

Savage Mothers and Rambunctious Nature:
Radical Challenges to the Discourse of Reason in the
Works of Toni Morrison and Maryse Condé

by

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In their fictional works, Toni Morrison and Maryse Condé confront colonial interpretations of maternity and imperialist ways of relating to nature. They dismantle the European colonists' attempts to domesticate a New World whose formidable wilderness threatened their masculinity and sense of civilized superiority. Annette Kolodny elaborates on the attitude of early British settlers in *The Lay of the Land*. She writes:

...was there perhaps a *need* to experience the land as a nurturing, giving maternal breast because of the threatening, alien, and potentially emasculating terror of the unknown? Beautiful, indeed, that wilderness appeared—but also dark, uncharted, and prowled by howling beasts. In a sense, to make the new continent Woman was already to civilize her in a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed (9).

As Kolodny suggests in this passage, the European man envisioned the land in maternal terms in order to bring “her” within the framework of Reason and Civilization: the tools that he employed to justify his dominance over the earth, women and “savage” peoples. Danielle Russell makes a similar observation in *Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison*. She notes that pioneers created gardens and orchards as a way of turning the frontier into manageable plots of land. In addition to serving agricultural purposes, these spaces functioned as feminine havens from the unknown wilderness. Russell clarifies that, “of course, should the isolation be externally rather than self-imposed, a creative centre can be transformed into a prison. The enclosed, walled garden can be protective *and* prescriptive” (64). Russell

touches on an essential consequence of transforming the wilderness into a maternal asylum: by constricting the terrain in this way, one limits the potential meanings of both nature and motherhood, and turns them into mild, ordered, passive institutions. In their novels, *Traversée de la Mangrove*,¹ *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière...Noire de Salem*,² *Tar Baby*, *Jazz*, and *Beloved*, Maryse Condé and Toni Morrison tear down the walls of the garden. In other words, they refuse any definition of Mother or Nature that is tame or controlled. Condé and Morrison bring incestuous relationships with Mother/Nature³ to the forefront of their writing, and investigate the potential of these relationships. They also discuss the volatile and even violent side of mothers and of the pastoral. Finally, they consider how a fertile Mother Earth renders her inhabitants childlike through excessive nurturing, and they meditate on the power and drawbacks of this ability. In their treatment of these subjects, Condé and Morrison challenge masculine attempts to govern the feminine and the natural through the discourse of Reason.

1) Incestuous Implications of the “Mother Earth” Trope and The Productive Potential of Incest

Imagining the New World as both mother and virgin inevitably leads to certain psychological perils. As Kolodny writes, the trope of the maternal landscape in the writings of early British colonists, “...could also lead to an experience of

¹ *Crossing the Mangrove*

² *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

³ I employ the term Mother/Nature to refer to the notion of mothers as animalistic and the view of nature as maternal at once. I opt for the term Mother/Nature because I believe it underscores the fluidity between our conceptions of nature and motherhood in Western culture.

incestuous violation” (15). These writers attempted to evade responsibility for taking advantage of Mother Earth by blaming the exploitation of the land on their fellow settlers. According to Kolodny, “John Hammond⁴ blames others for having proven ungrateful children to Virginia and Maryland; authors of the Georgia narratives lay the blame for that lady’s ruin at the feet of governmental mismanagement and false advertising...” (22). Unlike these settlers, the character of Mira in *Traversée de la Mangrove* embraces her incestuous relationship to her environment. Mira never accepts the notion that her mother died while giving birth to her. She tells the reader of her conviction that her mother existed somewhere in her surroundings, hiding in the cliff of a mountain or crouching behind the foliage in the forest. She recounts: “Un jour, à sa recherche depuis le matin, je remontais une trace [...] j’ai buté sur une roche et j’ai déboulé jusqu’au fond d’une racine, cachée sous l’amoncellement des plantes. Je n’ai jamais oublié cette première rencontre avec l’eau, ce chant délié, à peine audible, et l’odeur de l’humus en décomposition [...] J’avais retrouvé le lit maternel” (52).⁵ Condé’s use of the phrase “lit maternel” or “maternal bed” reveals that Mira’s relationship to the ravine is both familial and sexual. The phrase suggests a womb, but also alludes to the nuptial bed. Elsewhere in the novel, Mira makes this sexual element more explicit: “Je me glissais dans l’eau qui pénétrait, brûlante de la chaleur du soleil de la journée, jusque dans les profondeurs de mon corps. Je

⁴ author of ‘Leah and Rachel, or the Two Fruitfull Sisters, Virginia and Mary-land (1656)

⁵ One day, when I had been on [my mother’s] trail since morning, I picked up her trace...I tripped over a rock and tumbled down to the bottom of a ravine, hidden under a profusion of plants. I never forgot this first encounter with the water, its delicate song, barely audible, and the smell of decomposing humus...I had recovered the maternal bed. [This and all other translations in this essay are my own.]

tressaillais sous cet attouchement brutal” (49).⁶ Condé envisions a feminine form of incest with “Mother Nature,” as she describes Mira’s contact with this mother figure in terms of penetration, and writes of her trembling at the water’s touch. Since the water is hot rather than cold, we can only assume that these are shivers of pleasure. Unlike the colonial writers, Condé acknowledges this incestuous dynamic unabashedly. Her frankness reflects Mira’s open desire for the ravine. Mira’s encounters with this body of water are exuberant and consensual, as both parties are active players in their interactions. The ravine may even surpass her in vigor.

