that she is taking charge, facing up to what’s killing her, and finally doing what’s needed to be done to improve her situation. The first errand is visiting Reverend Michaels before the men come with the surveyors and the bulldozers to get the granite. Virginia just wants to hear him say it—the land’s been sold. The largest parcel of land in the district, the church holdings where the co-op school stood, where two storage sheds of the co-op stood, where the graphics workshop stood, where four families had lived for generations working the land. The church had sold the land. Held say it, she’d hear it, and it’d be over with. She and Graham could go. And he does tell her, indirectly, of course: “Wasn’t me,’ he stammered.” Virginia hears what she thinks she has wanted to hear—the land’s been sold. But she does not walk out smiling to herself, feeling free to go.

An anger or a force Virginia had no time to understand compels her, and she grabs a ruler and brings it down on the reverend’s chair and then on his arm, dropping him and the chair to the floor. He’s stunned in disbelief. But, it’s nothing like the disbelief that swept through her the moment we ourselves pushed past clenched teeth and nailed her to the place, a woman unknown. Seeing the scene detached, this unknown Virginia, the one who at the co-op school had never learned to speak her speak, surprises herself, hears herself both laughing and shouting: And what did the white folks pay you to turn Graham in and clear the way? Disturber of the peace. What peace? Racist trying to incite a riot. Ain’t that how they said it? Outside agitator, as you said. And his roots put down here long before you ever came. . . . Thirty pieces of silver, maybe?

The story comes both fast and slow to a close. Jake, Boone, and the kindly patient men are waiting for her, now that she’s ready to go and see Graham. In the car, they are talking, excited and explaining, and Virginia hears them: Mother Lee who’s secretarying for the board has held up the papers for the sale. We came to tell you that . . . We’re the delegation that’s going to confront the board this evening . . . They never intended to dig the well, that’s clear . . . That was just to get into the district, get into our business, check out our strength. I was a fool . . . Well . . . can’t you read? That’s what our flyers been saying all along. Don’t you read the stuff we put out? . . . We ain’t nowhere licked yet, though . . . Listen, we got it all figured out. We’re going to bypass the robbers and deal directly with the tenant councils in the cities, and we’re . . . and you tell him . . . just tell him to take his care.

“Don’t talk the woman to death,” says Boone for the second time. Virginia is listening enough to speak to them for the first time. “There’s still Mama Mae’s farm,” she says with a smile. But she’s remembering the last time she saw Graham and what she’s going to say to him now and how to explain this new growth she was experiencing. Not like the old dread, not like the baby; more like the toermal smashed the day the work brigade had stacked the stones to keep the road from splitting apart. The way the new nail pushed up against the old turning blue, against the gause and the tape, stubborn to establish itself. She’s trying to get a hold of it but she can’t quite yet. The “it” is still a memory of trying to come through the shell but not quite having the words for her feelings, only broken threads and words . . . bounding out in a hopeless scatter of tears and words until something—her impatience with her own childishness—made her grab herself up. This is what she remembers—grabbing herself up and trying to get to that place that was beginning to seem more of a when than a where. And the woman seemed to be inside her if she could only connect. And she does connect, remembering a when, getting the words, as wishes, into herself as what she knew exactly now to tell Graham: the ball’d been paid, her strength was back, and she sure as hell was going to keep up the garden. How else to feed the people?

"Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"

That’s how the story ends. Virginia doesn’t even say these words to Graham. She just remembers, connects, and gets ready to. We do not know if the community will save their land or if the hook-up with the tenant councils in the city will succeed. We’re certainly not led to believe that what Helen Quan calls the forces of savage development have been conquered or that corruption in churches has been eliminated or that poverty and its issue has disappeared. We do not know if Graham is released from jail, much less that prisons are abolished. We do not know what Virginia will or won’t do next. She’s not a New Woman in the Promised Land whose future is secured. She’s just a young woman who has found a strength already within her—that is, a memory—to transform the place she was stuck in and running away from into a home. At the end of the story, all that seems to happen is that Virginia goes to see the husband she loves in jail and decides to stay and keep up the garden. That’s it.

It takes Velma all 300 pages of The Salt Eaters just to answer the question that the healer Minnie Ranson asks on the first page, Are you sure, sweetheart, that
you want to be well? At the end of that story, Velma, a fighter who is much more experienced than Virginia but who has tried to kill herself, just barely says yes to Minnie Ransom's question.