Condé’s description of this interaction provides a marked contrast to Sir Walter Raleigh’s account of Guinea. Raleigh, an early British explorer of North Carolina and Virginia who founded the first English colony in America on Roanoke Island, wrote of Guinea as, “a cuntry that hath yet her maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought” (Kolodny 11). Unlike Mira’s mutually enthusiastic relationship with the ravine, Raleigh’s use of language conjures images of rape. In fact, this lack of consent factors into Raleigh’s excitement about the new continent. He appears thrilled at the opportunity for dominance over a passive body of land. When one reads Raleigh’s account alongside descriptions of the New World as a maternal breast or womb, one is struck by the incestuous sentiments at work. Raleigh does not recognize these incestuous motivations, however. One can assume that this is partly because of the taboo around incest, and partly because the violence of rape renders these feelings towards a mother figure even more complicated. By not only acknowledging this incestuous dynamic but redefining and celebrating it, Condé

⁶ I slid into the water that penetrated, boiling with the heat of the daytime sun, into the very depths of my body. I trembled under this brutal molestation.

demonstrates how desire will always factor into encounters with the land. Neither the colonists nor anyone else will succeed in justifying their relationship to “her” in purely rational or conventional terms.

Mira is not the only character in *Traversée de la Mangrove* with an incestuous attachment to the ravine. Carmélien Ramsaran, the son of a rich Indian planter in Rivière au Sel, also developed a fixation with water early in life. Condé writes that Carmélien discovered his enthusiasm for water at his baptism: “[...] c’est à ce moment-là qu’il avait retrouvé le souvenir du ventre maternel quand, sans yeux et des nageoires au pied, il baignait dans la félicité” (174).⁷ This passage demonstrates that Carmélien attaches an amniotic quality to water just like Mira. He also becomes enamored with the ravine. Condé writes, “Chaque après-midi au sortir de l’école [...] il courait vers elle, coeur battant, comme un amoureux vers sa promise [...]” (175).⁸ He therefore views the ravine both as a mother figure—since she is the source of the fluid that transports him back to the womb—and as his personal lover. His relationship to the ravine parallels Mira’s in these respects, but the specifics of their interactions with the water differ profoundly. Condé describes his attempts to expose the parts of the ravine that lie hidden beneath the earth: “[...] il essaya de la déterrer où elle se cachait et de lui creuser un lit dans le mitan duquel elle pourrait se pavaner princess” (175).⁹ Not only does Carmélien try to uncover the ravine in the places where she deliberately hides from him, but he also insists on situating her above

⁷ At this moment he remembered life in the womb when, without eyes and with fins for feet, he bathed in felicity.

⁸ Every afternoon after school, he ran towards [the ravine], heart beating, like a lover running towards his betrothed.

⁹ He tried to unearth her where she hid from him and dig her a bed where she could languish like a princess.

ground as a princess. Carmélien evidently feels the need to assign his own labels and significations to the ravine, as if she did not possess enough merit without the lavish title and amenities that he bestows on her.

Carmélien also reads myths about “the guardian of the water” at school, and imagines himself in this position at night (174). Condé writes, “La nuit, il se rêvait, maître de l’eau lui aussi, irriguant la terre reconnaissante, ordonnant la croissance des giraumons et des aubergines, il se réveillait tout surpris dans une mare d’urine [...]” (175).¹⁰ Here again we see that Carmélien fantasizes about mastering the ravine, about dominating her and controlling her movements. His desires could not differ more from Mira’s, since she is aroused by consensual encounters with the water in which she allows the ravine to envelop her. Ultimately, both characters have desirous, incestuous attitudes towards this body of water, but only Mira’s offers us a vision of a radical partnership with Mother Nature.

Mira’s interactions with the ravine do not constitute her only incestuous relationship in the novel, either. She also has an affair with her brother, Aristide. In her article, “Reconfiguring Boundaries in Maryse Condé’s ‘Crossing the Mangrove,’” Deborah B. Gaensbauer interprets Condé’s use of incest as a commentary on the effects of oppression. She calls Mira’s relationship with Aristide “an effectively perverted representation of domination in a context of imprisoning insularity” (Gaensbauer 7). Gaensbauer suggests that this “imprisoning insularity” is emblematic of Guadeloupe’s suffocating dependence on France. I would offer an

¹⁰At night he dreamed that he was master of the water, irrigating the grateful earth, ordering the growth of pumpkins and eggplants, and he would awake with a shock in a lake of urine.

alternative to Gaensbauer's argument: that Mira's incestuous experiences demonstrate a determination *not* to be imprisoned. She can do little to change her physical mobility, but she refuses to be contained within the realm of what's rational or acceptable according to the criteria of her society. She attains a kind of mobility of thought and of action, despite being physically contained on the island and stifled within the walls of her father's home.

In *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière...*, Condé similarly uses incest to symbolize the destruction of externally-imposed boundaries. Tituba, the 17th century slave famous for her involvement in the Salem witch trials, is the heroine of this novel. After envisioning a long life journey for Tituba, Condé eventually describes her return to the Barbados, where she meets Iphigene and imagines him as the son whom she aborted and never knew. Despite that she envisions him as her child and that he refers to her as "mother," the two experience an irrepressible attraction for one another. When they finally consummate this feeling, Tituba states, "une absurde conviction de commettre un inceste m'envahissait" (259).¹¹ Tituba does not shy away from this development, however. After the two are hanged for provoking a rebellion she describes Iphigene as her "fils-amant, compagnon de mon éternité" (268).¹² I find it intriguing that Tituba's radical relationship with Iphigene continues into the afterlife. This artistic decision by Condé seems to symbolize Tituba's refusal to be restricted in anyway, whether in her role as mother or by mortality. By adopting a son as a lover, Tituba defies the incest prohibition that is universal to almost every society (DeMause). Her experience of afterlife also challenges the notion of heaven

¹¹ "an absurd conviction that I was committing incest overcame me"

¹² "my son-lover, companion of my eternity."

as an a-material sphere that rewards the meek and the chaste. The realities of race, gender and sex are inextricable parts of Tituba's identity. For her to deny them once she dies would be impossible let alone ridiculous. Her afterlife is therefore just as material and political as her earthly life. She floats between forms (sometimes assuming that of a lizard or a bird), communicates with humans and provokes rebellions (268, 270). In her words, "visible comme invisible, je continue à panser, à guérir" (268).¹³ That Iphigene is her partner in her projects after death solidifies Tituba's position as the ultimate rebel against white masculine ideals.

In *Beloved*, too, Sethe's mother-love defies proscriptions against romance. Her relationship with Beloved contains a distinct sexual element. Morrison describes Beloved's touch on Sethe's shoulder as, "A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire" (69). Sethe, too, moans at Beloved's touch when Beloved strokes her neck in the clearing (114). Morrison's description of Sethe nursing Beloved also resembles a moment of consummation. She writes that Sethe, "...enclosed her left nipple with two fingers of her right hand and the child opened her mouth. They hit home together" (110). This incestuous aspect of Sethe and Beloved's relationship reflects the same unbounded quality of Sethe's love that leads her to kill Beloved when Schoolteacher arrives. In both scenarios, we see that Sethe's love refuses to be regulated. As Gloria Thomas Pillows comments in *Motherlove in Shades of Black: The Maternal Psyche in the Novels of African American Women*, "There seems to be no middle ground for Sethe...Slavery and Maternity are, simply, profoundly incompatible. Nothing good can come of a situation where a mother is

¹³ "visible and invisible, I continue to heal, to battle."

not free to love her children without restraint” (155). When Pillows refers to this love without restraint, she is alluding to Sethe’s decision to kill Beloved. Her critique works just as well as a comment on Sethe’s erotic motherlove, however. When Sethe loves, she loves passionately. She moans at her children’s touch and experiences ecstasy while nursing. To use Pillow’s words, this kind of amorous, maternal love is “profoundly incompatible” with slavery. In an environment where children are often separated from their mothers, such all-consuming love would be considered radical and dangerous. In fact, Sethe’s assertion of a right to unmitigated love is more shocking to the other characters in the novel than the infanticide that she commits. As Paul D remarks, “more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him” (193). Despite pressure from her community, Sethe refuses to love tamely. She will not mother within the framework of someone else’s garden.

2) Monstrous, Fecund Mother/Nature

If colonists like Raleigh envisioned the New World as virginal—“a countrey that hath yet her maidenhead”—they also paradoxically saw her as bountiful and fruitful. George Alsop, an English author who lived in Maryland as an indentured servant, described the lush vegetation of the colony in his “Character of the Province of Maryland” (1666) (Lemay 48,49). Kolodny writes that “Alsop hailed [the] ‘superabounding plenty’ as virtually suffocating, a paralyzing superfluity” (Kolodny 15). In the face of such excess fertility, the colonists were immobilized. There was no role for them in this self-sufficient landscape; they were essentially rendered powerless. It was, in effect, an awe-inspiring and even frightening experience to behold a land that wielded more (life) forces than they. Morrison explores this fear of an unbound,

fecund pastoral in *Jazz*. In part II of *Jazz*, we meet Golden Gray, a young man of mixed racial heritage who was raised by his mother, Miss Vera Louise, and her servant, True Belle. When he learns that his father is black, Gray sets out to discover his “other” parent. On his way back to Vesper County he encounters Wild, a young black woman living in the forest, who appears to be the embodiment of everything natural and savage. Morrison gives us Gray’s initial impression of Wild: “She is [...] sprawled there. Her mouth and legs open [...] Her stomach is big and tight.” She goes on to describe Gray’s movements: “He leans down, holding his breath against infection or odor or something. Something that might touch or penetrate him [...] Then he notices a rippling movement in her stomach. Something inside her is moving” (145). In Gray’s mind, Wild’s fertility is monstrous. The rippling, grotesque “something” that he observes in her torso resembles an alien life form more than a human infant. He is also disgusted by her indiscriminate reproduction of life, be it human, plant or animal. In writing that he holds his breath against infection, Morrison exposes his fear of Wild as a cesspool of bacteria: a warm, wet body where such organisms can multiply indefinitely. Gray is afraid of Wild’s fecundity because of its potential to “infect” or overpower him. His own education, culture and sophistication might be rendered useless in the face of this abundant life. Thus, Morrison suggests that feminine reproduction is another force that has the capacity to challenge the masculine weapons of Reason and Culture.