The healer's hand touches a vital spot and finally Velma responds. But even then, she was still trying to resist, still trying to think what good did wild dog you, since there was always some low-life gruesome gang bang raping lawless careless petty last straw nasty thing ready to pouce, put your total shit under arrest and crack your back.

It's only later, years hence, when Velma is able to make a story of it, able to retrieve it as a memory, that she would be able to laugh remembering she'd thought barely saying yes was an ordeal. She didn't know the half of it. Of what awaited her in years to come.

The what's-to-come, Sophie Heywood warns, will be a trial because the what's-to-come involves what Velma doesn't understand yet—which is how a politically astute, hard-headed critical, organizationally competent, knows-her-history, tough fighter is healed by another woman who needs her own guide to conjure the spiritual power she can wield. But the what's-to-come doesn't arrive, only the ending as it is. Velma answers yes, lets go of Minnie's hands, gets up off the stool on which she's been sitting for 300 pages, and throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool a burst cocoon.

At the end of The Salt Eaters, environmental racism and corporate pollution have not been eliminated, the bus driver Fred No's friend Porter is still dead from exposure to state-sponsored radioactivity, police brutality remains a hazard of an active protest life, the enraging and exhausting gendered division of labor within grassroots movements lingers, intimacy in love is still a difficult achievement, and care work and opportunism are as much a concern as the need to overcome the split between “race, class, and struggle” and the “spirithood arts”—this split being only one instance of the “demonic” binary model of thought in which we're often paralyzed.

In other words, nowhere in any of Toni Cade Bambara's writings is there the usual utopian scenario. No one is ever transported to a perfect world where all problems are solved, where the past is over, and where the future is all sweet perfection neatly organized according to nicely-sounding-on-paper rules. Bambara does not create pictures of perfection, only stories of living with the degradations and contradictions of exploitation, racism, authoritarianism—what she calls the psychopathological world of lies and inhumanity—differently; stories of living better than all that.

These are not American-dream stories—all “innocence and clean slates and the future.” In Bambara's stories, a different type of anticipatory consciousness is expressed, oriented towards the future, but not futuristic, that is to say, it doesn't treat the future as either an off-world escape or a displacing fetish. This anticipatory consciousness involves dreaming, but it also involves risks—USE EXTREME CAUTION, Those Bones warns at the start. Like the storytelling form in which Bambara always presents the dream of better living, this anticipatory consciousness "confronts, pushes you up against the evasions, self-deceptions, investments in opinions and interpretations, the clutter that blinds, [and] that disguises that underlying, all-encompassing design within which the perceived world—in which society would have us stay put—operates."

In this anticipatory consciousness, it is confronting the clutter that blinds and binds which allows you to get a certain distance or detachment from where you're told to stay put. This anticipatory consciousness is intensely in the present tense, moving back and forth between memories of what has come before and what is to come next, folding itself into sensual stories of movement, social movement, individual movement.

The emerging place that is inside Virginia that is more of a when than a where, and Minnie Ransom's “Everything in time” speak not only to the importance of time in Bambara's conception but also to the supreme importance of Taking Your Time. Bambara has spoken eloquently of how she was given permission by her mother, by her daughter, by her friends, and by herself to daydream, to imagine, to know her work and do it, to change, and to take her time to learn how to practice her freedom daily.

Bambara passes this permission on to her characters and readers as a right and a necessity, graciously, with a casualness her mother passed on to her, tenaciously, with the knowledge that the historic denial of this permission is a form of spirit murder. And so people—ordinary "folks . . . who've been waiting in the wings"—take their time to do what they need to do to face up to what's killing them, and others wait, instantiating a type of self and other-directed love that's free of any guilt over taking time. And that's because in Bambara's world, there isn't a finite block of time out there that we all have to compete for a piece of. In Bambara's world, permission replaces competition.

Minnie Ransom "can wait," although at moments it does strain her, while Velma takes her time deciding whether she wants to get well or not. It takes Velma a long time to make that decision, remembering and forgetting her life and the history of the people who surround her. The older men and women wait patiently for Virginia as she learns that she has a time of her own, a when that enables her to find a different place to live right there where a moment ago she could only meet the same red and yellow jumper on the road. We and everyone around them must wait for Spence to negotiate the time lost between his return from Vietnam and the present, as he confronts the possible sources of his son's disappearance and the surprise of the aching loneliness and grief it produces in him. We also must wait for Zala as she struggles with the haunting time—sharp, anxious, suspicious, delayed (He should have been here already!)—that has her bound to making every single moment a terrible struggle to turn her rage and also her guilt into a power capable of getting her son back or at least getting an accurate explanation for his absence.