The landscape that Condé envisions in *Traversée de la Mangrove* is also brimming with uncontrollable life. Mira expresses her love for the ravine by saying

that it is “vivante, violente meme” (50).¹⁴ Gaensbauer observes that “Mangrove” in French connotes not just a tree, but a swampy environment rich with vegetation. As Mireille Rosello, the prominent French Caribbean scholar, adds, this swampy region is “teeming with various forms of humid, vaguely monstrous lives” (Gaensbauer 2). Midway through the novel, Francis Sancher, the mysterious foreigner who has immigrated to the Guadeloupean town of Rivière au Sel, tells his mistress Vilma of his intention to name his next book *Traversée de la Mangrove*. Vilma responds, “On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (192).¹⁵ Through Vilma, Condé reveals that it is impossible to maintain a respectable distance from the mangrove. It will grab you with one of its many limbs and wrestle you down into the muck. Thus, Condé emphasizes that far from being a passive canvas for the imperial ambitions of white men, the Caribbean landscape is overflowing with life that is prone to act on its visitors. In fact, it will likely overcome them with its vivacity.

In *Moi, Tituba sorcière*, Condé offers another example of an unpredictable space, and one that has even more constructive potential. In a wave of nostalgia for her homeland Barbados, Tituba exclaims, “Comme la nuit change selon les pays que l’on habite! Chez nous, la nuit est un ventre à l’ombre duquel on redevient sans force et tremblant, mais paradoxalement, les sens déliés, prompts à saisir les moindres

¹⁴ vivacious, violent even

¹⁵ One does not cross the mangrove. One is impaled on the roots of its trees. One is buried and suffocated in the bitter mud.

chuchotements des êtres et des choses.” (103).¹⁶ Here the Caribbean night is a shadowy space like a mother’s womb that renders one childlike, and also a mysterious force that casts its environment in a new light. It can be conceived of as a feminine space, not only because of its maternal attributes but also because it offers an alternative perspective on the world. It encourages one to be in tune with the details of one’s surroundings: to pay attention to the particular rather than to impose one’s ideologies on what one sees. Condé returns to this trope of the night as a productive, feminine sphere later in the novel. When Tituba recounts a glimmer of hope that she experienced while imprisoned in Salem, she proclaims, “Nuit, nuit nuit plus belle que le jour! [...] Nuit, grand lieu de rencontre où le present prend le passé par la main, où vivants et morts se mêlent!” (188).¹⁷ In this passage, the night is an environment that defies all Western proscriptions, including that of Christianity which insists that the living and the dead occupy separate spheres. The night demands a holistic attitude that denies rigid, logical thinking, even towards matters like the linear progression of time.

In *Tar Baby*, too, Morrison demonstrates the failure of a wealthy white man to control the feminine environment around him. Valerian, the affluent owner of a Philadelphia candy factory, retires to a small island in the Caribbean called Isle des Chevaliers and “buil[ds a] greenhouse as a place of controlled ever-flowering life to greet death in” (53). Forcing plants to mature and blossom at his will gives Valerian

¹⁶ How the night changes depending on the country one inhabits! At home, the night is a shadowy womb in which one becomes weak and trembling, but paradoxically, the senses are acute and ready to seize the whispers of spirits and objects.

¹⁷ Night, night, night more beautiful than day! Night, purveyor of dreams! Night, the great place of encounters where the present takes the hand of the past, where the living and the dead mingle!

a sense of control over the lifecycle that is confronting him with death. He plays, “Bach for germination, Haydn and Liszt for strong sprouting” (12). By serenading them in this way, he attempts to govern the flowers’ growth through culture. At the end of the novel, however, Valerian accepts how little control he has over the processes of life. This comes when he learns that his wife, Margaret, used to stick pins in their son’s flesh when he was an infant. Valerian cannot make sense of this revelation within his view of life as a disciplined, ever-flowering greenhouse. Morrison writes, “Anything was better than knowing that a pretty (and pretty nice) sober young woman had loved the bloodying of her own baby” (231). Once again, Morrison presents us with a view of motherhood that is terrifying because it is uncontrollable: “You did it because you are monstrous,” Valerian levels at Margaret (238). After facing his impotency when it comes to nurturing, Valerian opens the doors to his nursery:

At some point in life the world’s beauty becomes enough. You don’t need to photograph, paint or even remember it. It is enough. [...] When that happens—that letting go—you let go because you can [...] So the windows of the greenhouse can be opened and the weather let in. The latch on the door can be left unhooked, the muslin removed, for the soldier ants are beautiful too and whatever they do will be part of it (242).

Morrison demonstrates Valerian’s recognition that it is time to stop controlling life around him. He stops attempting to ward off Mother Nature and her weapons of rainclouds and soldier ants, just as he knows that he cannot contain Margaret any longer. Significantly, this transformation serves as a testimony of a white man’s

progress in relating to motherhood and nature. By providing an example of such a development, Morrison underscores her refusal to define anything in rigid terms, whether that be maternity, the pastoral or even white masculinity.

In addition to Margaret and Mother Nature, *Tar Baby* offers other examples of mothers who refuse to be conquered. One such example is that of “the night women,” or “the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts” (269, 288). Jadine, a Eurocentric young black woman with a “masculine” aloofness towards family and sex, is terrified of being subsumed by the force of this Pan-African maternity. After seeing a vision of the older women in her life pointing and shaking their breasts at her, Jadine concludes, “The night women were not merely against her...they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits” (262).

Here, Morrison explores the complexities of negotiating a balance between nature and culture. To deny all natural forces has its consequences, as we have seen with Valerian. Yet, to be externally conflated with Mother Nature is also problematic. To return to Danielle Russell, “The enclosed, walled garden can be protective *and* prescriptive” (64). Through the character of Jadine, we witness a struggle to assert a kind of individuality that is not defined by masculine, European, Enlightenment standards. In Jadine’s words: “...the night women...wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building” (269). Here Jadine insists on her ability to be ingenuous, enterprising and powerful. She does not believe that she must

be manly in order to assume these qualities, either: “I have breasts too,” she pleads with the night women. She simply desires a form of femininity that is not defined by maternity.

Through Morrison’s depiction of the soldier ants, we see a form of “natural” femininity and maternity that may be compatible with Jadine’s fierce independence. Jadine watches these ants marching in formation from the window of her plane back to Paris. Morrison writes:

The life [of the soldier ant] requires organization so tight and sacrifice so complete there is little need for males and they are seldom produced. When they are needed, it is deliberately done by the queen who surmises, by some four-million-year-old magic she is heiress to, that it is time. So she urges a sperm from the private womb where they were placed when she had her one, first and last copulation (290).

Here, motherhood is a purposeful decision made by a single, authoritative female, and it occurs just as organically as when a male animal impregnates a female with or without her consent. Maternity does not define the soldier ant, either, or subsume her under its influence; she is still quite occupied with her work. Her motherhood is also ruthless, and knows no social norms: “when the first larvae appear, there is nothing to feed them so she gives them their unhatched sisters” (291). And yet, this soldier ant is not called upon to be utterly machine-like or emotionless. She is still susceptible to her own fantasies, and to her memories of copulation. Morrison writes, “she will recall the rush of wind on her belly—the stretch of fresh wings, the blinding anticipation and herself, there, airborne, suspended, open, trusting, frightened,

determined, vulnerable—girlish, even, for an entire second and then another and another” (291). Motherhood, nature, individuality and femininity are all compatible in this vision. The mother does not have to choose to be ruthless or sensitive; she can be unfathomably tough, and vulnerable in her own way.

The soldier ant feeds her unborn children to her offspring, but exhibits her soft side through her memories of her girlish days. Sethe’s approach to mothering is similarly layered and indeterminate; her love for her children is both violent and tender. Pillow comments on how quickly Sethe alternates between nurturing and murdering at the moment of infanticide in *Beloved*. She writes that Sethe “tends to Beloved” when Schoolteacher comes to reclaim his slaves, underscoring the similarities between Sethe hurrying to Beloved when she needs nursing and how she rushes to Beloved’s “aid” when the white men arrive (154). Sethe also continues to clutch Beloved to her breast even after killing her, as though to comfort her in her newly dead state. Shortly afterwards, as Pillow writes, “Sethe’s consciousness grasps a baffling thought in the midst of this extraordinary tableau: that baby Denver, whom she would have killed moments before, now needs nursing—immediately” (154). Sethe clutches the dead and the living baby to her breasts in an attempt to nourish them equally. She also refuses to clean herself before nursing Denver, and so “Denver [takes] her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (179). Here we see that Sethe’s mother-love is utterly unbounded. She will not shield her living child from the strength of her love for her dead one, and even more shockingly, she refuses to see death as an impediment to her role as nurturer. Sethe is not wrong to think this way, either, as Beloved never fully dies. She lives on as a baby ghost in

their home, as the girl who is “always crouching,” as an embodied being when she returns to the house at 124, and in the landscape after she “erupts” into many pieces once more (248, 323). Morrison writes at the end of the novel after Beloved has disappeared: “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather. Certainly no clamor for a kiss” (324). Through her use of irony, Morrison demonstrates that Beloved is down in the water, whistling in the attic and thawing when the weather turns warm. As Sethe remarks earlier in the novel, her ghost is persistent, and just as powerful as Sethe’s love for her (5).

Sethe refuses to comply with the fugitive slave act or to view death as an obstacle to loving her daughter. Mother Nature, too, disobeys both Death and the White Man in *Beloved*. Rainwater “delivers” Paul D from his confinement in an underground slave prison. Russell writes, “Prison ditch becomes birth canal; the threat of flooding becomes the force of freedom...The grave is transformed into a procreative space which, while it cannot sustain life...propels the living out of the womb” (95). I agree with Russell that Morrison’s description of men “push[ing] out, fighting up, reaching for air” conjures the image of infants struggling through the birth canals of their mothers (130). The chain that serves as their connection to the external world, the chain that “would save all or none,” also recalls an umbilical cord (130). By demonstrating the power of Mother Earth to transform the tomb into a womb, Morrison demonstrates the limitless capacities of mother-love. White men will inevitably fail at trying to contain such energy, not only because it supersedes

their commands (keep the black men in the trenches), but also because it is more powerful than their ultimate weapon: death. Once the white male can no longer use death as a threat, his power is significantly diminished.

In *Moi, Tituba sorcière... Noire de Salem*, Maryse Condé also considers the connection between violence and motherhood. While she is enslaved to the Parris family, Tituba makes a calm and deliberate decision to abort the fetus in her womb. Tituba recounts that shortly after witnessing the hanging of an elderly woman condemned for witchcraft, "...je m'aperçus que je portais un enfant et...je décidai de le tuer" (82).¹⁸ Tituba's blunt, concise statement reflects her steady determination and confidence in her decision. Shortly afterwards, she states, "Pour une esclave, la maternité n'est pas de bonheur. Elle revient à expulser dans un monde de servitude et d'abjection, un petit innocent dont il sera impossible de changer la destinée" (83).¹⁹ Tituba is both thoughtful and philosophical in her decision to abort her fetus, and thus threatens Man's monopoly on reason. What's more, she employs her own brand of reason to take action in a way that counters white men's interests. As much as white slaveholders feared black women's sexuality, they still relied on slave women to reproduce their property. Here masculine rationality, which attempts to regulate women's maternity and sexuality, is replaced by a feminine school of thought on reproductive matters.