The structure of all Bambara's novels and many of the short stories consists in a relay between the present and the past, between the trouble afflicting you right at the moment and what else is going on around you, between there being no time to waste at all and the necessity of taking your time. It's not simply that Bambara doesn't have a linear sense of time, as many have pointed out. It's that she describes the meeting of collective forms of time—what she calls Black Family
time—and individual forms of time. This meeting of the collective and the individual produces that abolitionist time of both acute patience and urgency which Martin Luther King Jr. tried to explain to the white moderate in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Abolitionist time cannot wait for the "right" time, nor for others to decide when those who are "harried by day and haunted by night" can have their time.  

In abolitionist time, nothing is inevitable except the struggle to make "now the time to make real the promise of democracy," to make time one's "creative ally." Abolitionist time is a type of revolutionary time. But rather than stop the world, as if in an absolute break between now and then, it is a daily part of it. Abolitionist time is a way of being in the ongoing work of emancipation, a work whose success is not measured by legalistic pronouncements, a work which perforce must take place while you're still enslaved.

Urgency and patience forged in the crucible of a historic struggle. A struggle for what? For Virginia to find her when? For Velma to get up off the chair? Yes! Because what's at stake in taking your time to face up to what's killing you is nothing less than the revolution in selfhood or subjectivity that, for Bambara, is the root of being capable of living better than is expected of you. And living better than what is expected of you is revolutionary; it is about changing how life is lived in the here and now. And that takes time. Time, Bambara says, we have. "That, of course," she wrote in The Black Woman,

is an unpopular utterance these days. Instant coffee is the hallmark of current rhetoric. But we do have time. We better take the time to fashion revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships. Mouth don't win the war. . . . Neither does haste, urgency, and stretch-out-now insistence. Not all speed is movement. . . . It is so much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain't out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be. And arguing that instant-coffee-ten-minutes-to-midnight alibi to justify hasty-headed dealings . . . is shit. Ain't no such animal as an instant guerrilla.

"It's so much easier to be out there than right here"

It's so much easier to be out there than right here.  

Bambara knows this very well, it is what her healers know, and it is what the truth and justice fighters who change, who find wholeness—integrity, honor, health, responsibility—where before there was disconnection, find out. As Bambara states:

One of the greatest afflictions in American society for both the teacher/student and the writer is the affliction of disconnectedness. The separation between the world of academia and the world of knowledge that exists beyond the campus gates, the seeming dichotomy between politics and ethics, the division between politics and art, [between materialism and metaphysics] etc., etc. . . . In this society, forgetfulness is a virtue, amnesia is a virtue. . . . And we carry this habit, this outlook, into our daily lives. This is extremely dangerous. So, I teach about the necessity of being connected, and about the necessity of resurrecting the truth about our experiences (and revising the texts) in this place called America.

The truth of our experiences. "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well," Minnie Ransom, "fabled healer of the district," asks Velma Henry, fabled worn-out activist. "Are you sure, sweetheart? I'm just asking is all. . . . Take away the miseries and you take away some folks' reason for living. Their conversation piece anyway."  

Minnie Ransom must ask Velma this question fifty times, repeating it over and over again, trying to make Velma hear the real import of the question: Are you ready to be better? Do you want to eliminate your own misery or do you need it to live? These are profound, difficult, and tedious questions that get to the heart of any utopian enterprise. What do you really want? What is involved in achieving what you want? What's the cost of taking away the miseries? What's the cost of holding on to them?

What Bambara wants is revolution. Revolution involves a "free society made up of whole individuals."  

Such a revolution begins, Bambara states, "with the self, in the self." The self is, for her, "the basic revolutionary unit" and consequently it must be "purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart, that hazard" couples, families, movements, and communities.  

A new person is born when he finds a value to define an actionable self and when he can assume autonomy for that self," she writes. Assuming the autonomy to create a new person, from the bottom up, out of the messy, complex, and willful people that we are and will remain, is to assume the power to make history. For, as Bambara states, making history involves refusing to act "like we were just symbolic personas in some historical melodrama."