Tituba's decision to abort her unborn child would be considered violence by some, possibly even by Tituba herself, who uses the verb "to kill" to describe her

¹⁸ "I realized that I was carrying a child and I decided to kill it."

¹⁹ "For a slave, maternity is not a blessing. It forces an innocent child, whose destiny is fixed, into a world of servitude and abjection."

actions (83). Later in the novel, another pregnancy provokes Tituba to violent action, but this time in the form of a political rebellion. Tituba reflects on her pregnancy:

Je lavais mes cheveux dans la purée de graine de carapate afin que les siens soient noirs et brillants. Je prenais de longues et lourdes siestes à l'ombre des manguiers. En même temps, mon enfant me rendit combative. C'était une fille, j'en étais sûre ! Quel avenir connaîtrait-elle? Celui de mes frères et soeurs les esclaves, ravagés par leur condition et leur labeur? Ou alors un avenir semblable au mien, pariah, forcée de se cacher et de vivre en recluse...Non, si le monde devait recevoir mon enfant, il fallait qu'il change!
(243).²⁰

Like Sethe and the soldier ants, Tituba's version of maternity is both feminine and ruthless. She luxuriates in her pregnancy, giving herself spa treatments and taking long, carefree naps. In this respect she appears to be the embodiment of the restful domestic sphere. On the other hand, her pregnancy renders her "combative." She refuses to accept the choice of slavery or exile for her daughter, and demands systematic change. Shortly afterwards, she plants the notion of rebellion in Iphigene in the hopes of creating a new world order for her child (247). Tituba's brand of maternity is closely linked to violence and is also explicitly political. This renders her especially threatening to the slaveholding class. In developing a philosophy to justify abortion, Tituba had already threatened the male monopoly on logical

²⁰ I washed my hair in a purée of carapate seeds so that they would be black and brilliant. I took long, heavy naps in the shadows of mango trees. At the same time, my child made me combative. It was a girl, I was sure! What would her future be? That of my enslaved brothers and sisters, ravaged by their condition and their labor? Or a future like mine: pariah, forced to hide and live in exile? No, if the world was to receive my child, it would have to change!

reasoning. Now her maternity challenges not only masculine ideas about the appropriate applications of reason, but the white man's political system as well. The thought of maternity leaving the domestic realm and infiltrating the public sphere would be highly destabilizing to the colonial worldview.

3) The Possibility and Danger in Ceding to Mother/Nature's Nurture

The volatile combination of motherhood and slavery was just one of many challenges to European rule in the colonies. Another fearsome prospect was the sight of white men shedding their customs in favor of a "native" way of life. European visitors to the New World and South Africa were shocked to see their countrymen abandon their work ethic in favor of an "idle" lifestyle. The Protestant Reformation popularized the notion that working was man's way of atoning for Adam's fall (Coetzee 20). During the Enlightenment, Western intellectuals declared that work enabled man to know himself better, to master his environment and to create high functioning societies (Coetzee 21). Thus, Europeans believed that colonists who lived off the land with little effort were regressing on multiple levels. They were regressing by reverting to the state of feeding from the mother's breast, and by abandoning a defining cultural attribute—work—that reassured Europeans of their superiority. Certain British visitors to the Americas complained that the land was *too* fruitful and *too* nurturing, and that such abundance encouraged lethargy in their compatriots. William Byrd II, a British surveyor, planter and lawyer residing in Virginia, wrote in his "a Journey to the Land of Eden" that, "people live worst upon good land, and the more they are befriended by the soil and the climate the less they will do for themselves" (qtd. in Kolodny 17). Kolodny deduces from Byrd's account,

“Clearly, where the land is most overwhelmingly maternal [...] regression will be the most complete” (17).

Morrison toys with this anxiety about regression through the characters of Golden Gray and Joe in *Jazz*. When describing Gray’s reaction to his first sighting of Wild, she writes, “He looks at her and, holding on to the brim of his hat, moves quickly to get back into the carriage” (144). Faced with an overwhelming embodiment of unrestrained nature, Gray clutches his hat, desperately holding onto a token of civilization that separates him from this creature. His hat serves as a potent symbol of sophistication, because its refinement supposedly reflects the refinement of the organ within. In addition to protecting and decorating his brain, his hat also contains his mind, and keeps his thoughts within the boundaries of all that is proper and civil. While meditating on his first glimpse of Wild, however, he reflects, “[She was] a vision that, at the moment when his scare was sharpest, looked also like home comfortable enough to wallow in? That could be it. But who could live in that leafy hair? that unfathomable skin?” (150). Morrison’s choices of terms like “home” and “wallow” indicate Gray’s repressed desire to retreat to a carefree, somnolent state. When he demands, “...who could live in that leafy hair? that unfathomable skin?” we see him struggle to conceive of how his version of humanity, with all its abstract and spiritual connotations, could coexist with a state of being so profoundly natural and material. At the same time, the fact that Gray expresses these sentiments through open-ended questions shows his acknowledgement that it *may* be possible to live with such hair and such skin. In fact, he might just take off his own hat and let his mane grow, as the reference to “flying golden hair” later in the novel suggests (174).