And so Bambara focuses her creative energy—her power—on showing the damage caused by alienation from creative labor, alienation from economic and political power, alienation from history, alienation from truthfulness and the alienation from ourselves. And on showing the intimate, sensual, and embodied process which heals that damage, from the bottom up, from You to the world waiting for you to be ready. This healing is absolutely crucial, a necessary part of creating free individuals and a free society now, when we need it. There is no free society without free individuals, Bambara says—or as Mrs. Sophie Heywood "counseled": "Have to be whole to see whole."

And so, individuals will have to be healed—it can't wait until later, it can't be done in a minute, and most importantly, it can't be done alone.

"Dreamer? The dream is real, my friends. The failure to make it work is the unreality"

Always in Bambara's stories, the community must be present for this transformative act of healing, of liberation, to take place. The community must be present for three important reasons. First, the community must be present because you
can't do it alone, it's too difficult. It is difficult because it's so much easier to be out there than right here. And it's so much easier to be out there than right here because people often hold on to sickness with a fierceoleness... So used to being unwhole and unwell, one forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one was programmed to believe. ... For people sometimes believed that it was safer to live with complaints, was necessary to cooperate with grief, was all right to become an accomplice in self-ambush. They were proud, frequently, the patients that came to Mrs. Ransom. They wore their crippleness or blindness like a badge of honor, as though it meant they'd been singled out for some special punishment, were special. Or as though it meant they'd paid some heavy dues and knew, then, what there was to know, and therefore had a right to certain privileges, or were exempt from certain charges, or ought to be listened to at meetings. But way down under knowing "special" was a lie, knowing better all along and feeling the cost of the lie, of the self-betrayal in the joints, in the lungs, in the eyes. Knew, felt the cost, but were too proud and too scared to get downright familiar with the condition fit, getting downright familiar with their bodies, minds, spirits... Took heart to flat out decide to be well and stride into the future sane and whole. And it took time.

It's so much easier to be out there than right here, where, given all the unrelenting taxation on you, you have a right to what's familiar, to what's safe, to what you've come to rely on to keep you as sane as you are. You have paid your dues, you fight the good fight, you deserve to feel you're special. It is so much easier to hold on to the familiar costs, the co-operations you've trusted in the past, than to let that go, let go of a pride hard-won and rarely given, let go of the fear that raises the defenses that are your known strength.

In a remarkable passage, remarkable for its seeming counterintuition, Minnie Ransom says, "There's nothing that stands between you and perfect health, sweetheart. Can you hold that thought?" You usually can't. The immediate reaction, full of charged resistance, is almost always, "Are you crazy? What's standing between me and perfect health is the obvious reality of the sick world that's made me ill in the first place." For Bambara, healing is the process by which you hold that counterintuitive thought and overcome the resistance to a truth that doesn't so much set you free, as set you up to practice a freedom that improves upon use. But this resistance is fierce, rooted in a self-protectiveness that feels absolutely essential, and so you're going to need some help. Indeed, you cannot do it on your own. The magic—and there's no other word for it—of the healings which Bambara describes is effected by the complex of power that comes from a concentrated meeting of healer, sick person, and the group. It is not a strictly speaking individual or dyadic process. It is absolutely essential for the group's love, patience, concentration, and belief in the power to heal to be there, even if you're not entirely aware of its presence, as Velma is not. Without the group, the healer and the other individuals present in your circle have no power, nothing to draw on to help you out. And like any other analytic and creative production, you want to be healed by tools and methods capable of doing and not botching the job.

Therefore, the second reason the community needs to be present is because the community is where the dream is real, where the only unreality is the failure to make it work. The heart of the two-parts-that-go-together dream, which is a "chorus," is that: one, exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary; and two, it is possible to rise above one's training, "think better than" one's been taught, and defiantly behave accordingly. This dream is not, in Bambara's hands, fantasmatist or elusive or something people only experience while they're asleep. This is not a dream of color-blindness, of homogeneous, self-contained alien societies, of perfect and perfectly conscious individuals, or of genocidal settlement masquerading as democratic freedom. Bambara's dream of a world in which exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary, a world in which we are better than we're expected to be, sounds simple, simplistic even. But to me, it is a profound standpoint, a utopian standpoint, magical in its ability to suspend common disbelief, passed down to her as the community's teaching and tradition.

The community means everything to Bambara, and thus it is the focal point of her imaginative attention, a place she speaks from and speaks to, inventing it as often as describing it. The community is what's needed for healing. The community is the source of the history and the memory and the now of what's possible because it's already happened there. The community possesses a special way of seeing, a second sight, in which the dream is real and the only unreality is the failure to make it real. Many individuals, Bambara writes, spent a great deal of time, energy, and imagination encouraging and equipping me to practice freedom in preparation for collective self-governance... I became acquainted with Black books that challenged, rather than mimicked, White or Negro versions of reality. I became acquainted with folks who demonstrated that their real work was creating value in the neighborhoods—bookstores, communal gardens, think tanks, arts-and-crafts programs, community organizer training, photography workshops. Many of them had what I call second sight—the ability to make reasoned calls to the community to create protective spaces wherein people could theorize and practice toward future sovereignty, while at the same time watching out for the sharks, the next wave of repression, or the next smear campaign, and preparing for it.

Insubordinates, disidents, iconoclasts, oppositionists, change agents, radicals, and revolutionaries... studied... argued... investigated. They had fire, they had analyses, they had standards. They had respect for children, the elders, and traditions of struggle. They imparted language for rendering the confusing intelligible, for naming the things that warped us, and for clarifying the complex and often contradictory nature of resistance.
Toni Cade Bambara rejects those Western utopian traditions “wherein people cannot be a higher sovereign than the state.” Instead, in Bambara’s vision, people in community are a higher sovereign than the state or the market or the media or the academy. It is the sovereignty of people conducting the “daily rituals of group validation,” based on a second sight, that create a “liberated zone” right there where they are “penned up in concentration camp horror.” This liberated zone is inhabited by bold insurgents and quiet plodders, by champions—those who get up when they are down for the count—and those who want to hide, by adept healers and those who need some healing, by patient teachers and impatient learners, by people doing more than their best and others doing less. In this liberated zone, democratic, antiracist community values, whether in culture, in politics, or in housekeeping, are practiced as sovereign and for future sovereignty. In this liberated zone, the morning how do’s, the borrowing, the helping out, the “that’ll be enough now” matter—matter because they are valued as the values we want to live by. In this zone, some women want to run away, and some men need to be told to stay put. In this zone, some people just need to figure out how to get up off their chair and others are busy with meetings and keeping more lists of things to do than they’ll ever accomplish. There’s an effort to resolve conflicts with respect and care, and there are breaks that cannot be repaired. In other words, in this liberated zone, there is the ongoing meeting of those who believe the dream is real, of those who might be persuaded, of those who don’t care all that much, and of those who oppose you all the way. The community is not a panacea for all ills, but it is the place where Bambara locates the practice of freedom, the second sight that gives us the knowledge that we have the sovereignty, the authority, to free ourselves on our own terms.

Thus, Bambara rejects those Western utopian traditions which are rooted in the assumption that the powers that oppress us are not only bigger than us, as the spatial reasoning has it, but also the source of who we are and even what we are capable of. As Cedric Robinson succinctly put it, “We are not the subjects or the subject formations of the capitalist world-system. It is merely one condition of our existence.” To understand as embodied knowledge, that is to say, to live by what this statement means, is to hold to a reality principle that runs counter to everything we are taught by all rulers, most scholars, and many radicals. To be intimate with this thinking is to hold to a reality principle in which the dream is real and the only unreality is the failure to make it work. The dream that is real is both deeply subjective, in Bambara’s conception, and it is also a supremely material way of conceiving our relationship to the systems that attempt to control and dehumanize us. Listen to the following exchange between Bambara and Kalamu ya Salaam:

**Salaam:** What you were talking about was not so much what others do to us and how others do it to us, but rather what we must do for ourselves.

**Bambara:** Yes.

**S:** The colonial response: First, you have colonialism and then you have anti-colonialism, which is still not affirmative of yourself because you’re just reacting to your oppression and are still using colonialism as a reference.

**B:** I think that’s the politics of despair and I don’t ascribe to that at all. There was something before colonialism and there is something that persists in spite of it. It’s that core that interests me. Colonialism was just a moment in our history. It’s a very temporary thing.

**S:** What you’re saying then is that as long as we consider colonialism the major aspect of our reality we have in fact missed . . .

**B:** We have in fact collaborated . . .

**S:** . . . with colonialism because then we are implicitly saying that’s where our history started . . .

**B:** Saying that this is our reality. It’s not our reality. . . . To constantly be looking at . . . how [we are boxed in on all four sides]. . . . Is to stay in prison, is to collaborate with your captives, indeed, is to lend them energy, which is the same thing as providing them with the power to keep you locked in.