Morrison also considers this fear of regression through Joe, Wild's son whom she refused to raise. Joe grows up with no knowledge of his parentage until his friend and mentor Hunters Hunter hints at his mother's identity. Like Golden Gray, the pain and longing that Joe experiences on making this discovery motivates him to search for his lost parent. When he detects Wild's presence in the woods, Joe becomes childlike. Morrison illustrates this infantile behavior by underscoring how much time he spends on his hands and knees. He *crawls* into the cave that he believes to be her habitat (177). Later, when he sees four redwings—a sign that she is nearby—he immediately falls to the ground (178). After he calls into the forest, asking Wild to give him some sign of her whereabouts, Morrison writes: “Whispering into hibiscus stalks and listening to breathing, he suddenly saw himself pawing around in the dirt for a not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his mother that Hunter once knew about but who orphaned her baby rather than nurse or coddle him or stay in the house with him” (178). This regression to a childish state of needing the mother is clearly associated with a more naturalistic state of being for Joe. He sees himself “pawing around in the dirt,” like a young boy or an animal that has not been socialized to know better. He also condemns Wild as “a dirty woman” for being so inseparable from her material surroundings. Above all, he accuses her of having, “orphaned [him] rather than nurse or coddle him or stay in the house with him.” Interestingly, Joe lists attributes of motherhood and the “civilized” quality of living in a house in one breath. His vision of motherhood is inherently socialized, and the difficulty of separating motherhood from civilization is probably the reason that Wild

resists both institutions. Ultimately, she could not enter motherhood or society without limiting and reducing herself.

Fears that the colonists were regressing to a less sophisticated state were closely linked to concerns about idleness within their ranks. If the settlers became accustomed to a nurturing environment and no longer had to work for food, then they might opt for a listless, directionless existence, rather like a fetus floating in its mother's womb. At the heart of these fears is the humanistic distinction between leisure and idleness. Europeans in the Old World worried that their countrymen overseas were engaging not in leisure, which is productive and allows for self-improvement, but in idleness, which has no particular aim at all. J.M. Coetzee summarizes this attitude in "Idleness in South Africa:" "Leisure holds the promise of the generation of all those differences that constitute culture and make man Anthropological Man; idleness holds no promise save that of stasis" (25). Morrison conjures a static, womb-like atmosphere on Isle des Chevaliers in *Tar Baby*. She writes, "Bees have no sting on Isle des Chevaliers, nor honey. They are fat and lazy, curious about nothing. Especially at noon. At noon the water in the mouths of orchids left there by the breakfast rain is warm" (81). In this passage Morrison pushes the notion of an Eden before the fall—a state where one does not have to compensate for Adam's sins—to its limits. When envisioning paradise, one typically pictures a land overflowing with every possible resource. There is no reason that honey would be excluded. Morrison suggests that the ultimate womb-like paradise, a haven of idleness, would not include honey because honey implies industry. Neither would Adam nor Eve seek out honey in Eden, or take the time to extract it from the

hive. They would be content with whatever nutrition befell them. The fact that the bees are “curious about nothing” is also noteworthy. Curiosity is the main impetus to acquiring knowledge, or to self-improvement. A lack of curiosity would be especially fearsome to any imperialist, as he always conquers under the banner of “progress.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines progress as, “progression or advancement through a process, a sequence of events, a period of time, etc.; movement towards an outcome or conclusion.” Movement and progress are thus inextricably linked. This turns the seduction of stasis into a profound threat to imperialism. J.M. Coetzee suggests this as well when he writes:

The spokesmen of colonialism are dismayed by the squalor and sloth of Boer life because it affords sinister evidence of how European stock can regress after a few generations in Africa. In being content to scratch no more than a bare living from the soil, the Boer seems further to betray the colonizing mission, since in order to justify its conquests colonialism has to demonstrate that the colonist is a better steward of the earth than the native (30-31).

The persistent idleness in the air of Isle des Chevaliers, where indolence pervades even among the bees, would be a formidable prospect to any enterprising colonist. Indeed, the island thwarts Valerian’s efforts at deliberate cultivation. Morrison writes that after Valerian opens the doors to his greenhouse, “Isle des Chevaliers filled in the spaces that had been the island’s to begin with” (242). Ultimately, Valerian’s efforts to impose a plan and a trajectory onto the island’s vegetation turn out to be futile, and the force of the island’s aimlessness prevails.

In *Beloved*, however, Morrison demonstrates a troubling side of regression in terms of human relationships to the land and to each other. Her concerns reflect those of William Byrd II, as they share an interest in the effect of regression on the strength of character. Byrd worries about an intangible toll on moral fortitude, however, whereas Morrison considers how the inability to pass through stages of development—or the experience of being forced to retreat to a childlike state—affects one’s ability to build interpersonal relationships and to possess an independent ego. Paul D, for instance, retains a childlike relationship to the earth because he has never learned to view himself and the landscape as equals. When Morrison describes his attempts to flee slavery, she writes: “...in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it” (316). Paul D adopts a deferential, even submissive attitude towards the earth by lapping at its rivers on his hands and knees and by skimming the ground for whatever food it happens to discard. His juvenile approach to the earth reflects the insecurities that he developed from being told all his life that the terrain was the white man’s property, and that he should behave reverentially towards this entity. Paul D does not have the confidence to walk upright to the bank of a river and dip his canteen into the water. In this way, he has been stunted in his development as an independent individual. Besides never reaching equal terms in his relationship to Mother Earth, Paul D also never allows himself to love this maternal figure with abandon. This too has a profound impact on his development. Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of the importance of the mother to later relationships can inform our understanding of Paul D’s character. Freud writes

that the mother is, “unique, without parallel, established unalterably for a whole lifetime as the first and strongest love-object and as the prototype of all later love-relations” (qtd. in Pillow 148). Paul D’s limits to loving Mother Earth contribute to his inability to stay with one woman in adulthood. These inhibitions also cause him to fear Sethe’s “too thick” love, and prompt him to leave 124 after learning about the infanticide and Sethe’s ferocious devotion to her children (293).