Refusing to provide them with the power to keep you locked in. The dream is the art of making things and relationships of value without believing that the rulers can successfully and completely rule you. The dream is about being unavailable for servitude, back stiff with conviction. The dream is neither cynical nor naive towards power, it is in-difference to it. To live in the reality of the dream, you not only need to be different, you need to be in-different. Indifferent to the lure and the pull of the sacrificial goods and promises ubiquitously on offer and also indifferent to the familiarity of being sick of it all. To be in-difference is to refuse to be intoxicated with the “ugly” and with the deathly, to stop loving that which you claim to despise. To be in-difference is to practice freedom in preparation for collective self-governance. To be in-difference is to believe that we are better and more human than the reactive subjects of a variety of abusive arrangements of power and authority. To be in-difference is to see all the winning ways in which many people for as long as anybody can remember resist the degradations imposed on them, and to see what those great and small acts of resistance teach us about the fragility of power and the ease with which it can fail to achieve its ends. To be in-difference is to see as real, as reality, that many people not only resist but also build worlds that live by better and more just and equitable rules, rituals, and relationships. To be in-difference is to refuse to collaborate by lending energy to that which oppresses you. To be in-difference is to be ready, in a moment, to let go of what’s merely seemed a superficial or temporary investment in the way things are. In short, to be in-difference is to find “the work of revolution irresistible.”
The work: to make revolution irresistible

And thus, we come to the third and final reason the community must be present in the healing process. The community must be present because without it, you’ve got no place to go when you’re better. Being well in the way Bambara means it, as an act of emancipation or liberation, brings a responsibility with it. “Do we want to be well?” The answer tends to be ‘no!’ To be whole—politically, psychically, spiritually, culturally, intellectually, aesthetically, physically, and economically whole—is of profound significance. It is significant because there is a correlative to this. There is a responsibility to self and to history that is developed once you are ‘whole,’ once you are well, once you acknowledge your power. There’s a great force, Bambara is suggesting, that comes from refusing to cooperate with grief, from insisting on the capacity and the right to be better than and in a sick society. This is the power of in-difference: the capacity to let go of the ties that bind you to an identification with that which is killing you, to assume a freedom or an autonomy you can own because you are one of its most important sources, and to share it with others so that it is “usable,” not simply a private possession. The power to be in-different is a world-making power, the power of freedom—the freedom to create an alternative civilization right in the here and now, right there in the same place where greed, abusive authority, and all sorts of biological and social determinisms reside. The power of in-difference is more powerful than skepticism for the simple reason that it attaches you, not to what you hold in contempt (as cynicism does), but to that liberated zone where the daily practice of freedom constitutes the grounds for sovereignty and for a labor of love that’s anything but misguided. The something more powerful than skepticism is guided by vigilance in the pursuit of a freedom you’ve already begun to taste.

Freedom? Yes. You. Don’t you want to be free? Freedom is what Bambara, the dreamer, the organizer, and the bad housekeeper, is after. What she does mean by freedom? Freedom means facing up to what’s killing you, healing the damage, and becoming in-different to the lure of sacrificial promises of monied or exclusive happiness and the familiarity of your own pain. It means facing up and out with analytic precision, creative determination, and sympathetic understanding for yourself and others, with tenderness, as Herbert Marcuse advised. Freedom, Bambara insists, is a process. It is not the end of history nor an elusive goal never achievable. It is not a better nation-state however disguised as a cooperative. It is not an ideal set of rules detached from the people who make them or live by them. And it is certainly not the right to own the economic, social, political, or cultural capital in order to dominate others and trade their happiness in a monopolistic market. Freedom is the process by which you develop a practice for being unavailable for servitude. It is an uneven process, not very linear, always looping around, catching folks at different moments—facing up, healing, becoming in-different, already in-different. The practice of freedom is difficult; it can be overwhelmed by despair and depression, but it is also joyous. Freedom is, in short, the process by which we do the work of making revolution irresistible, making it something we cannot live without. Then be straightened. back stiff with the conviction that he, like many others going home now, was totally unavailable for servitude. Being or becoming totally unavailable for servitude, as Bambara herself declared, was the work she took on as her own and for us. Making revolution irresistible. This is how we make the best history we can now, which is only ever when we have a chance.