Paul D does not pass through the stages of development that are contingent on loving the mother, and so struggles to love ardently as an adult. Sethe, on the other hand, loves Beloved so passionately that she reverts to a childlike state. She becomes helpless in the face of Beloved, and literally loses physical mass and strength. Coming upon her mother and Beloved together, Denver observes that, “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child” (294). This role reversal is underscored by the fact that Beloved is pregnant and growing bigger all the time.

The state of Sethe’s house demonstrates her developmental regression, as well. When Paul D returns to 124 after a period of absence, he observes dead flowers rotting in cans, old newspaper photos tacked to the outhouse walls, a jump rope hastily discarded and “jars and jars of dead lightning bugs.” “Like a child’s house;” he remarks, “the house of a very tall child” (318). Like Paul D, Sethe’s childishness does not reflect an idyllic escape from earthly cares. She too has been reduced to a less-than-whole person, since she has reverted back to the mirror-stage of development: that is, a significant part of her identity hinges on what she sees

reflected in *Beloved*. Only when Paul D returns and insists that “You your best thing, Sethe,” does she begin to regain her former independence (322).

In *Moi, Tituba Sorcière...*, Condé also presents us with a troubling image of the fluid relationship between motherhood and girlhood. Tituba describes the close relationship between her mother, Abena, and Abena’s white mistress to the reader: “Après tout, ce n’était que deux enfants effrayées par le rugissement des grands animaux nocturnes [...] Elles se couchaient ensemble et ma mère, les doigts jouant avec les longues tresses de sa compagne, lui contait les histoires que sa mère lui avait contées à Akwapim, son village natal” (14).²¹ In this passage, Condé jumps from describing Abena as a frightened child to depicting her in the maternal role of pacifier. Although she and her mistress are young girls equally frightened by the unidentified sounds of the night, Abena realizes that it is her obligation to console her white companion, and draws on her memory of her mother’s behavior to do so. Abena is thus forced into a maternal role as an adolescent girl like many other young black women who became mothers after being raped, or who were made to raise the children of white families. In fact, Abena is carrying the child of a sailor who assaulted her during the middle passage. She is compelled to fulfill a diffuse maternal role to a variety of children—her young mistress, the child of her rapist—who have been forced upon her.

Abena does not progress linearly through the stages of childhood, young adulthood and motherhood. Her identity remains a fragmented composition of

²¹ After all, they were only two children frightened by the roaring of the great nocturnal animals... They slept together and my mother, her fingers playing with the long tresses of her companion, told her stories that her mother had recounted to her at Akwapim, her native village.

childlike and womanly qualities. For instance, after assuming a motherly position in relation to her mistress Jennifer, Abena reverts back to being a girl when she moves into the hut of a slave named Yao. Abena is miserable after her separation with her female companion, and Yao soothes her by telling her a fable to make her laugh. He thus consoles her in the manner of an adult who distracts a child that has scraped its knee. Condé writes, “En verité, Yao avait deux enfants, ma mère et moi” (18).²² Condé’s portrait of Abena is radical for its disruption of a linear notion of development, which the West applies to both societies and individuals. At the same time, Abena’s dual identity as mother and child puts her in a fragile position, as she possesses a delicate sense of self and a splintered ego.

Through their discussions of incestuous mother-daughter relationships, fearsome mother figures, and the threat of regression when faced with an overwhelming maternal force, Condé and Morrison demonstrate the futility of trying to confine motherhood within the boundaries of masculine thought. They show how attitudes towards Mother Earth and human mothers have become profoundly intertwined, and refuse definitions of either that are soothing, limited or tame. They do not entirely reject the connection between nature and motherhood, however, or aspire to a form of motherhood that is wholly “civilized” and removed from natural and material forces. Rather, they call attention to the empowering associations between mothers and the earth: namely their uncontrollable capacities. Condé and Morrison do not idealize these imposing mother figures. Mira ultimately feels betrayed by the ravine, stating that “le fruit qu’elle m’a donné pour apaiser la faim de

²² In truth, Yao had two children: my mother and me.

mon coeur était, en réalité, un fruit empoisonné” (230).²³ *Beloved* adopts no clear position on the morality of Sethe’s infanticide. Morrison certainly does not glorify the immense mother figure of Beloved who absorbs Sethe’s personality and reduces her to a child. Yet, while they neither condemn nor condone many of these formidable mothers, Condé and Morrison do one thing in their favor: they do not imprison them within reductive definitions.

²³ The fruit that the ravine gave me to appease my hunger was, in fact, a poisoned fruit. (Mira is referring to the fact that the ravine, her mother figure, was the one to lead her to Francis Sancher and eventually to heartbreak).

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